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“Doing it like Real Runa Women and Men” A Runa Ceremonial Festival

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The sonorous vibrations of snare drums from other ceremonial houses sound in the distance. A motorized canoe appears on the river, followed by others, each one crowded with men who stand with beautiful toucan headdresses, their bodies covered with dried animal furs and their faces painted with *wituk* (*Genipa americana*). They hold and play the drums, which leave behind an incessant pulse-tremolo: tumtumptumtumtumtum, zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

As Norman Whitten, well-known ethnographer of the Canelos Kichwa of Pastaza, has cogently remarked, symbolic enactment can be found in everyday mundane activities in which Runa people engage within their rain-forest villages (1976:165). These same activities, which occupy most of the time of my Runa friends in rural communities, crystallize beautifully during the ceremonial festival, *jista*. Each Runa community (*llacta*) holds its own festival at different times during the year.

Although each *jista* differs from others in certain aspects, people recognize an overall uniformity in the ritual structure of the festival. It generally begins with the day of *yandachina* (gathering of the wood), followed by a period of preparation (more or less fifteen days) in which men and women work separately, after which the proper *jista* begins with the arrival of hunters from the forest. This phase of the *jista* lasts generally three to four days.

The majority of *jistas* in the Pastaza region involve only two ceremonial houses (Whitten 1976; Reeve 1988) which are respectively called the *kari jista* and the *warmi jista* (male and female festivals). Each house is guided by a married couple, who are the owners of the festival.

In *Wituk Sas* (as well a few other communities), there are four ceremonial houses, one of which is called *lancero wasi* (spear house). The *lancero* ceremonial house is characterized by the presence of four dancing warriors including the male *amu* of the *lancero jista*. They dance with “spears” (wooden “knives” made out of *puka kaspi*, a hard darkish wood) and *walingas* (bone and seed shoulder slings worn across the shoulders and the chest of each of the four men).

The *jista* is a moment of great excitement for people in virtually every Runa community, both in urban and rural areas. People always remember a good *jista* as one where rivers of rich, strong *aswa* were served and poured on people (*ima mundu aswa tiara*), where pottery was beautiful and original, drums were played hard and incessantly all day, where people danced *sumak* and *sinzhi* (beautiful and hard), and where peace and amusement reigned supreme.

Beginning with the extensive work of the Whittens (Whitten 1976; Whitten and Whitten 1987, 2008), followed by the description of Reeve in Curaray (1988) and, more recently, of Guzman (1997) in Canelos, much has been written on the Canelos Kichwa *jista* and its enactment. The similarities between the ethnographic works of these authors, which date back to the 1970s through the 1990s, and my own material are striking. I cannot do justice here to the many important analytical insights offered by these ethnographers.

Thus, my aim is not that of giving a comprehensive or definitive exegesis of the festival, but rather of providing a preliminary attempt to focus on one central aspect of it. The fundamental tenet of the festival regards the way the ceremonial process (re)creates an ancestral “Runa-ness.” In the case of Whitten, this “Runa-ness” took the shape of an extended, ancestral *ayllu* (kin group), recreated through symbolic enactment. For Reeve, the festival was mainly concerned with the ethnogenesis of a “Runa” identity which stood in stark opposition to other categories of people, notably the Whites and other non-indigenous groups. Similarly, Guzman describes the festival as a “ritual of integration” whereby the festival creates a collectivity through exchanges of gendered substances (1997: 202).

Notwithstanding the importance of the festival for somehow creating a certain feeling of “Runa-ness” shared by all its participants, I suggest that such a perspective, which focuses mainly on the structure of the exchanges between houses, overlooks the gendered experience of this very Runa-ness. It is not just “being Runa” that is of concern for people in the festival. Rather, a main philosophical preoccupation during the *jista* regards the very meanings of being a Runa man and woman. Idioms of maleness and femaleness are deployed by Runa people to make sense of their cosmology and sociality during their ritual ceremony.

Focusing on concepts of “male” and “female” desire and the ways these articulate within the festival, I suggest that gender is a key cosmological category for Runa people. Despite some notable exceptions (Belaunde 2001; Conklin 2001; Fisher 2001; High 2010; McCallum 2001; Rival 2005; Seymour Smith 1991; Walker 2009), the analytical value of gender has been de-emphasized in the Amazonianist literature, subsumed under the consanguinity/affinity dichotomy (Descola 2001; Taylor and Viveiros de Castro 2006; Vilaça 2005). In this paper, I follow the suggestion of Rival who, alongside others, (Santos Granero 2012) writes:

In fact it would be extremely difficult to conceptualize social relationships in the absence of sexual imagery. Gender may not be an immutable attribute of whole persons, but sexual difference is, and it is from this basic difference that more abstract and vague principles such as femaleness and maleness are extrapolated to articulate what divides and unites or what separates and connects, in society (Rival 2005:288).

In what follows, I hope to show how these connections and separations in the *Wituk Sas jista* are created and maintained through the circulation of specific gendered objects.

***Yandachina*: Preparations for the Festival**

The day of *yandachina* (cutting wood) begins with the sound of drums in each ceremonial house. Upon invitation of the ceremonial owners, other members of the community come to the *jista* house carrying bundles of firewood. This wood will then be used to cook all the foods during the festival days. People leave their firewood and then sit on the benches of the *batun wasi* (big oval house) where they will be served manioc beer (*aswa*). The male *amu* then begs some of them to become helpers (*ayurantes*).

Ceremonial helpers are chosen as a couple, preferably constituted as husband and wife. It is inconceivable to have only a female helper or only a male one. Were there to be a young unmarried man who is exceptionally good at hunting (thus a very desirable potential helper) he could enter the *jista* but he would necessarily need to be accompanied by his mother or his sister.

In the *lanza* house in 2013, the majority of them were husband and wife and I was made to understand clearly that this was the most desirable condition. Once a couple has been asked and has accepted to become *ayurantes*, the woman goes to join the ceremonial house female helpers who are serving manioc beer and the husband joins the circle of men drumming inside the larger ceremonial house.

In the *lanza* festival in which I was helping, there was a large house (*batun wasi*) where the men played the drums while walking in a circle, and a smaller one (*ichilla wasi*) on the side, where there were large *tinajas* (manioc beer storage pots) from which women took *aswa*. The rest of people who have not been chosen as helpers just sit and enjoy the light chat and the strong manioc beer (*aswa*). As more people come to bring firewood, the ceremonial house fills with men playing their drums.

The drumming is incessant and very strong; the men begin to get a bit drunk as the women keep serving manioc beer to all the male *ayurantes*. However, the women are very careful not to get their own men too inebriated, the aim being to make the men from the other house drunk when they come to visit.

At about midday, two people, usually the male *amu* of another house and a close kin of his, come to beg the four *lanceros*, who are sitting on a bench, to come to dance in their house. The two male supplicants kneel in front of the *lanceros*, ask for their blessing, which the *lanceros* give by making the sign of the Cross on the ground with their spears, and then, after repeating the invitation, the two supplicants leave the house.

It is at this stage that the women run to serve *aswa* to the visitors. *Aswa* is poured forcefully into the men's mouths, and whether they like it or not, they will have to finish each *mukawa* (drinking bowl) full of beer they are offering them. If men can't drink anymore, women will just pour the beer down their throats, spilling it all over their bodies. Men's protests are met with indifference, teasing and annoyance by the women. These latter do not show any sort of compassion for the men who, in few seconds, get surrounded by twenty more women, each holding one or two drinking bowls full of *aswa*.

After some time, the male *amu* invites all his helpers to go to visit the other houses and to have a good time. When we are close to the other ceremonial house, the male helpers of the other house form a corridor through which we enter. They drum and shout *ayayayaya*, in falsetto, like monkeys in the forest.

At this stage, the women enter first—dancing—and then follow the men, who join the other male helpers in the house as they begin to play their drums while walking in a circle. We are immediately attacked by dozens of women bearing *aswa* bowls. Men of the visiting house are forced to drink *aswa* by the women of the host house, whereas the women are forced to drink by the men of the host house. If one cannot manage to drink from each bowl, he or she pays by being doused with the whole bowlful on one's head (something which I learned rather quickly that day).

The two pairs of *amu* couples sit next to each other on a bench, and the female *ayurantes* of the host house put many large beautifully decorated drinking bowls full of special manioc beer with peanuts in front of them. They are the only ones who cannot get doused with *aswa* in this climate of general teasing and jokes, for if it were to happen, it would rain so much the following day the hunters would not be able to bring any meat home.

After a bit of drumming, the two male *amus*, already a bit drunk, give advice on how people should behave during the festival. In particular, they warn about the need to avoid any sort of conflict, be it between people of different houses or within the same house. The seeds of conflict are undoubtedly there: the whole *jista* event is talked about as a *competencia* (competition) between different houses as well as between different *ayurantes* within a house.

After these admonitions, the *amu* couple of the hosting house invites the other *amu* couple to dance, each couple exchanging its opposite-sex partner. While they dance, all the women of the *lanza* festival grab men from the other house to make them dance. After a while, the visiting group moves on to another house. Then they will reciprocate with *aswa* when the people of the other houses come to visit, and so on the festival goes, until drunkenness and exhaustion win over the drummers and dancers. *Yandachina* is over.

The next day, all the *ayurantes* gather in the *amu* couple's house, where men prepare to leave for the forest. Female elders prepare *chini* (stinging nettle), *wituk* (*Genipa americana*), *manduru* (*Bixa orellana*), *ruyak allpa* (white pottery clay or slip), and *killu allpa* (yellow pottery clay or slip). Each grandmother takes one of these colors and, having placed men and women in two different rows, proceeds to paint their faces. While they paint the men, the women call out names of animals that they will catch; when they paint the women, they incite them to be strong and to make good pottery and *aswa*, as well as to be kind to one another. After painting, they whip all the *ayurantes* on their bodies with stinging nettles, hitting the men harder to incite them to cry out in pain. "Just like you scream now, so will monkeys in the forest, indicating their presence." Then rice grains, peanuts, and corn are thrown on men and women. This ends the beginning of the *jista*: from this moment, men and women are separated for 15 days, each of them striving to do their best for the *jista*.

The day after the hunters leave for their hunting trips, the collective mood is somewhat pensive and melancholy. The people remaining in the settlement feel extraordinarily empty after the preceding days of drumming and shouting. The house of the festival also appears empty and forgotten. On the floor of the house lie leaves of plantain, leftovers of the poured manioc beer and some other rubbish. The earth floor will not be swept until the men return, for the women say that if they sweep the floor all the animals in the forest will disperse just as rubbish does when swept away. Despite the sadness of their husbands' absence, the mood amongst women is light-hearted. This is also because, Dina told me, "If we cry over them, they will not be able to hunt any animals."¹ So the conversations during the preparation, from the making of pottery to the elaboration of *aswa*, are carried out in a climate of relaxed and cheerful humor. In fact, laughter and female chatting are the only audible human sounds during these days.

During the fifteen days of preparation, women will devote their time to the making of pottery (*manga allpa*) and manioc beer (*aswa*), whereas the men will go deep into the forest to look for meat (*sacha aicha*).

The *Jista* Proper

The day of *shamunkichu* (coming of the hunters) begins before sunrise.² Once the men come back from the hunting trip, with toucan feathers and skins on their shoulders, they give their *pilana* to their wives. A *pilana* is a basket made with fresh leaves and only used to carry game. The women begin to open the *pilana* on the floor and place the smoked and broiled meat on plantain leaves. They divide prey meat from fish, monkeys from tapirs and so on, piling the meat up in distinct groups so that a man helper can begin to

count them. The scene has a sort of majesty: the men all covered with fur and skin beat their drums while women stand in the middle of the male circle with piles of hundreds of dried animals.

Once the game and fish are counted (later to be compared with the amount of the other houses) meat is hung to the internal roof of the house so that everyone from the outside can see how "rich" the ceremonial house is. The day follows with reciprocal visits between the houses, exchange of dancing and *aswa*, more or less following the same pattern described in the previous section.

The second day, called *sisa punzha* (day of flowers), proceeds as the previous day, with people of different households visiting each other. Flowers are brought to the festival house in the morning by people who are not *ayurantes*. These flowers will serve to adorn the central plaza in the afternoon and a statue of the Virgin in the church. On this day, pouring *aswa* on the people bringing flowers is compulsory, and done with great glee. Women attack men and vice versa, with finely decorated ceramic bowls (*mukawas*) full of manioc beer. To make a person drink as much as he or she can, to the point he or she can't walk, is the obvious aim of both the male and female helpers. In fact, a good manioc beer at this time is inevitably a "*sinzhi aswa*" (strong) and being "*machashka*" (drunk) is the wished and desirable state for everyone during the festival.

Showers of *aswa* and food are also a typical feature of the last proper day of the festival, called *kamari*. On this day, recognized as the culmination of the *jista*, people from different houses exchange cooked meat. When people of one ceremonial house visit the other, in addition to the incredible flows of *aswa*, they also receive pots of cooked *katu*—meat and fish soup with ground plantain—often as warm showers on the head. Men are the ones who come near women from another house and tap them on the shoulder or on the head with the heads of capuchin monkeys, caymans, or catfish and then give those heads to the touched women. At the end of the visits, each woman has a large pot of food received from male helpers from another house. Although the day proceeds in visits that more or less resemble the description of the *yandachina* day, on the morning of *kamari*, people also attend mass, which is undertaken by a priest, flown in for the occasion from Puyo, the capital of Pastaza Province. This is the only day when church marriages take place and many people attend the ceremony.

The final day, *puruta pakina* (breaking of the drinking bowls), is the day of jokes and laughter. Visits between the houses continue and intensify. So do the audacity of jokes and the pouring of *aswa*. Today, no one is exempted from an *aswa* shower. At the end of the day, men are invited to throw all women-made *purus* (a type of drinking bowl) to the house roof to break them. The old male *amu* gives all the skins acquired by his *ayurantes* to the new male *amu* and now he is allowed to be doused playfully with *aswa*. The new *amu* then proceeds to the river, letting the skins flow downstream. Only by doing this is the regeneration of animals assured. *Tinajas* (large storage jars) are removed from the small ceremonial house, their contents used to shower other *ayurantes* and then cleaned and returned to their owners. This signals the end of the festival. The sound of some drunk *ayurantes'* drums keeps resonating until dusk. Then it rapidly fades away and it is swiftly replaced by the tunes of the most famous Peruvian Cumbia hits of the moment which powerful loudspeakers blast out from hill to hill. With dancing and the eclectic melodies of electronic keyboards, the *jista* ends.

Between and Within the Ceremonial Houses

In his analysis of the festival, Whitten reads it as an enactment of Runa ancient times (*kallari*), a re-embodiment of the primordial birth of Runa people by the incestuous union of a brother (*kari*/*Killa*/Moon) and a sister (*warmi*/*Jiluku*/Potoo Bird). The symbolic parallel is evident in the institution of two houses, a custom widespread all over Runa territories, the *kari wasi* (male house) which, according to Whitten, was referred also as *Killa*, the brother who mischievously had sexual relationships with his sister and then ascended to the sky and transformed into the Moon. The female house was instead

named *Jiluku*, after the mythical sister who, pregnant by her own brother, gave birth to twins, the primordial ancestors of contemporary Runa people.

The two ceremonial houses would thus be linked simultaneously by relationships of consanguinity (by being brother and sister) and affinity (for the sexual relationship entailed in the union they are also husband and wife). In this, the *jisteros*, all of whom participate in the festival, are the sons and daughters of this primary union, “each other related to others by stipulated descent, from Mythic Time, from Ancient Times, and from Times of the Grandparents” (Whitten 1976:168). This is why Whitten argues that the *jista* is primarily concerned with the re-embodiment of this primordial Runa *ayllu* to which all Runa people belong.

From this structural perspective, the festival undoubtedly signals the two (or whatever number) *jista wasis* as being two units in a relation of potential affinity. This is highlighted also by the fact that relationships between the houses are developed along the lines of the male/female divide. Central in Whitten’s analysis is the proposition that the *jista* represents a moment in which distinct *ayllu* (represented by the ceremonial houses) come together and merge together symbolically through the exchange of substances. In *Wituk Sas*, however, each ceremonial house did not represent a coherent *ayllu* but was rather composed by very heterogeneous groups of people who were often unrelated. The context in *Wituk Sas* could be accurately be described as one where the owners do not take kin as their helpers, but rather they actively try to consanguinize, albeit temporarily, previously unrelated people.³ This is evident in the speeches by the male *amu* who addresses his *ayurantes* as *ayllukuna* (kin) and by the fact that the female *amu* is called *jista mama* (mother of the festival). Both the male and female *amu* are expected to take care of their *ayurantes* as if they were their own sons and daughters by providing them with food, *aswa*, and all the objects they need. Failing to do so provokes harsh responses from the *ayurantes*, who do not attempt to hide their disapproval.

On a distinct level, Reeve, in her analysis of the *jista* of Curaray, argues that the *jista* represents a moment in which the community comes to stand as a whole against other “foreign” structures; in particular, the Christian Church and mestizo and white outsiders. She asserts that when celebrating the *jista*, people re-assert their identity as *Runapura* (between Runa) against others. Guzman suggests we see the *jista* as a moment of construction of the community via the exchanges of valuable substances (manioc beer, meat, money). Her work, while paying attention to gendered objects, maintains a focus on the “mediated” and “unmediated” exchanges between the houses.

Implicit in all these perspectives is the idea that during the festival, through the exchange of food substances such as manioc beer and meat, Runa people become a whole, albeit temporarily. In the case of *Wituk Sas*, however, the different houses never merge together as a whole⁴ but maintain throughout time their distinctive separateness from each other. Even in the last, most chaotic day, each ceremonial house ends the festival in its own space with its own people.

Important also is the exclusion of other villagers from any fundamental activity that takes place in the ceremonial house (perhaps with the exception of making manioc beer). These people are in fact forbidden from the dancing and from the dousing of manioc beer. In *Wituk Sas*, to invite someone to dance who was not an *ayurante* was unthinkable and was taken as a serious offense by the rest of *ayurantes*.

These details have important consequences for an analysis of the *jista* of *Wituk Sas*. In the first instance, one cannot assume that the houses form kin groups which stand against other kin groups because the internal process by which the *amu* couple transform their own unrelated *ayurantes* into kin is momentary and fraught with difficulties. Once this assumption is no longer tenable, its implicit emphasis on the competition and exchange between the houses (conceived as affinal groups) loses power. Notwithstanding the importance of external exchanges for the ritual construction of the community, such stress on exchange (and thus competition) between the houses overlooks the degree of competition within the house which can be perceived as a fundamental part of the festival experience in *Wituk Sas*. This “inside” competition exists because of the existential importance of being a Runa woman (*Runa warmi*) and man (*kari*) in the festival. The two factors are strictly intertwined.

As McCallum observes, "gender is not just one of the differences out of which new forms are made, but rather occupies a special place in the overall process whereby sociality is produced" (2001:181). This is why, I suggest, tensions and expectations during the *jista* revolve around what it means to be a Runa man and woman. Here being Runa is re-conceptualized as an enacted bodily experience through the elaboration and circulation of specific gendered objects. Through an analysis of these objects, I hope to elicit a sense of the meaningfulness of the female/male opposition in the creation of a "proper" social world.

Of Manioc Beer and Clay: the Making of Drinking

It is a hot Sunday afternoon and from one house to another, the news is spread that Delicia has an entire *tinaja* full of good manioc beer. Soon, her house fills up with people. When visitors or kin reach the house, they sit in a circle on the benches. The men sit next to each other, the women in another group. Men talk about hunting, the price of gasoline or bullets, or about some work they have to do. Women either participate in the conversation or chat amongst themselves about their children, the latest gossip, or their own work. Some humorous anecdotes are told, which generate great laughter. The stories go ahead punctuated by bursts of surprise of men, which crystallize in the typical male exclamation "*Wari ala!*" (No way brother) and in women's laughter "ahahaiiiii." This laughter, with a high pitch on the third "a" is the typical Bobonaza female laughter, which resonates loudly from hill to hill in *Wituk Sas* on lazy and hot Sunday afternoons. It is also a laughter that is heard less and less as time goes by, a fact that is lamentable to some elders.

In this hearth-lighted atmosphere, the owner of the house promptly begins to serve *aswa*. The *pika* (fermented manioc mash) is gently mixed with water in a *pilchi* (a drinking bowl made out of the shell of the fruit of the *Crescentia cujete* tree) to then be poured into a *mukawa*. The *aswa mama* stirs the manioc beer with her hand, gently squeezing the *pika* and then throwing it away once all its juice has come out. The borders of the *mukawa* are ritually cleansed of any residue or dirt and then served to male visitors or male kin. "Drink until you are full" (*saksakta upingui*) the woman tells the visitors convincingly, handing them *mukawas* full of manioc beer. Delicia's husband too takes a *mukawa*, already filled with beer, from his wife, to then hand it to one of his guests. After the first, another round of beer begins. Some of the visitors leave the house, others stay until night and fall asleep on the benches.

The importance of manioc beer (*aswa*) among the Runa cannot be stressed too strongly. Uzendoski (2004) writing about the importance of manioc beer for the Napo Runa, notes that this is thought to be infused with "*sama?*" soul substance (2004: 896). Manioc beer gives strength and vitality; significantly, it is the first food a baby receives and the best nutritive drink for sick people. It is an exclusively female produced substance, one that the female head of the house is compelled to offer when people come to visit. In virtually every Runa house I entered, I was always offered a drinking bowl full of manioc beer. The rare times this did not happen, I was always offered murmured apologies for not being able to give me any beer.

When a woman decides to make manioc beer, she goes to her *chakra*, alone or in company of her female kin. She fills one or two baskets of manioc and then returns home. In the house, women peel it and cook it in large pots. Once it is cooked, the content is poured into a large *batan*, a wooden bowl made by the husband in shape of a water turtle or a dugout canoe. There the boiled manioc is mashed. As soon as the manioc is out of the water, women begin to chew it. Manioc is chewed communally by many women or by one alone. Were there to be a woman who happens to come to the house at the moment of manioc beer making, she can take a bit of it and chew it, to help the *aswa mama*. Despite the communal work, the proper "mother" of *aswa* is the woman who sponsors the manioc beer making.

The process of cooking, chewing, mashing, and spitting usually lasts several hours. When the chewed pulp turns sweet, the puree is ready for storage in a large storage jar.

Depending on whether the *aswa* is for a festival or for house consumption, different measures are adopted to dispose of the puree (*pika*). In both cases, women place, just at the height of the storage jar's belly, some cut plantain leaves so as to create a sitting structure where the puree will be laid. Then the storage jar (*tinaja*) is carefully sealed with some smoked plantain leaves.

If it is for house consumption, the puree is mixed with water and served at any occasion, while in the case of a working party or a festival, the jar is left sealed for five days. The night before the drinking party, the woman drops fresh water inside the *tinaja*, until it is full. Then she gently covers it with the leaves. She may or may not add more water successively. The next day *aswa* is "matured" or "ripened" (*pukushka*) and emanates a good smell.

A *tinaja* is a large belly shaped storage pot, painted in red and white. Its body is formed by a bottom (*siki*), a belly (*wiksa*), a neck (*kunga*) and a mouth (*shimi*). The references to the human body are not casual for the *tinaja* has the connotations of a pregnant woman.⁵ To dream of making a *tinaja* foretells of pregnancy because *tinajas* are conceived as the maternal recipient of *aswa*, the site where the process of gestation of chewed manioc takes place. When in dream the woman is "making" (*awana*) a *tinaja*, in reality her womb is "making" a baby. The *tinaja* is a material womb for the woman producer,⁶ who is, in fact, called *aswa mama*, the mother of manioc beer. The material qualities of the *tinaja* as a female pregnant body enable it to "give birth" to manioc beer. In the words of Descola, "this ontological mimetism allows these objects to function, in their turn, as agents of transformation" (2012:460). In its womb, the *tinaja* transforms manioc into *aswa*.

All over the Pastaza region, manioc beer is served in finely decorated *mukawas* (ceramic drinking bowls). I cannot stress enough the relation of consubstantiality between manioc beer and its ceramic drinking bowl. When a woman during the festival broke a large ceremonial *mukawa*, a friend of mine, an experienced potter, commented bluntly that the woman in question did not even know how to hold a *mukawa* to serve *aswa*. This refers not only to the inability of this woman to properly serve *aswa* or to produce a piece of pottery. By pointing to the holding of the *mukawa*, my friend was making reference to a circular female knowledge, which begins from making the piece of pottery to handling it when full of *aswa*. This knowledge is grounded in a deep dexterity and intimacy with the product itself, with its materiality, its lightness, its texture, and its smell.

The process by which *mukawas* are made is long and complicated, surely the topic for another essay. Here, it is sufficient to say that, once fired, the drinking bowl is coated with the sap from the *shilkillu* tree. *Shilkillu*, together with another black sap called *pungara*, also covers the inside belly of the *tinaja*. If you ask *Wituk Sas* people why they still widely use *mukawas* and *tinajas* to serve and store their manioc beer, they will often answer that the smell of *mukawas* and *tinajas* is what makes "proper" *aswa*. Smell is not perceived as being simply a secondary quality of *aswa*, but rather, an essential part of it.⁷ For example, when spirits have their own drinking parties, they are thought to "drink the smell" (*asnata upina*) of the *aswa*. Runa men appreciate good *aswa* by saying "*ima gusto asnak aswa*" (what a rich smelling *aswa*) and crying out a falsetto shout of satisfaction. The co-substantiality of manioc beer and *mukawas* in terms of smell and taste explains why Runa men and women are wary of serving their manioc beer in plastic cups or storing the mash in a plastic container. In light of this, it is unsurprising to hear Runa people commenting with pity on the poor pottery making skills of Jivaroan and Waorani women whose men are "forced" to drink from a *pilchi*.

Pottery is, along with manioc beer, an object of intense male desire. The first task of a newly wedded girl in *Wituk Sas* is to learn how to make pottery, if she hasn't already done so. The task of teaching the new bride is usually carried out by the mother-in-law who, in so doing, ensures her son the double pleasure of drinking a good manioc beer and having it served in a beautiful drinking bowl. Husbands are the principal appreciators of a woman's abilities. A friend of mine from a forest community near *Wituk Sas* married a mestizo girl from the city and, for this, he was repeatedly teased by his fellows. During a beer drinking session, a man humorously told him: "You don't want

to drink from a *mukawa*; you don't want to marry my daughter." As the joke concisely phrased it, the desire for a wife and for drinking from *mukawas* often coincide; ultimately, a wife is someone who can provide *aswa* not in just any container but in the receptacle that substantiates and "completes" manioc beer drinking, a *mukawa*.

Pilanas of Penises and Hunger for Meat

Game among the Runa is, as with many other Amazonian people, of central importance. Men are associated with the spirit master *Amazanga*, the "owner" of game. The sound of drums during the *jista* is said to replicate the thunders of this spirit owner. During the *jista* men also wear animal furs and cover their bodies with jaguar designs. They become animals through a transformation which, as ethnographers of Amazonia have long noticed, takes place on the skin (Turner 1980; Viveiros de Castro 1998). The somatic identification with animals is also reproduced in the hanging of game heads inside the roof of the ceremonial houses. People say that animals are left with their mouths open because men during the *jista* will open their mouths to drink, laugh and shout.

Whereas the behavior, the diet, and the lives of game animals are among the favorite topics of conversation among men, the different tastes and the abundance (or not) of "meat" (*aicha*) are sources of great interest for women. Therefore, in this section, it is meat—the emblem of male work—that is our topic of concern. In particular, I choose to elicit the importance of meat here through the following story, which was narrated to me, by *Wituk Sas* people.

It was festival time and there was a man who became *ayurante*. The group of *ayurantes* departed for their hunting trip. As they reached the hunting territory after their trek (*purina*), one man decided to stay behind his fellow hunting companions to fish-poison in a small river. As he waited for his *jambi* (fish poison) to work, he heard the sound of a frog *lactanlactanlactan*. "Ah," he said, "If you were a woman, I would penetrate you making love." As soon as he said that, he saw a beautiful woman standing in his path. "Penetrate me as you make me love," she said to him. And he began to undress. As he got closer to the woman, she grabbed his penis and began to pull it, pull it, pull it until it became so long he could not walk properly anymore. Then she disappeared. She was the frog woman (*tulumba warmi*). The man could not carry his penis around so he made a *pilana* with it and walked to his friends. They laughed at him a lot and decided to leave him behind because he couldn't hunt anymore. They returned to the village but he slept by the river because he felt too ashamed to enter the village with this *pilana*. The hunters told his wife what happened and everyone laughed at her. While the man was sleeping, a group of giant otters (*yaku puma*) came by. They cut the man's penis and then threw the pieces in the river; then they went to other rivers, Pastaza and Napo, to throw the pieces there. From these pieces the *amarun* (anaconda) was born. This is why anacondas still inhabit these rivers today.

This myth is in many ways similar to other Amazonian myths (Gregor 1985) that relate the fatal consequences of having sex with a non-human. The story seems to be an admonishment for the Runa listener about male desire: improper desire for sex can lead to very negative consequences. Opas (2005), in her analysis of Piro sexual encounters with animals, argues that the result of such meetings is to remove the hunter from his own kin relationships, thereby affecting him in his quality of being a moral person. Morality, she argues, is primarily seen as a corporeal attitude. Eating improper foods, talking nonsense and, one could add, carrying one's penis as if it were a basket full of meat, fall into such amoral categories. Whereas the morality breaks down in desiring (or wanting) to have sex with an animal, I would also argue that the hunter's behavior is even more improper because it is time of *jista*.

In other versions, the story plot went along the same lines, but there were no references to the time of *jista*, nor to the penis made into a *pilana*, nor to the man sleeping outside the village. I did try to retell the story to my consultants, deliberately omitting the first words of it (“it was time of festival and a man had become *ayurante*”) but I was continuously and patiently corrected. When placed purposefully in this context, the story is not simply a straightforward telling about sexual anxieties.

First, the most evident consequence of the man’s massive penis enlargement is that he can’t hunt anymore, and for this reason his fellows leave him behind. He disqualifies his “maleness” by depriving himself of the most essential male activity: hunting. In fact, the humorous tone in the story is conveyed by the term *pilana* used to refer to his pile of penis. *Pilana*, as mentioned above, is a term that strictly refers to a basket of fresh leaves, made on the spot to carry meat. In the festival, it is women who, after the arrival of the hunters, have to carry their husbands’ *pilanas* into the ceremonial house. The ridiculous effect is thereby produced by the man having to carry his own *pilana* that is also filled with his penis. Here, the *pilana*, that usually stands as the epitome of a productive husband, becomes, by consisting of a man’s own penis, a quite obvious sign of non-productivity or sterility. Thus the subsequent shame, his isolation from the community, and the laughter directed at his wife, who is deprived of both a proper *pilana* and a proper sexual partner.

The Making of Gendered Desires

In a seminal article, Gow (1989) argues that, among the Piro, relationships are not regulated as an economy of exchange, but rather as an economy of desire.⁸ He takes the example of a child eating dirt and asks himself why Piro people saw this behavior as deviant. Gow argues that the Piro see in the child’s longing to eat dirt a desire that escapes the channels through which it must be contained. In other words, by eating dirt, the child only satisfies his own will, a will without any social bearing. Its anti-sociality is also evident by its a-gendered act of consumption. Dirt is nobody’s product and its existence is directed to nobody. Similarly, in the case of the man and the frog woman, I would argue that the desire of the man is self-satisfactory and for this reason it results in a *pilana* of useless human flesh. The man, in the myth, fails to turn his manhood into a product that women desire: meat. This is true in every case in daily life, but it is even more so during *jista*, where everyone is compelled to display his meat, her pottery, and her *aswa*.

If we look at the plane of causality in the story, the man could not hunt because he had sex. During the *jista* there is no obvious prohibition against sex, but in fact, at least in the fifteen days of preparation there is no actual possibility of sexual interaction. Instead, all sorts of female actions need to be controlled so as not to affect the men. In particular weeping or manifesting affection towards one’s husband should both be avoided during this period when women are in the community making pottery and *aswa*, and men are hunting in the forest. If a woman was to manifest such strong emotions a hunter would not be able to capture any prey. The absence of a show of overt feelings towards one’s husband is again a hint to the impropriety of certain desires in these times of *jista*.

During the *jista*, a male *ayurante* who had gone to hunt alone was seen near his house by an *ayurante* woman before the *shamunkichu* Friday, the day he was supposed to return. The woman then told this to everyone in the ceremonial house, including the hunter’s spouse. The news was met with both disapproval and humor by the majority of the women, who laughed at the wife, saying that her husband obviously could not stand being alone much longer and he returned for her *churu* (vagina). These comments were met with silence and shame by the young woman who ignored the gossip and tried to convince the rest that it was a lie (which, as I later learned, it was not).

In the same way, during the preparation period, some of the very young women helpers were teased mercilessly by older women, saying that they looked sad because they missed their husbands’ *kaspi* (“stick”= penis). Women who long publicly for their

husbands to return are laughed at because they misdirect their desire from the proper manifestation (meat) to the inappropriate one (the sexual organ). It is indicative that sexual organs are used here rhetorically as a synecdoche: the part—the penis or vagina—comes to stand for the whole person, thereby creating a sense of *amusement* underlain by a sense of moral impropriety.

Desire for one's husband can and should be expressed through idioms of desire for food. When my friend Clemencia's husband returned from the hunting trip, she was commenting to other women about how she could finally eat rich *pawa* (guan), one of her favorite meats. The ritual structuring of this desire is manifest with the coming of the hunters.

When husbands return from the hunting trip, there is little public display of emotion between them despite the overt preoccupation women have shown in the weeks of separation. Men enter the ceremonial house drumming, and women, after carrying the *pilana* inside the house, stand at the center with the piles and piles of smoked meat. Then, slowly, women begin to eat pieces of it. The voraciousness, appetite, and taste of the women inevitably strike the unaccustomed eye. Without any verbal or explicit order, all the women begin to eat large chunks of meat while men keep circling around them, drumming in one of the most intense moments of the festival. As I was standing in the middle with other female friends on just such an occasion, they encouraged me to take a large chunk of smoked meat and eat it. They did so by handing pieces to me and telling me softly but convincingly, "*kanka aichata mikui*" (eat your meat), which I did, somewhat reluctantly, because I felt I did not understand, or, now I would say, I was not properly situated within that economy of desire.

Women's avid consumption of their husbands' prey was not so much caused by hunger as by appetite; in other words, by a strong desire for meat (Siskind 1973). Such desire is never accompanied by a sentiment of judgment. In fact, in a place where women are subjected to all sorts of merciless criticisms, I have never heard anything about being too greedy when eating meat.

On the other side, manioc beer is the object of desire of men. This is why women would often say that they feel happy (*kushi*) when men drink their *aswa*. During the ceremonial drumming, men shout "*aswa! aswa! aswa!*" (manioc beer! manioc beer! manioc beer!) with enthusiasm. The shouting is not simply an invitation to bring more beer but rather an appreciation per se of the drink. This is also the reason for which women are particularly forceful when they serve beer to other male ceremonial helpers and feel rejected if they refuse it. During a different festival, I once witnessed some women getting angry at male visitors who did not want to drink their beer. They called up their own women to surround the unfortunate drummer with dozens of *mukawas* full of *aswa*. The man, after this attack, could barely walk out of the house and ended up on the earthen floor, his body soaked with beer.

Manioc beer, as I showed earlier, is intimately associated with pottery making. Pottery, too, is situated within this economy of desire. Pottery drinking bowls, as well as other figurines made during and for the *jista*, are said to be made for the men. An example of this may be clarifying. During the festival preparations I was in the house of my host grandmother in the company of her granddaughter. Both were working to make pottery for her grandchild and her brother, respectively. As we were sitting, firing the last pieces of pottery, sweating terribly in the heat of the afternoon, two young women came to the house, announcing themselves with the usual falsetto shout. They had come to buy pottery from my young friend and her *apamama*.

Being *ayurantes* in the same ceremonial house of the young girl, they had found themselves short of time and could not produce the pottery required. The girl seemed hesitant, probably allured by the possibility of having some ready cash. However, her grandmother, in a very relaxed tone, suggested the two girls to go home to make their own pottery. According to her, there was still plenty of time and when they tried to feebly reply, she responded that they should "make pottery hard, night and day".

At the end, the two girls went away empty-handed and *apamama* made some harsh comments about the incapability of young women to make pottery nowadays. The episode would have ended there, if it were not that, on the same night, *apamama* was

complaining about her lack of money. When her daughter-in-law questioned, somewhat provocatively, why she hadn't sold the pottery if she needed money, she replied that the pottery was not on sale. This pottery was for her grandson (a newly wedded man who had become *ayurante*).

There are two meanings to this answer. One speaks of an economy in which a well-made *mukawa* is the object of desire of a man as well as the manifestation of one's self. In this economy of desire, money cannot buy a *mukawa* (although this is certainly the current trend) because the *mukawa* comes to personify the woman and her work. The other point in the episode is the attempt by *apamama* to teach the young women something essential about the nature of pottery making and of being a *Runa warmi*. This has to do with being *sinzhi* (strong) and with not being *killla* (lazy), the worst offence that could be directed toward a man or a woman. The young women interpreted *apamama*'s gesture as being stingy of her skills (pottery making). The *apamama* was "stingy" in the sense that she firmly believed that her pottery could only be lent to her female kin, affine and non-affines. In so doing, her pottery would be passed, via related women, to her own male kin who would use it during the festival. In *apamama*'s view, the objects are created to satisfy the desire of her male kin, not someone else's. To fulfill that desire was the women's duty as *runa warmikuna* (Runa women). The pottery did not solely personify the woman maker but, simultaneously, the desires of her male kin. For this reason it was inalienable.

In this last example, it is clear how, during the process of making objects for male desire, women often receive harsh comments (both the young women and the *apamama*). This can happen to men too when they fail to comply with their conjugal duty of providing meat. However, criticisms are never as fierce as in the case of women.

Of Lazy and Stingy Women

It was time of *jista*. A man had become *ayurante*. His wife didn't know anything about pottery making and she was very worried about the *jista*. She begged other women to help her and tell her where she could find clay but the women were stingy (*mitza*) and did not want to reveal where it was. So one day when they went off to gather clay she followed them. The women took the best clay and left other pieces of clay thrown on the soil. After the women went home, as she was about to come out, she saw an old woman. The *apamama* was very upset and was saying "*Mankallpa ñuka isma imankata chasna ichunkichi?*" (Clay is my excrement, why do they waste it like that?). As the woman came out, she told the *apamama* how the other women didn't want to help her, so the *apamama* gave her the left-over clay that the other women threw away, tapped her hands with *wiwishku* (the calabash or bottle-gourd shell with which clay is smoothed) and told her to go home to "weave" her pottery. So the woman went home and began to make beautiful pottery that did not break when fired and could give her husband many *purus* and *mukawas* for the *jista*, whereas all the other women were very jealous and all their pottery broke.

The story is not just a female version of the hunter's story told earlier. In fact, whereas failure in finding and providing meat is only the hunter's fault, in this story, the initial difficulty of the young woman is caused by other women who refuse to help her. This story sheds light on the competitiveness that reigns supreme between Runa women in daily life and even more so during festival time. Other analyses of the *jista*, which focus on the competitiveness between the people in the ceremonial houses, often overlook the latent, yet very perceptible, feeling of competition between women within the same house. Comments about one's ability to do something as a Runa woman (*Runa warmi*) are extraordinary for their fierceness in the days of preparation, especially between women helpers within the same house who have to spend more or less two weeks at close contact every day.

The gathering of manioc is a particularly fitting example of this climate of tension. What at a first look would appear like a communal work, geared towards the making a shared substance (beer), is in fact an endeavor in which each woman has to "fight" for her manioc. The groups to gather manioc are generally made of three women related through affinal or consanguineal ties. The swidden garden in my case was quite far away and had to be reached by a forty-five minutes hard walk up and down hills. Before going, I was told by the women in my host family, to be strong vis-à-vis other women. I was told that as soon as the *amu* gave permission, we had to start cutting manioc stems and pulling manioc roots out, as rapidly as possible. Were I to forget and leave a manioc plant behind, another woman would probably pull it out and then, my host family admonished, I would lose "my" manioc. In fact, during the race to get as much manioc as possible, accusations were made between different groups of women of having begun to pull manioc out before the order of the *amu*, or to have stolen someone else's manioc. Women commented to each other on the quantity of manioc gathered, making comparisons between the different women's ability to work quickly as well as to carry very heavy baskets of manioc by a tump line fastened to their foreheads.

Whitten himself had noticed the festival's inherent risk of turning into chaos and death and its actual occurrence (1976:194-199), which he related to a post-festival "re-adjustment" phase in which people, under the effect of alcohol, continue to play their drums and drink *aswa*, but "without ceremonial support" (Whitten 1976:195), thereby leading to potential violence between different affinal relatives.

What I want to stress here is that the competition is always present throughout the festival, as the *amu*'s continuous invitations to peaceful behaviors remind us. This competitiveness is not generalized but takes place between women with other women, and men with other men. Also, competition takes different shapes according to gender. This is why on the day before the hunters depart, grandmothers, when whipping the hands of female *ayurantes* with stinging nettle, repeat the invitation not to be stingy or lazy only to the women. The same admonishments are not even mentioned to men, who are only reminded by their male *amu* not to get into physical fights when too inebriated.

The female-to-female accusations during the days of the *jista* take place mainly between female affines (but often also between consanguines), and always revolve around being lazy (*killa*) or stingy (*mitza*). Nobody wants to be offended like that, especially not during the *jista*. So, my host cousin and I were warned to chew manioc fast and hard: did we want the women in my group to think we were too lazy to make beer? Similarly, we were encouraged to make a repeated number of trips carrying heavy baskets full of manioc from the owner's garden. In so doing, we would have shown our hardiness to everyone there.

The two offences mentioned above are routinely used in non-ritual contexts as well, but acquire more salience and strength during the *jista*. This is so because they refer to key concepts in the making and circulating of substances. The first, *killa*, is the equivalent of not bringing a *pilana* home. Being *killa* is the antithesis of the festival, for it implies a lack of productivity, or better said, a manifestation of infertility. By contrast, *mitza*, the quality of being "stingy" and jealous of one's property, refers to the restricted distribution of substances and things. Again, at a time when things should abound without constrictions, *mitza* stands as the stark negation of the reproductive flow of the festival itself. But why are women's behaviors, and not men's, the ones which, via such accusations, are more strictly controlled?

In her work on Canelos, Guzman attempts to answer a similar question. She asks why female in-laws are subjected to harsher criticisms than male in-laws by their affinal kin. She suggests that this may be related to the fact that Runa women, unlike men, control virtually all foods (be it manioc beer or meat) that enter the household (1997:126). In fact, ideally, wives are entitled to all the meat (among other things) obtained by their husbands. Although men too "own" their wives' manioc beer, they do so in a different way. Men cannot "give" manioc beer as a gift, like women do with meat to other kin or neighbors. This is because even if manioc beer is made for male desire it is not transferable like meat. Meat is "taken" by men from somewhere, whereas manioc beer, just like pottery, is created by women from their own bodies.

In summary, the derogatory terms with which women are addressed, particularly during the festival, point to significant concepts within the cosmological meaning of the *jista*. Their use also indicates an asymmetry in this “cosmic food web” (Århem 1996) where women seem to occupy a special position.

The Gendered Reproduction of the World

I argued that practices in the *Wituk Sas* festival, by inviting a neat separation between men and women, shift attention from thinking about their personal dramas to refocus their energies toward the production of what real social *warmikuna* and *karikuna* are about: *aswa*, *manga allpa*, and *sacha aicha* (manioc beer, pottery clay, and forest meat). To work, the two different parts—*warmi* and *kari*—must be distant and their difference needs to be constantly reaffirmed.

This is why women from one ceremonial house can serve *aswa* only to men from another house whereas men can give beer only to women. The only appropriate receiver of an *aswa* shower is, for a woman, a man from another ceremonial house (and the opposite applies to men). Were a woman to pour *aswa* on another woman from a different house (something that does happen when women get drunk), negative comments inevitably arise. Women take great pride in their ability to make men get drunk and the more inebriated a man becomes, the more they insist on forcing him to drink—“*sinzhi upichiki pai kuinankawa*” (make him drink forcefully, until he vomits) I was told.

During *jista* time other things such as *purus* (small *tinaja*-shaped bowls) and animal-shaped vessels also served the purpose. By making different holes through which manioc beer can be drunk, the woman forces the drinker to drink and at the same time he is being showered through another hole. Vessels can be in the shape of fish, frogs, birds, and penises. These figurine-shaped vessels are produced exclusively during *jista* time and women refer to this pouring through different holes as *kuinana* (vomiting)—an act of fertility, as *aswa* too is produced by a regurgitation (see also Hugh-Jones 2001: 272 for Tukanoan people). It is clear that, despite the ubiquitous usage of *mukawas* in the *jista*, animal or object shaped vessels are more valued exactly for this simultaneous capacity of nourishing/vomiting.

The pouring/vomiting of *aswa* makes rain fall heavily. For this reason people should pour manioc beer only at the end of the festival. The dousing and pouring will ensure the ripening of fruits and thus the fattening of game. Regeneration and the continuity of life are caused by the flows of life-giving manioc beer and the letting of animal furs into the river.

Not coincidentally, the *jista* in *Wituk Sas* is also called “*Uyantza*.” When trying to elicit the meaning of this word, I was confronted with the same, somewhat disconcerting, answer. The term *uyantza*, from the root *-uya* (to listen, to hear) referred to a past time in which the festival ownership was passed on from one *amu* to another when, in the midst of the *jista*, someone inadvertently farted loudly. The current *amu*, when hearing the fart, would go to grab the farting person’s buttocks. A third person would then intervene to separate the bodies of the current *amu* and who had become, by virtue of his fart, the next *amu*. The process was also called “taking the fart” (*supinata apina*).

Farting, among the Runa, as in many other Amazonian people, is imbued with different meanings. In her work on the Barasana, Christine Hugh Jones relates the story of No-Anus Spirit (1979:197-199). This spirit cannot fart nor defecate and he is seen as socially unacceptable. A being who does not have an anus is unable to eat, thus to live properly. Similarly in the Napo region, Runa people tell of underworld beings called “*Unquia*” who only eat smoke because they have no anus (Foletti-Castegnaro 1993:226). The cultural hero of the neighboring Zápara people, Tsitsano, during his wandering in the forest, reaches the house of People without an Anus. They have plenty of meat but cannot eat for they would not be able to digest it. Thus they simply place meat on their

shoulders rather than eating it. Tsitsano, using a bamboo stick, gives them an anus. Finally people can eat their meat.

Farting (like defecating) is the sign of a vital digestion, of a human apparatus where substance flow circulates appropriately. "To take the fart" thus ensures that the flowing of substances within the festival, from one *amu* to another, will keep running, without impediments or blockages, like the absence of an anus.

In this sense, the *jista* talks explicitly about cosmic reproduction and flow. Such regeneration is enacted through the circulation of specific gendered objects. Meat is given away to other houses and none is left on the last day of the *jista*. Similarly, manioc beer is drunk until virtually everyone can no longer walk.⁹ It is significant that the last day of the *jista* consists of breaking all the pottery vessels. It is men who throw the pottery in the air, shouting "*jista tukuriin*" ("the festival is over"). None of the delicate drinking vessels were spared in the house of *lanceros* in *Wituk Sas*. All the manioc beer was poured out of the *tinajas*, sometimes emptying the whole pot on someone's head. In the nearby community of Montalvo, men, on the last day, have to lie on the muddy floor of the house and pull, with the only aid of their own rolling bodies, the empty *tinajas* outside the ceremonial house. It is then, when the *tinajas* lie outside the house and when the vessels are broken, that the festival is over.

Conclusion

In my description I try to sketch a preliminary analysis of how, in the *jista* of *Wituk Sas*, gender is a primary idiom through which cosmological and social ideas are expressed. I also argue that, in the *jista*, sexual separation is required at all levels. It is not just at a structural level where the households comprising the ceremonial houses stand as different gendered kin groups, but also at the level of the gender relationships that take place inside each house.

I also suggest that, for women and men to join as productive and desirable parts of a whole, there need to be two distinctive yet complementary gender units, each of them excelling in their respective work. Runa people, as Strathern writes with regard Biersak's Paiela of New Guinea, "locate the sources of their internal efficacy beyond themselves. The sources do not constitute some other realm or domain but another type of 'person.' For 'men' they lie in the acts of 'women.' These sources are not to be controlled or overcome but sustained in order to give perpetual evidence of this very efficacy" (Strathern 1988 cited in Conklin 2001:162).

Finally, to comprehend really what the *jista* is about one needs to understand the jealousy, protection, hunger, love, and happiness that stem from a particular economy of desire and its way of controlling, fueling, and channeling properly this desire. Desire is strictly linked to a moral regeneration of the cosmos. This desire, and by extension cosmological regeneration, can be sustained only if gender separations are maintained.

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Notes

¹ See Reeve (1998:137) for similar comments by Curaray women.

² Reeve (1998:142) portrays an almost identical arrival of the hunters in Curaray in the 1980s.

³ Guzman (1997:182) observes a similar pattern in Canelos.

⁴ A notable exception is the day of flowers when people from different houses enter the central plaza of the Church and begin to circle around drumming altogether. It is significant that this “merging” of people takes place exactly in a “religious” space, thus highlighting the type of process Reeve argued was at play in the Curaray festival.

⁵ Uzendoski too notes the maternal connotations of manioc beer making and *tinajas* (2004:897).

⁶ The maternal relationship women develop with pottery and manioc invites a reflection on the problematic use of the word “production” to refer to this kind of “making” processes. Descola (2012) justly warned against the indiscriminate use of the term “production” in anthropological works, wondering whether or not this is the most appropriate term to designate the relationship many indigenous people entertain with inanimate objects. From a different angle this was also the question that underscored the proposal made by Santos-Granero (2009) of rethinking the status of “objects” in Amazonia. These remarks here point to ontological questions regarding the status of pottery (but of manioc beer too) as a “thing” which can be produced ex-nihilo by a unique agent. Of course the answer to this question still seeks further elaboration.

⁷ Among Amazonian Runa, smell is an important ontological constituent of any being. For example, smell marks a definitive transformation from one ontological level to another. Encounters with spirit beings (*supai*) and fatal illnesses are always described first as an olfactory experience.

⁸ Significantly also, Uzendoski, working with the Napo Runa, takes Gow’s article as inspiration for his work on manioc beer and desire (2004: 2010). This is indicative of the ways both Napo Runa and Pastaza Runa think about such “vital” substances (namely meat and beer).

⁹ Perennial inebriation is the only a-gendered state during the *jista*, one which pertains to both women and men. It is perhaps this general state of drunkenness that suggests the feeling of “becoming a whole” or “becoming all Runa” to which ethnographers of the region.

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