

**Living through forms:  
similarity, knowledge and gender  
among the Pastaza Runa  
(Ecuadorian Amazon)**

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## **DECLARATION**

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I explore the knowledge practices of the Pastaza Runa, an indigenous group of the Ecuadorian Amazon. A central claim in my work is that processes of knowledge acquisition among the Runa involve an acknowledgement that human bodies, as well as non-human ones, share a network of 'likeness'. This is not to be located specifically in the possession of a soul nor in the 'shared' substance of the body. For the Runa, humans share with non-humans specific 'patterns' of action, which I call 'forms'. Things can affect humans (and vice versa) because they share a certain *formal* resemblance. Such resemblance is not found in discrete entities, but rather in the movements *between* entities. As such, forms cannot be reduced to the physicality of a singular body: they are subject-less and inherently dynamic.

The concept of forms developed in this thesis seeks to think about the relationship between human and objects in ways which go beyond ideas of ensoulment or subjectification. Such focus is central to my analysis of the relationship between humans and objects, and, in particular, between women and their ceramic pots. I explore the connection between women and pots by following closely the sequences of elaboration of ceramic vessels.

Pottery making is intimately linked to women's capacity for engendering novelty. I suggest that, for the Runa, the differentiation between women and men is not 'made' but rather given *a priori*. The 'givenness' of this difference has major implications for what one - as a Runa woman or man - can know or do. Thus, I explore how women, by virtue of their capacity for giving birth, are thought to be 'inherently' inclined towards 'exteriority'. By virtue of such 'outward' propensity, women need to engage in processes of making knowledge visible to the eyes of others. This 'exteriorizing' process has important consequences for the ways men and women are respectively thought to become 'acculturated'. Ultimately this work also aims to examine how processes of 'change' - a key concept in Amazonian cosmologies - are inevitably gender inflected.

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## Glossary of common Runa terms

**Ahuallacta:** literally, people from the highlands (*abua-* meaning ‘above’). The term designates *mestizo* people but not the indigenous population inhabiting the Andes

**Ahuana:** literally ‘weaving’, the term to describe the process of making a clay pot

**Allpa:** earth

**Alli:** good

**Alma:** soul

**Amarun:** anaconda

**Amu:** owner

**Apamama:** grandmother. It is often used to refer to any elderly woman

**Ashanga:** basket made of natural fibers

**Asua:** manioc beer

**Ayllu:** kin

**Auca:** term to indicate non-Runa indigenous people

**Batan:** wooden recipient where the cooked manioc is poured and smashed to make beer

**Cari:** man

**Causana:** to live

**Chagra:** women’s garden

**Colonos:** non-indigenous people who have come to occupy indigenous land

**Huarmi:** woman

**Huicsa:** belly

**Huituj:** Genipa Americana. Its dark juice is used by the Runa to paint the body and hair

**Gringo:** term to indicate white foreigners

**Jista:** Runa ceremonial festival. See also Appendix 1

**Lanceros:** male ceremonial dancers

**Lumu:** manioc

**Mama:** mother

**Mangallpa:** clay

**Mestizo:** people of mixed ancestry

**Minga:** collective work party

**Mucahua:** ceramic drinking bowl used to serve manioc beer

**Purina:** literally ‘to walk’; it is generally used to describe a hunting trip

**Runa:** person

**Runa shimi:** Quichua language

**Sacha:** forest

**Samai:** life force or breath

**Sinzhi:** strong or knowledgeable

**Sumaj:** beautiful

**Supai:** forest spirit

**Tinaja:** ceramic jar to store manioc beer

**Yachaj:** literally ‘the one who holds knowledge’; also often used to indicate a shaman

**Yachai:** knowledge

*To my parents*

*Ai miei genitori*

## Prologue

*The canoe was slowly descending the river, the murmur of its motor perpetually accompanying us during the long trip. The sky was clear blue, dotted by a white cloud only now and then. Around us, the forest looked like a tempting cool refuge from the incandescent sun. All the other people sitting in the canoe were unusually quiet, tired after six interminable hours of travelling under the merciless sun and eager to get home. Now it was finally getting cooler, with a soft breeze coming from the river. In the sky, just over the trees, two birds appeared and began chasing each other.*

*'Look!', the woman sitting behind me whispered to her little daughter, half asleep in her laps. The little girl woke up and her mother pointed with a finger to the circles made by the flying birds. 'Look how the birds dance. They dance beautifully. So you shall learn to dance when you are older'. As the canoe proceeded, both mother and daughters kept their heads up, their gazes lost in the fleeting image of the birds' dance. So they remained, gazing in the sky, until the birds disappeared over the trees.*

As I am writing now, about a year after my return from fieldwork, I recall this ephemeral vision as one which powerfully condenses the mindful aesthetics which permeates Runa lives. As the reader will soon realise, such fleeting moments constitute much of the bulk of my ethnographic material in this thesis. However minor these events are, they nevertheless constitute the texture of what the Runa - an indigenous people of the Ecuadorian Amazon - consider as a good, beautiful life. One of the first things that struck me about the Runa was indeed the meticulous attention they devoted to small, almost unnoticeable features of the world: the way one holds a drinking bowl, the designs on an insect's shell and so forth. This punctilious scrutiny is often accompanied by expressions of enjoyment and wonder. Runa people hardly get bored: the world, for them, is literally a source of continuous fascination. This first impression was further enhanced by what I felt was the marvellous poetic ability of Runa people.<sup>1</sup> They often saw connections

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<sup>1</sup> See also Michael Uzendoski (2008) for similar experiences with Napo Runa poetry.

between the most disparate kinds of beings and emphasised such links both in speech and practice. Those connections were not readily visible to me: my hosts often seemed incredulous that they even had to explain them to me.

This thesis explores the idea of similarity which underlay such connections. It asks the question of what it means, for the Runa, to be ‘alike’. What is the meaning of the connections Runa people often draw between themselves and others? And, importantly, what is the relationship between such relationships of ‘similarity’ and knowledge? In what ways can ‘learning’ be understood as a process of becoming - albeit temporarily - ‘like’ others?

In this thesis, I will explore how for the Runa the process of becoming knowledgeable depends upon the recognition that all entities share a ‘likeness’. Such likeness resides in what I call ‘forms’. By this term I refer to a stylised set of movements which can be shared by entities, humans and non-humans. Thus, for example, in the opening paragraph, the bird’s flight and Runa women’s dance share the ‘form’ of moving in circles. This is just one case of the myriad of parallelisms the Runa draw between themselves and other people, animals and things. Throughout the thesis I will show how learning processes involve the ability of recognising similarity between one’s movements and those of others as well as the ability of reproducing or imitating others’ ‘forms’. Thus for example, for Runa women it is in the very moment they reproduce the ancestral movements of the Owner of Clay (*mangallpa apamama*) that they become knowledgeable potters.

The recognition that we all share - to a certain extent - some ‘movements’ is central to understanding processes of becoming a ‘proper’ Runa person. For example, I, a non-Runa, could become like a proper Runa woman insofar I was able to imitate and reproduce some specific movements of Runa women. In the moments I imitated Runa stylised movements I was ‘knowledgeable’. Equally, women are ‘knowledgeable Runa’ only insofar as they ‘enact’ such connections of similarity linking them to others. Such relations of similarity are disclosed through the execution of specific forms. To give an example; using a nutshell, Runa potters often ‘tap’ gently the walls of the pot they are making. This ‘tapping’ - a stylised gesture - is the same movement elderly women execute when they gently hit the hands of young girls to ‘mould’ their hands. This single gesture - a form ‘shared’ by both potters and elderly women - initiates a set of relationships of similarity: first,

between potters and elderly women, secondly, between clay and female bodies. By tapping, Runa women render 'visible' to everyone else such connections and in so doing, they are recognised by others as knowledgeable ones.

As soon as I began realising this, another question began to bother me. If the Runa have such a 'flexible' notion of knowledge - you are knowledgeable inso far as you reproduce certain 'forms' - why should the Runa be so concerned with cultural change and loss? A recurrent theme during my fieldwork, loss of knowledge is indeed perceived as a real threat by the indigenous inhabitants of the Pastaza region. If everyone was equally concerned about the loss of knowledge, in practice it was almost always women who were harshly reprimanded for not being 'knowledgeable' enough. Equally, women seemed to naturally be more susceptible to cultural loss or 'ignorance'. They constantly had to make their knowledge visible through the enactment of specific movements. Surprisingly, for men, the opposite was true: they were hardly under the pressure of 'showing' their knowledge to others. In fact, as I will show in this thesis, men's 'Runaness' was hardly ever questioned. The different moral evaluation with which people regarded women's and men's knowledge intrigued me. Reflecting upon my own experience of learning and that of other young Runa women, I began pondering the following questions: what is the relationship between different knowledge regimes and indigenous conceptualisation of sexual difference? Is there such a thing as female knowledge? What does it mean to be a knowledgeable Runa woman? How does this differ from being a knowledgeable Runa man? Where does the difference between men's and women's knowledge come from? In other words: what kind of persons are women and men? This thesis proposes investigating these admittedly ambitious questions through an ethnography of pottery making and gendered personhood.

As a more general question, this thesis ultimately aims to investigate what knowledge is for the Runa. Pondering my own process of knowledge acquisition, I take the different assumptions which informed my own and my friends' actions as starting points to explore what 'being knowledgeable' means to them. In this thesis I suggest that knowledge is, to use a Runa friend's expression, in 'the movements'. This work is an attempt to take this definition seriously.

## Introduction. The form of anthropology

*But this time, Kublai didn't seem willing to give in to his tiredness.*

*- Tell me about another city - he insisted.*

*- ... From there one departs and rides for three days between Greek and Levant ... -*

*Marco Polo began to narrate again, enumerating the names, the customs and trades of a great number of places. His repertoire looked inexhaustible, but now it was his turn to give up. It was dawn when he said:*

*- My King, I have now described all the cities I know.*

*- There is one left which you never talk about.*

*Marco Polo lowered the head.*

*- Venice - said the Khan.*

*Marco smiled - And what else did you think I was talking about?*

*The emperor remained imperturbable. - But I have never heard you mentioning its name.*

*And Polo - Every time I describe a city I say something about Venice.*

*- When I ask you about other cities, I want to you to talk about those. And I want to hear about Venice when I ask you about Venice.*

*- To distinguish the qualities of other places, I need to begin from a first city which remains implicit. This is Venice.*

*The invisible cities* (1972) by Italo Calvino

As Marco Polo did in his wonderful recounts of far away cities, in this thesis, which is about the Runa, I am always talking about 'my' Venice. In this introduction I do not only provide a scholarly review and discussion of the literature I engage with in the thesis, but I also aim to provide the reader with a sense of the architectonic structure - the 'Venice' - which informs my work. My aim in this introduction is to make such underlying assumptions visible (cf. Strathern 1988; 2004 [1991]) so that the analysis carried out is not mistaken for an indigenous theory, but it is rather seen, in the words of Marcio Goldman, as a 'fecund corruption' (2006: 169) of ideas between two worlds.

## A first arrival

*Memory invades me. It is no use keeping it at bay by quoting musty pages. I cannot confine this first sighting to the past. I must let it run its course in the present, on this page.*

(Valerio Valeri 2000:5)

Rain. A thick shower of rain. This is my first memory of Pastaza. The torrential pouring went on for days, leaving the streets inundated by a muddy flow. Puyo looked like a ghostly city under the heavy rainfall, on that distant afternoon when I first reached the town. A few days after my arrival, the land and roads dried up and I could finally get out of my gloomy hostel room and have a first taste of the tropical heat. But Puyo, or better, its population, remained strangely spectral to me: during my first period in Pastaza, people looked impenetrable and foreign. When I wandered in the street, with no clear idea of the reasons why I was there, I would observe closely each person who looked vaguely indigenous. I would place their faces, their movements, their laughters under a careful examination, animated by a mix of intense longing and fear. 'Will I ever succeed in knowing them? Will I ever become a part of their community?' Those were my admittedly ingenuous questions. I would ponder about these issues with excitement as well as with deep turmoil for, as days went by, these impenetrable 'indigenous people' seemed to recede from me even further. So were my first months in Pastaza, and so was I, devoured by an intense, almost painful, desire to know and be known.

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Indeed it was my very turbulent mood during the first weeks in Pastaza which marked indelibly the course of my successive fieldwork. Eager to 'begin' with fieldwork, I was eventually led, some time after my arrival in the provincial town of Puyo, to accept the casual invitation of an indigenous leader to visit his community.<sup>2</sup> According to him, his kin would be happy to receive me. The village was located in the interior of the forest, reachable only by a 40 minutes flight. Completely

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<sup>2</sup> The community I visited and lived for about two months and a half is not Runa. Here I retain its anonymity out of respect of its inhabitants.

oblivious to any practical issue, I embarked on a long trip to this locality only to find out, upon my arrival, that I was neither expected nor particularly welcomed. People were simply indifferent to my presence. But unfortunately, I was there already and returning to Puyo proved to be difficult: there were no canoes, no flights I could take advantage of. At that time I was also convinced that fieldwork was a bit like self-sacrifice so, I told myself, I had to stoically endure. But life there was too hard even for an anthropologist with a missionary bent.<sup>3</sup> When I finally left the village, returning to Puyo ill and emaciated, ‘indigenous’ people seemed all the more obscure to me.

I relocated my research in Puyo and its surrounding areas and opted to work as a teacher in a bilingual school to begin forging my first relationships with indigenous people. At this point, the choice was clear: I would have worked with the Runa, the largest indigenous group in the region. I stumbled upon the school of Ņukanchi Allpa, a little indigenous centre at the periphery of Puyo, almost by chance and I was immediately integrated to the team of teachers as the English professor. I continued to teach English classes to the children of the Ņukanchi Allpa primary school for about a year and a half. Given that research with the Runa of Ņukanchi Allpa began in the aftermath of my tragic adventure in the forest village, I could not help but describing my stay there to the first Runa people I met. The Runa in Ņukanchi Allpa were horrified (as well as terribly amused) by my stories about the remote village and my physical and mental exhaustion. The care they initially showed towards me was always accompanied by remarks on their own moral righteousness: they would not let me suffer as I did in the forest.

Unexpectedly, my experience in the forest gave me a certain degree of respectability. I had been able to live there, without dying, for three months. I had fed myself with manioc and plantain. I had drunk large amounts of *asua* (manioc beer). I had gone to gather clay to make pottery. I had worked in a *chagra* (swidden garden). People would look in amazement at this *estudiante* (‘student’ as I was called throughout my fieldwork) who had survived living in an isolate jungle village. This

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<sup>3</sup> The community was composed of about 8 adults and a dozen children. Even if there was abundance of game, people mainly consumed fruits and manioc beer as meals. The strenuous diet, combined with my poor manual skills and my hosts’ lack of interest in my presence were the perfect ingredients for a disastrous first experience of fieldwork.

experience proved to be crucial for developing an intimacy with people of Ñukanchi Allpa and beyond, and was always brought up as a proof that I was really 'hard' (*sinzhi*). While my initial research focused on the lives of a group of Runa people in the urban community of Ñukanchi Allpa, I also began following Ñukanchi residents to their natal communities. Many of them are from various centres of Comuna San Jacinto, located in the surroundings of Puyo. Many close friends also come from villages situated along the shores of the Bobonaza river. With Ñukanchi Allpa, this latter is the area where I worked most of my time. Throughout the 30 months I spent in Pastaza for my doctoral research I had the opportunity of traveling throughout the region as well as meeting people from all over the Bobonaza area.



**Fig.**

### 1. Map of Ecuador (Pastaza and Puyo highlighted)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Available at [http://www.embassyecuador.eu/site/images/articulos/mapa\\_geografico\\_ec.jpg](http://www.embassyecuador.eu/site/images/articulos/mapa_geografico_ec.jpg)

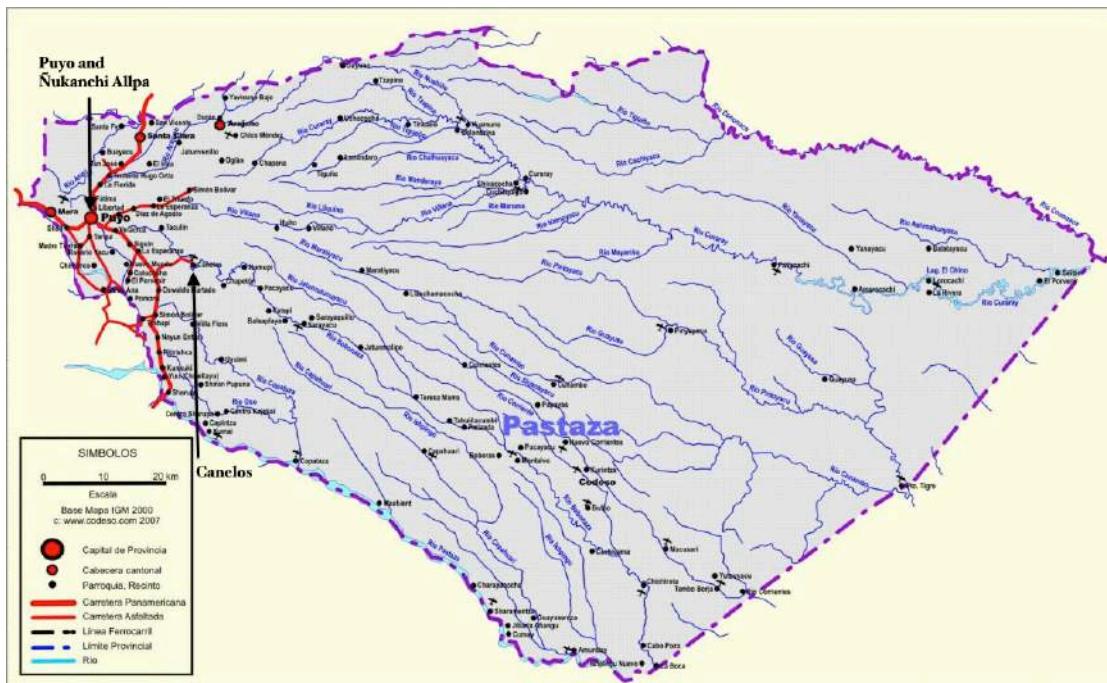


Fig. 2. Map of the Pastaza region<sup>5</sup>

As a teacher in the local school, I was lucky to be hosted by three different Runa families in Ņukanchi Allpa, gaining insight of the considerable differences that exist between Runa people living in town. In the rural communities where I resided for long periods of time I lived in the house of my *compadres* and friends. My daily activities changed considerably when I moved from town to the rural centres: if in the first case I would spend most of the time sitting, chatting and making pottery with my hosts and neighbours, in the second context, I often had to work much harder. Accompanying my hosts to the garden, preparing food and manioc beer as well as participating in any social gathering represented my main occupation during my stays in rural communities.

Although I established a 'fixed' place in Puyo, in my last year and a half of fieldwork I only spent short intervals of time there in between travels along the Bobonaza. Being constantly on the move helped me to realise the intricacies of connections which branch out all over the Runa territory of Pastaza. In particular, the participation in hunting trips and trekking in the forest greatly enhanced my knowledge about people's relationship to places, spirit beings and animals. Even if I spent much time with Runa men, especially during hunting trips (*purina*) and

<sup>5</sup> Available at [http://www.codeso.com/TurismoEcuador/Mapa\\_Pastaza.html](http://www.codeso.com/TurismoEcuador/Mapa_Pastaza.html)

political meetings, as a woman, I became more competent in the activities of Runa women.

As such, this thesis is primarily based upon materials which I gathered during daily life, as I lived with my friends and hosts and participated into their daily activities. All the material presented in this thesis comes from informal talk or participation in rather mundane activities.<sup>6</sup> As will become increasingly evident during the thesis, my analysis builds upon small, unremarkable events, such as the encounter of a spider in a storage pot, or the floating of sand into the river's whirlpool. Such is Runa aesthetics: appreciative and aware of the minor details. In this thesis I do not aim to draw the overarching structures of Runa 'culture' but rather to give a sense of how an aesthetics of forms can be created through daily activities such as pottery making. Amongst other things, this thesis aims to give a sense of the texture of what a beautiful life (*sumacilla causana*) is for the Runa.

This introduction is organised around different themes: life, gender and processes of object making. They are linked to each other by the same thread: a notion of 'form'. In the section titled '*Causana*: on life and beyond', I aim to show how a concept of forms enables to think about similarity in ways which go beyond ideas of shared substances or 'soul' commonly deployed in debates about animism.

In the following section on gender, I examine how Amazonian anthropologists have often described gender as a fluid category, constantly made through practice. Contrarily to fluid models of gender, I argue that in the Runa case, gender is somewhat fixed and pre-given. By devoting attention to local constructions of fixity and givenness, I hope to contribute to the anthropological discussion on gender and its place within Amazonian lived worlds.

In the section on processes of making, I review current literature on objects and materiality both in Amazonia and beyond. Drawing upon my analysis of pottery among Runa women, I seek to partake to post-humanist discussions on artefacts by

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<sup>6</sup> In the first year of my fieldwork I communicated with people in Spanish. As my understanding of Quichua improved, I began to talk to my guests and friends exclusively in Quichua. Nevertheless, given that most Runa people - with the exception of elderly women - are perfectly bilingual, it was not rare for my interlocutors to switch from one language to the other within the course of a conversation.

suggesting that a concept of form - as well as a careful analysis of process of making - eludes any straightforward dichotomy between 'thing-per-se' and 'representation', a dichotomy which is the focus of much discussion among contemporary debates on objects and materiality.

Finally, I consider my contribution to the anthropology of ontology by addressing some of the problems intrinsic to the 'ontological turn', especially in relation to my own ethnography on 'knowledge'.

Before proceeding to discuss in detail the anthropological literature with which my work is in dialogue however, I wish to explore ethnographically, in the next section, my own process of apprenticeship among the Runa. Learning the arts of being a Runa woman became so central to my work and then, successively, to my life when I married a Runa man, that I wish to address this engagement both theoretically and methodologically before exploring my contributions to the anthropological literature.

### **The pot of the anthropologist<sup>7</sup>**

During my first months in Nukanchi Allpa, I began a correspondence with Professor Norman Whitten, well-known ethnographer of the Pastaza Runa. After a while, I had grown increasingly frustrated with my clumsy attempts at 'eliciting' information. I was overwhelmed by the distressing thought of never 'knowing' enough. In that moment, I resorted to Norman for advice. After all, he had worked with these people for so long! The question I asked him addressed specifically the usefulness of interviews. I had tried to interview people, but they either seemed uneasy or reluctant to answer formal questioning. His answer stayed with me for a long time:

Because of my early travels, collecting of pottery and taping of music, we both [Norman and his late wife, Sibby] had a great deal of 'knowledge' when we arrived in Puma Llacta and soon learned that the more we knew the more the Runa would 'tell us'. We found early on that

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<sup>7</sup> Title adapted from Marcio Goldman's (2008) article 'The Drums of the Anthropologist'.

interviews were worthless, and even detrimental to field research. If one doesn't 'know' something of the subject, whether the knowledge is deep or immediate (yachana and ricsina), then one should not 'ask' (Norman Whitten, email correspondence, 4 October 2011).

Admittedly, at the time, Norman's suggestion seemed paradoxical. How could I know, if I didn't get information first? Seen retrospectively, this was the best piece of 'methodological' advice for working with the Runa I could ever receive. For, during the very initial stages of my field work, it was my talking about the experience in the jungle village which stirred the interest of people of Ñukanchi Allpa. The fact that I had already experienced life in the forest encouraged my hosts to see me as an interested 'student' and to enthusiastically assume the role of teachers.

Throughout this thesis, therefore, I amply draw from my own experience of learning. I make no attempt to hide that the process of becoming knowledgeable was one which happened primarily on my skin. To draw on one's process of enculturation is a fundamental anthropological device, one no anthropologist could do without. Indeed, as Tim Ingold suggests, anthropology might well be defined as a 'practice of education' (Ingold 2014) which takes place through attention and participation and culminates in the acquisition of a specific *savoir faire* (cf. Descola 2005). Such learning process becomes particularly visible in the works of phenomenologically inspired anthropologists (Poirier 2005; Nadasdy 2007; Willerslev 2007) which are underlain by the assumption that cultural difference can be partially overcome by virtue of a shared phenomenological experience which brings close the apprentice-anthropologist and the people she works with (cf. Keane 2013).

Nevertheless, the relationship between Amazonian ethnography and phenomenology is difficult. Aparecida Vilaça (2005), writing about approaches to the 'body' in anthropological literature, aptly criticises the notion of the 'mindful' body as developed by Csordas (1999) and others. According to Vilaça, this notion leaves unproblematised the ontological status of the body itself. In phenomenologically inspired works on the 'body', she suggests, this latter figures as a universal physical substratum. This clashes with the idea, held by most Amazonian

people, that a proper human body is constantly made through processes of substance incorporation, rather than simply 'given' (see also my section below and Chapter 2 & 3).

It is exactly the presupposition of 'sameness' underlaying the idea of a universal body which is criticised by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2012 [1998]:92) who, in response to Ingold's work (2000), argues that phenomenology - with its emphasis on *being in the world* - assumes 'sameness' to be prior to difference, while, he suggests, in the case of Amazonian people, the opposite is true. Sameness does not come 'ready to hand' but rather, needs to be created out of difference. In sum, both Vilaça and Viveiros de Castro, seem to suggest that phenomenology entails certain assumptions about the nature of the human body which are blatantly at odds with Amazonian ontologies.<sup>8</sup>

Given the ethnographic specificity of Amazonia, these objections to phenomenology and to its assumptions - the pre-existence of a 'biological' body and the negation of dichotomies - are indisputably valuable. However, even if we do not use phenomenological insights explicitly in our work, this does not mean that some of its basic assumptions are *not* at work in our ethnography.

A basic premise of phenomenology - the fact that we all dwell in a world and that we are affected by it - is a central, if unspoken, tenet of all anthropological endeavour - perspectivism included.<sup>9</sup> As Peter Skafish (2013) remarks, in an ironic vein, the metaphysics of anthropology is constituted by:

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<sup>8</sup> Viveiros de Castro further argues that phenomenology is just another way to talk 'about' the world. In other words, phenomenology does not concern ontology (what the world 'is') but only epistemology (how do we 'know' the world). In his own words:

Phenomenology, new or old — especially the 'phenomenology' invoked by anthropologists of late — can be seen as an ashamed surrender to epistemology: the notion of 'lived world' is an euphemism for 'real world for a subject', that is, 'known world', 'represented' world (2012 [1998]:153).

I shall delve more upon this contrast between ontology and epistemology in my last section of this introduction.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the sense for which we are always 'affected' by others and what surrounds us is, more than to phenomenology, profoundly linked to the philosophy of Spinoza (2002 [1677]) who, in his 'Ethics' identified 'affects' as the modifications produced in a body by its relationship with another body.

A cocktail of the phenomenological Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and a little Marx, according to which everything human is constituted, in essence, from some mix of *Zubandenheit*, lived experience, perceptual/cognitive forms, historical conditions, and that favorite metaphysical master concept of anthropology, practice.

Indeed, people are others because they live in ‘other’ worlds and are, in turn, constituted by it (Descola 2013; 2014). In this thesis, I actively embrace such phenomenologically inflected assumptions, if only to show how they systematically clashed with those of my informants. An example might clarify my point. One of my assumptions throughout fieldwork was that, through learning, I could only *partially* become like my Runa friends. The transformation, in my view, could only be partial for, although phenomenology can be read as an attempt to overcome difference, it can also be thought of as a resistant *habitus*. Roy Wagner makes this point when he writes that the learning of the anthropologist is different from that of a child:

He [the anthropologist] will participate in the subject culture, not in the way a native does, but as someone who is simultaneously enveloped in his own world of meanings, *and these meanings will also participate* (1981:8).

My hosts, however, held entirely different views on the matter, as I will show in Chapter 6. They thought that such radical transformation was possible. In their view, I could turn into a native. Indeed, it could be argued that this is what some people ultimately aimed for. Nevertheless - and this is important - they attributed this transformation not to an idea of a common body, nor to a capacity for interiorizing knowledge, but rather, as I will explain in this thesis, because of the possibility of ‘shared’ forms.

My ability at replicating specific movements - which I call ‘forms’ - such as the tapping of clay or the cutting of weeds, signaled my transformation. This began when, in the middle of my fieldwork, most of my pottery teachers unanimously decided that it was time for me to learn to ‘weave’ pottery. I will not enter into details of this process, which I fully explore in Chapter 4: suffice to notice that this moment represented a fundamental turning point in my fieldwork. When people

visited my teachers' house and found me sitting on the floor, 'weaving' clay, I would often become the object of endless commentaries. Every minimal detail would be promptly noticed and commented upon. For instance, as I quietly sat 'weaving' pottery and began to 'tap' the pot to straighten it, my teacher would whisper to the others with a smile: '*Ricui! Ricui! Tas tas tas!*' (Look! Look! *Tas tas tas!* [imitating the sound of a good execution]).

Little by little, the transformation I was undergoing became even more visible. 'Look at Francesca!', a friend would whisper to the other, indicating my bare arm; 'Her skin is turning dark!' On another occasion, as a friend was looking for lice in my hair, she suddenly exclaimed: 'Your hair is turning black!'. Meeting my incredulous look, she rapidly pulled some hair out. I turned around to protest, only to see her hand waving, close to my face, few thick hair of a dubious dark colour. Whilst I examined the hair - which looked to me still relatively blonde - she assumed a serious expression and said:

What will your parents say now? Will they recognise you when you go back? Perhaps you should stay here.

There was no trace of irony in her face. But that people thought I was undergoing a real metamorphosis became only evident when one day, as I was chatting with some women in Nukanchi Allpa, a close friend stared at my eyes and said excitedly to the others: '*Ñabuita ricui! Ñabuita ricui!*' (Look at the eyes!). I was soon surrounded by five women, closely inspecting my eyes. According to them, some tiny dark circles had begun to appear in my otherwise green iris. These black dots, it was announced, would soon spread all over the entire iris. In sum, my eyes were becoming black. Amidst the group of women, my friend Leticia voiced aloud everyone else's opinion:

You have spent too much time here! Now you've turned into a Runa! You've looked too much at these *mucabuas* (drinking bowls)! Now you are changing and when you go back to your country your parents won't be able to recognise you anymore. What will you do then?

For my friends, it was obvious that my ‘practice’ with them was making me become a Runa, while distancing myself from my family back home. Notice, in the passage, how my physical transformation - the change of eye colour - was seen as a direct consequence of a movement - that of looking fixedly at designs. In the very moment I learnt to reproduce certain ‘bodily’ states, contrasting assumptions about knowing emerged. What I saw, in a phenomenological sense, as my process of interiorising knowledge was seen as something different by the Runa (see Chapter 6). The processes of learning and thinking through a phenomenological perspective revealed thus to be useful methodological and analytical strategies *especially* as they clashed with different ideas about knowledge and personhood. The clash helped to tease out not only my consultants’ ontological assumptions (Scott 2007), but also to render visible my own.

### ***Causana: on life, knowledge and beyond***

This thesis explores Runa knowledge practices. A central claim in this thesis is that learning practices among the Runa involve an acknowledgement that there is a ‘network’ of likenesses linking all entities in this world. The status of ‘likeness’ and similarity is little explored within Amazonian models of sociality inspired by structuralism which tend to emphasise instead alterity and otherness (Lévi- Strauss 1993; Lima 1996; Overing 1996; Vilaça 2002). In particular, the economy of alterity has become a theoretical cornerstone of Viveiros de Castro’s (1998; 2001; 2009) multinaturalism as well as Descola’s (2005) analysis of animism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, current models of Amazonian sociality do contemplate the idea of ‘similarity’. For example, the body which is the site of ‘difference’ *par excellance* in Viveiros de Castro’s cosmological schema can equally be thought of as the site of ‘similarity’ from the perspective of those who are ‘like you’. To make one’s body ‘similar’ (through processes of substance sharing) is to acquire the same ‘human’ perspective. In addition, many works by British and American anthropologists have emphasised the idea of a ‘community of similars’ (Belaunde 2001; Gow 1991; Rival 1998) created through food sharing and co-residence.

I have no space here to do justice to the complexity of Descola's and Viveiros de Castro's theories.<sup>11</sup> Sufficient to notice, for the purpose of this thesis, their interpretation of Amazonian cosmology posits a uniform soul shared by human and non-human entities, and a particularised body which differentiates between different kinds of beings. In both models, the body bears an important theoretical weight for it is the site of difference (and of similarity). Bodies, conceived like differentiating envelopes of a shared substratum of subjectivity, are ontological anchors: they constitute whom you are and whom you are not.<sup>12</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, these 'bodies' need not be understood as biological substrata (Vilaça 2005): they are not 'given' but actively 'made'. What is exactly the relationship between difference (as well as similarity) and the body in the aforementioned models of animism? What does an Amazonian body consist of? How is it made?<sup>13</sup> In his original discussion of the term, Viveiros de Castro defines the body as a 'bundle of affects' (2012[1998]:114). He further specifies:

Affects, in the old sense of dispositions or capacities which render the body of every species unique: what it eats, how it moves, how it communicates, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary ...The

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<sup>11</sup> United by the analytical distinction between body and soul, the two theories differ on an important point. In animist societies, people say that non-humans see themselves as human by virtue of a common soul (Descola 2013). Perspectivism, as elaborated by Viveiros de Castro (1998), goes a step further by adding that the non-humans see humans as animals. This has important theoretical repercussions. In a world where every subject perceives himself as human - where human 'culture' is the lens through which to look at the world - what changes is not the concepts - manioc beer, blood, etc. which all equally derive from a humanoid vocabulary - but rather the things themselves. Thus, for example, what for us (humans) is blood, for a jaguar's is manioc beer. Note that the jaguar too has a concept of 'manioc beer' - however what counts for him as 'manioc beer' is radically different from what humans see as beer. Things thus have no essential substance: they exist only in relation to a perspective. For its daring non-essentialist approach, Viveiros de Castro's theory has found ample resonance in anthropology beyond Amazonian ethnography (Hage 2012; Holbraad 2012; Latour 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Of course to a certain extent, given that the risk of metamorphosis (a quality of the soul) is always latent.

<sup>13</sup> The literature on the 'body' in Amazonia is vast (Conklin 1996; Descola 2013; Hugh-Jones 2009; Kelly 2001; Lagrou 2007b; Lima 2002; McCallum 1996; Mentore 2012; Rival 2005, 2008; Santos-Granero 2012; Seeger, da Matta & Viveiros de Castro 1979; Taylor & Viveiros de Castro 2006). I limit myself to discuss here only Viveiros de Castro and Descola's theories which generally inform most ethnographic accounts of the body in Amazonia.

visible shape of the body is a powerful sign of these affectual differences (2012[1998]:113).

Viveiros de Castro's description closely parallels Descola's (2005) 'ethogram', that is, the set of behavioural patterns which differentiate each being in the world. Aparecida Vilaça (2000) in her work, seems to suggest yet another slightly different conception of what 'makes' a body:

As we have seen, all human beings have the same practices: drink manioc or maize beer, live in families, make war. The difference between themselves is given by the point of view, which is determined by the physical constitution (2000:66).

In her interpretation, it is the 'physical constitution', rather than 'practices' which makes one's point of view.<sup>14</sup> As she continues her analysis, Vilaça suggests that the 'point of view' - the physical body - is constituted by the ingestion of food, corporeal substances and clothing. If I understand her correctly, unlike the early definition proposed by Viveiros de Castro, she does not identify movements, communication etc. as the site of difference: the body she talks about is rather a physical entity made of interpenetrating liquids and substances. Through the flow of such substances, similarity or kinship - as well as difference - can be created. In this sense we can understand food taboos, bodily modifications and ingestion of substances as fundamental part of the process of making similar (or different) bodies or perspectives (Fausto 2007; Gow 1991; Oakdale 2008; Vilaça 2007).

Indeed, much Amazonian ethnography has emphasised the role played by corporeal substances in creating difference and similarity (Belaunde 2001; Santos-Granero 2012; Walker 2012). Whilst the ingestion of substances as well as the sharing of foods and manioc beer constitute primary acts for becoming similar or kin, in this thesis I suggest that this is not the only way Runa people can become 'like' others, be those 'others' non-Runa people, animals or objects. I suggest that the Runa find in *practices* - the site of difference in Descola's and Viveiros de Castro's models - also the space for likeness.

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<sup>14</sup> Although one could legitimately argue that the physical constitution is the result of these very practices, i.e. the way one walks etc.

It is worth, however, to specify the meaning of ‘practices’ here. With this term, I do not merely refer to the activities people engage with but, more importantly, to the *ways* in which such activities are carried out. The transformation of a person into a Runa occurs only through the replication of specific ‘stereotyped’ forms: for example, one does not turn into a Runa woman simply by making pottery but rather by enacting a specific set of gestures which the Runa recognise as being ‘proper’ and beautiful. My concern here is thus not with the body as a representation or a physical substratum. The object of my analysis are the ephemeral *movements of the body as it does things*. This particular perspective echoes Jean-Pierre Warnier’s (2001) take on the body as a ‘sensory-motor’ apparatus, a body that is *always* in motion, constantly interacting with its material environment. This thesis could indeed be seen as exploring the practices through which human subjects are taught, in Marcel Mauss’ expression, ‘to use their bodies’ (1950 [1935]: 70). The analytical attention to the body in motion helps us to consider some fleeting yet central moments of Runa life and, in particular, their daily ‘techniques’ for creating the self: as I will show, the way one sits when doing pottery, the movement with which one pushes a log into the fire are all ephemeral yet important instances of the work involved in becoming a Runa. Only through an attention to such practices, we are able to see the ways in which the Runa align themselves to others. In this work, I suggest that it exactly these moments – the way one moves, the way one eats – which differentiate not only humans from non-humans and Runa from non-Runa but also enable the Runa to recognise others as ‘similar’ to them.

Importantly, I suggest that ‘likeness’ needs not to be located specifically in the possession of a soul. Whilst similarity in animist ontologies is generally understood as a function of the shared ‘subjectivity’ which characterises all entities in the world – you can become ‘like’ someone else only because both of you share a ‘soul’ – I suggest that this is not the only possibility through which the Runa become ‘like’ other entities. To give just a small example: during the festival (*jista*), Runa hunters hung the heads of dessicated prey into the roofs of the ceremonial house. They are careful not to leave their mouths shut. As in most occasions with the Runa, the practice is not accompanied by any verbal exegesis. However, its meaning was revealed to me, in the course of a festival, as a drunk man excitedly pointed to me first the head of a caiman hanging from the roof and then, his own mouth. ‘We have to leave their mouths open, just like our mouths which are open to laugh, shout and

drink during the festival'. The open mouths is what I call a 'shared form'. Such relationship of similarity is not underscored by any idea of animacy as 'subjectification': the caiman is not 'subjectified'. Equally, it must be noticed that it is not the caiman nor the man *per se* which constitute the terms of the relationship but rather their movements (the opening of the mouth). Similarity is created not by two static entities or 'subjects' but rather by the movements both seem to share. The 'forms' I talk about in this thesis are thus far from Platonic ideals: they are processual rather than static.

Yet, this description might not be entirely accurate. Throughout the thesis, the reader can detect a certain tension between a static and a dynamic conception of forms. Forms, as mentioned above, are patterns of movements, yet, they can also become 'congealed' in time and thus serve as an 'ideal' prototype for action. For example, the set of movements executed by the Grandmother of Clay (Chapter 4) become crystallised in time and reproduced over and over from a woman to the other with little modification. In this sense, the movements become a fixed, Platonic type of form which people hold in mind and seek to replicate throughout time. This is a tension which I do not aim to resolve here but that I limit to acknowledge as intrinsic to Runa knowledge practices.

My use of forms is, in many respects, similar to Eduardo Kohn's (2013) use of the term in his analysis of Ávila Runa interactions with the environment.<sup>15</sup> Influenced by Terrence Deacon's (2012) 'morphodynamic', Kohn's 'forms' refer to quasi-biological manifestations of certain general patterns. His is a 'naturalistic', to use Descola's (2013) terminology, use of forms: for example, he labels 'form' the patterns of rivers in upper Amazonia which are shaped by different morphological and environmental constraints. If Kohn's approach generates thought-provoking insights, the theory collides, at times, with Runa ethnography. Admittedly, Kohn is not concerned with this incongruity: he clearly explains that his argument, although supported by ethnography, does not emerge from a specific ethnographic point of view (2013:94). This is perhaps where our approaches differ most. While he grants that forms (a notion he derives from a semiotic framework) belong also to the world of non-humans, as in the case of rivers, he nevertheless does not include such

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed the similarity of our use of forms may be a sign of the ethnographic specificity of the Runa.

inanimate entities into the realm of the living. Objects and other non-living things are conspicuously absent from his account. This omission is patently due to his interest in aligning anthropology and biology (see also Kohn 2002). However as Kohn himself recognises (2013:94), for the Runa there are far more things which are 'alive' than what his analysis allows.<sup>16</sup> In this thesis, I thus bring forth the relevance of 'form' to show how this notion can help us to go beyond our understanding of the Amerindian distinction between body and soul as well as that between living and non-living beings. I suggest that when the Runa talk about *causaj sacha* (living forest) they do so referring not only to the multiplicity of subjects - things, animals, stones, rivers - which inhabit the world but also to the movements between such entities.

My position resonates with the suggestion recently made by Tim Ingold (2006) in his work on 'life'. Arguing that scholars of animism mistakenly conceptualise 'animacy' as a substance to be infused in entities or substances, he suggests that such view does not account for many phenomena, such as meteorological events, which are perceived as 'alive' by some indigenous people. He thus suggests an intrinsic relationship between life and movement, recognising the primacy of this latter in animist ontologies.

My main difficulty with Ingold's approach is that he does not simply suggest that an 'expanded' version of animacy is needed. Rather, he argues that animacy, as a kind of vital flux or movement, is 'ontologically prior' (Ingold 2006:10) to entities. In my view, such approach imposes what 'animacy' should be over ethnographic data. If I too deploy 'forms' as an analytical tool to go beyond ideas about the soul, the body and animism, nevertheless I recognise that such idea stems from a specific ethnographic context. My use of 'form' does not aim to constitute a comprehensive theory applicable everywhere in animistic worlds nor do I wish to impose such perspective on 'animacy' on other, different ethnographic contexts.

Furthermore, my position should not be taken as to imply that the Runa only relate to others by virtue of these 'shared' forms. Runa people certainly entertain relationships with non-humans others in a variety of ways which I do not fully explore in this thesis. Rather than trying to set the boundaries of the meaning of

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<sup>16</sup> See at this regard Pitrou (2014) review of Kohn's work as well as de la Cadena (2014). See Kohn (2014) for a reply to this latter.

‘animacy’, my intent is that of opening up anthropological possibilities to think about life through the analysis of one, fundamental way the Runa relate to non-human others.

### ***Runa buarmi asba: On gender and knowledge***

In the previous section, my discussion has focused mainly on the forms shared by human and non-humans. Nevertheless, the concept of ‘forms’ is also essential for understanding Runa processes of knowledge acquisition and transformation.

As reported by many ethnographers, for many Amazonian people knowledge is created through the sharing and the exchange of substances (cf. McCallum 1996; Santos-Granero 2012). The Pastaza Runa do not make an exception to this trend: as I will show in more detail later, they too aim to make the body knowledgeable through the ingestion and exchange of powerful substances. The incorporation of others’ qualities (for example, the strength of a plant) makes one’s body ‘knowledgeable’. Nevertheless, in this thesis I wish to highlight another fundamental process through which Runa people become knowledgeable. This consists in the practices of imitation and reproduction of other people’s movements. Throughout the thesis, I refer to such specific ‘movements’ (e.g. the spitting of manioc beer) as ‘forms’. I suggest that, through these particular movements, two entities (e.g. a Runa and a non-Runa) become temporarily aligned and ‘alike’. These instances of alignment, I argue, are fundamental for becoming knowledgeable.<sup>17</sup> For example, whenever a woman makes pottery, she is reproducing the specific movements of Mangallpa Apamama, the Owner of Clay, as well as the movements of many other Runa potters. Knowledge *is* the reproduction and appropriation of other people’s movements.

Strictly related to this notion of forms as the reproduction of ‘proper’ movements is the issue of gender. If this thesis focuses on Runa knowledge, it does so from a particular female perspective. This was inevitable: as a white foreign woman, I had to follow a specific path of knowledge if I ever wanted to learn anything about Runa ‘culture’. The recognition that one’s gender inevitably influences what one can learn

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<sup>17</sup> During my fieldwork, this kind of knowledge was strongly emphasised. It could perhaps be said, paraphrasing Rita Astuti’s description of the Vezo of Madagascar, that knowledge or Runaness ‘is not so much ‘on’ the body as in the movements that bodies make’ (1998:7).

about things is not mere, indulgent self reflexivity. In my view, such admission should be situated within the agenda of a truly symmetrical anthropology in which we fully acknowledge that what we learn in the field depends upon our own motifs and assumptions as much as upon the imagination and desires of the people we study. Thus, this thesis stems from and it is about gendered knowledge. Having said that, however, I find the very notion of 'gendered knowledge' tricky. Does this definition imply the existence of a gender-less knowledge? Does 'gendered knowledge' mean that some knowledge can only be accessed by women or men? These are some of the questions I aim to address in the thesis.

If many works in Amazonia focused on the importance of sexual symbolism (C.Hugh-Jones 1979), antagonism (Gregor 1985; Siskind 1973) as well as their role within economy and exchange (Murphy and Murphy 1985), gender has been sometimes overlooked in Amazonian ethnography.<sup>18</sup> This is perhaps due to the claim, made recently by a handful of scholars (Descola 2001; Vilaça 2002; Viveiros de Castro 2001, 2012[1998]) that gender in the Amazon is encompassed by relationships of affinity and consanguinity. Within the structuralist model, men become associated with affinity, whilst women with consanguinity. The problem which I find with this approach is that consanguinity and affinity seem to pre-exist independently of what actual women and men are and do. Why should 'consanguinity' take precedence over the subjective experience of being women, mothers and wives? And, perhaps more importantly, why should women - and not men - be better apt to deal with consanguinity?

What perhaps is most striking in this approach is the persistent avoidance of talking about 'essential' differences between women and men. Take, for example, a passage from Descola's discussion of the association between women/consanguinity and men/affinity:

Warfare and hunting are male affairs, *not because men would be stronger or braver than women*, but because these activities are conceived as expressions of relationships with metaphorical affines, and fall therefore under the jurisdiction of those whose business is to deal with affinity.

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<sup>18</sup> Some notable exceptions include Belaunde 2001, Bellier 1993, Lorrain 2000, McCallum 2001, High 2010, Overing 1989, Rival 2005 and Walker 2013.

Conversely, gardening or child rearing are female prerogatives, *not so much because women would be naturally predisposed to produce and manage life*, but because these tasks befit their aptitude at dealing with consanguinity (2001:102, my emphasis).

Descola's argument paradoxically parallels the arguments made by those anthropologists who argue, *against* him, that gender is indispensable for an analysis of Amazonian societies. For example, Cecilia McCallum (2001) who has devoted her monograph precisely to an analysis of gender among the Cashinahua, suggests that, despite criticisms of extreme gender constructivism, 'gender difference is clearly located in ... *created corporeal difference*' (2001:166: my emphasis). She is critical of previous works, i.e. Gregor (1985) which were underpinned, in her view, by the assumption that:

Men and women are previously 'sexed' and that 'sex' can be read as a natural aspect of individuals understood as bounded biological and psychological units (2001:161).

In contrast, McCallum invites us to look at how gendered persons are 'produced'. Both Descola and McCallum are obviously wary of applying 'Western' dichotomies, such as that of sex/gender, to the people they studied. This is a laudable aim and one which has its roots in early anthropological work on gender (Schneider 1984; Collier and Yanagisako 1987) as well in the works of gender theorists (Braidotti 2003; Butler 1990) aimed at dismantling the too easy link between gender and biology. With her analysis in *The Gender of the Gift*, Marilyn Strathern (1988) has perhaps contributed more than anyone else to a rethinking of the place 'gender' occupies within anthropology. Nevertheless, I suggest here that even if our dichotomies (nature/culture or sex/gender) do not apply to the contexts we work in, this does not mean that other kinds of closely resembling dichotomies cannot be relevant to our research participants. In other words, whilst our notion of 'sex' may be inappropriate for the Runa, this nevertheless doesn't mean that they do *not* think that there is an inherent difference between women and men. For example, sexual dimorphism, the different shapes of genitals as well as their texture, smell and taste are object of much speculation and discussion among the Runa. Whilst these differences may appear naive to the eyes of a gender-conscious anthropologist, it is

not because of their apparent ‘straightforwardness’ that they need to be dismissed as superficial. As I show in Chapter 3 of this thesis, there are many instances which suggest that the Runa think of gender differences as something ‘given’ rather than completely ‘created’. For example, I was told that a baby can be born as an animal-like in other parts of the Amazon - but if she is a female, she will stay a female. No female baby could transform into a male tapir. Equally, no matter whether a man takes up pottery, he will always be a man, just one which ‘doesn’t have a woman’ (*buarmi illaj*), the Runa expression for homosexual men.<sup>19</sup>

Admittedly this kind of thinking is hazardous: we might too easily identify such constructs with ‘sex’ (cf. Povinelli 2002: 107). However, this needs not to be so. My suggestion in this regard thus echoes the invitation made by Michael Scott (2013a) for a ‘methodological non-dualism’. In commenting about the current theoretical trend which emphasise relations over entities, Scott observes that we should be careful not to impose ‘non-dualism’ over our ethnographic subjects. He suggests that whenever we deploy non-dualist theory (e.g. Heideggerian phenomenology, Deleuzian becoming etc.) to elucidate our materials, we need to acknowledge the fact that ‘our non-dualisms are not isomorphic with those of our informants’ (2013:306). In other words, the non-dualism of various philosophical schools should not be confused with the non-dualism of our indigenous informants. I think this suggestion applies equally to the kinds of dualisms we might encounter in the field. So if we encounter something which looks like ‘essentialism’ in the ways our informants think, we should be careful not immediately identify it with the ‘essentialisms’ we might know nor should we dismiss such constructions. My aim is thus not that of re-introducing the old dichotomy sex/gender (cf. Astuti 1998) in order to shed light on Runa construction of the person, but rather, that of paying attention at what the Runa think of as ‘fixed’ or ‘given’ without assuming that this neatly corresponds to our well known ‘givens’. I think this is an important contribution to the study of gender in Amazonia, where generally more ‘fluid’ models of gender are deployed by ethnographers.

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<sup>19</sup> My approach here could be paralleled to the attempt made by Laura Rival (2005) to trace the gender constructions which underpin ideas of the body and the soul among the Waorani.

Such ‘essential’ differences have an impact on the way Runa knowledge practices take shape. Whilst I think that the Runa are quite unanimous in their opinions of what knowledge ‘is’ (see Chapters 1 and 6), I also believe that, in practice, different regimes of knowledge apply to men and women. Thus, for example, while I argue in Chapter 6 that the replication of ‘movements’ is fundamental for understanding the meaning of ‘culture’ for the Runa, I also suggest that the responsibility for such replication more heavily falls upon the shoulders of women. Women’s knowledge is tested upon its ability at replicating *visible* proper forms, in a manner that men’s is not. If women’s knowledge is basically a work of reproducing ‘forms’ - of becoming ‘like’ others through the replication of ‘forms’- men’s knowledge is conceptualised, on the contrary, as something more ‘essential’ and thus, less susceptible to external influences.

This has important repercussions with regards to processes of so called ‘acculturation’. A central theme in Amazonian anthropology, ‘cultural change’ has been recently articulated in terms of ‘bodily transformation’ and it is currently a topic generating much fertile debate (Santos-Granero 2009b; Vilaça 2011, 2014). However it is remarkable that such accounts seem to have altogether forgotten about gender, talking of ‘change’ as if this constituted the same thing for both men and women. I think this is an unfortunate consequence stemming exactly from neglecting the ‘essential’ differences indigenous people may draw between men and women. Consider, for example, the Runa case.

Because women’s knowledge is mainly concerned with the visible reproduction of movements, I argue that Runa women are placed in a double edged situation: on the one hand since they are in charge of reproducing forms, they become the harbingers of cultural conservatism but, on the other, their knowledge is considered to be more ‘shallow’ than the men’s: in the moment they cease to reproduce certain forms, they become automatically non-Runa. In the thesis I link these differential regimes of knowledge and change to the local construction of women and men as intrinsically different kinds of people. In Chapter 3 I argue that women’s difference lies in their generative power and more exactly in their capacity of engendering new visible forms out of their bodies. This capacity is what renders them both the perfect candidates for ‘representing’ their culture and the most susceptible to turn ‘like’ others.

Finally, thinking retrospectively, I find my straightforward decision to write an introductory section on gender somewhat bizarre. After all, many Amazonian works on shamanism, warfare and hunting - activities which are prototypically limited to men - hardly ever mention gender, even *en passant*. This omission makes such practices - and most importantly, the ideologies which derive from them - look as if they were universally shared by all 'people', irrespectively of whether they are female or male. The absence of references to gender in such works (as well as the explicit reference in mine here) seems to implicitly reinforce the assumption that men are 'the' unmarked category, whilst women exist only insofar as they are 'marked', that is, opposed to men, as Simone de Beauvoir (1961 [1949]) suggested long ago (cf. Ortner 1974).<sup>20</sup> In a recent review of works on animism, Costa and Fausto (2010:98) ask, somewhat ironically, whether the emphasis on predation/alterity could represent an overly male-centred perspective. With the needed caution, I think the question is worth investigating. If the economy of alterity is fundamental for Amazonian people - and the Runa are no exception to this trend - it may be that the forms this economy takes are nevertheless different for women and men (Vilaça 2002:360; Rival 2005). This work should be understood as following this line of enquiry.

### ***Abuana: On making***

In this thesis I devote two chapters to the process of pottery making. Pottery making is a central occupation of Runa women (as well as a favourite topic of conversation), both in the city and in rural villages. A difficulty I encountered in writing about material objects consisted in answering the spontaneous questions my chapters generated in readers: What is the symbolic function of bowls? Is the storage jar a representation of maternity? And so forth... These might be inevitable questions for anyone working with objects, which stem from the particular status 'objects' occupy within our epistemology where they are often conceived as the representation of something else. This is also a common interpretation in most anthropological approaches to material culture where, beginning from Boas, ethnographers have identified objects with the expression of an aspect of society. It

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<sup>20</sup> The same could be said of many works on 'ontology' which hardly ever mention gender (cf. Bessire 2014). Exceptions at this regard are Rane Willerslev's (2007) monograph on Siberian hunting and Maya Mayblin's (2012) work on motherhood in Northeast Brazil.

seems as if objects cannot be but images of something else.<sup>21</sup> Among anthropologists, scholars interested in material culture (Alberti 2014; Coupaye 2013; Forge 1970; Gell 1998; Ingold 2007; Lemonnier 2012; Rowlands and Warnier 1996; Sillar 2009; Warnier 2007) have worked towards dismantling such representationalist bias.

To escape the traps of projectionism and/or representationalism, many anthropologists have sought to recur to the notion of 'agency'. This term has become particularly notorious with the work of Gell on art (1998) but it has nevertheless been a central concern for all anthropologists, old and new (Mauss 2001[1925]; Latour 1993). In Amazonia such an example is provided, for example, by the edited volume by Santos-Granero (2009a) on things, where the contributors opted for redefining objects as subjectified entities: objects thus as persons (see also Fortis 2014; Velthem 2003). Whilst I partially make this claim too (see Chapter 4), I would however hesitate, at least for what regards the realm of pottery making, to define pots as 'subjectified' entities.<sup>22</sup> Runa people do not repute pots to possess a subjectivity (with some exceptions which I will explore throughout the thesis). The question I ask is thus: what do pots and human bodies share, if not the possession of a shared 'subjectivity'? What other kinds of relationship can Amazonian people have with objects if not one of subjectification?

My contribution to these debates lies exactly on the possibility of escaping such dichotomies (representation *versus* thing-*per-se* or objectification *versus* subjectification) through an attention to both processes of making as well as ideas of 'form'. For example, the analysis of the storage jar (*tinaja*) in Chapter 4 seeks to problematise any definitive depiction of an artefact as either a 'projection' of human thought or as a 'living' thing independent of its maker.

In the thesis I also tried to experiment with the suggestion, made by Martin Holbraad (2012), of letting 'the thing speak'. In a working paper, Holbraad, echoing

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<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant (1991) on the birth of images in Ancient Greece reminds us that the status of objects as representations has a specific origin, which can be traced back to Plato's philosophy.

<sup>22</sup> For the Runa too, certain objects, most notably, special stones (see also Bilhaut 2006) are persons, imbued with an animacy people recognise to be like theirs.

Ingold (2007) suggests that post-humanist approaches in dealing with things have failed to focus on the things themselves, stopping merely at what people 'say' about things. Indeed this is a criticism which could be leveled also against the contributions of the aforementioned volume on Amazonian objects, who seem to be more concerned in describing the place of things within cosmology and myth rather than exploring their material features or their making process. On the contrary, Holbraad proposes to take the 'thing' in itself - with its material characteristics - as a point of departure for conceptual imagination.

The very notion that things might make such a difference of their own accord, 'as such', does, it seems to me, ultimately raise the prospect of pragmatology as a *sui generis* field of inquiry ... Might one imagine a thing-centric discipline called pragmatology in which things' material properties would form the basis of conceptual experimentations that would be unmediated by, and run unchecked from, any human projects whatsoever? (2012:22)

Indeed this statement captures well what certain things 'are' for the Runa. Specific things and artefacts indeed speak for themselves. For example, for the Runa, as I will show in Chapters 2, 3 and 6 the strange bodily condition called *paju* speaks for itself. To borrow an expression by Strathern, *paju* contains 'its own prior context' (2004[1991]:33). Nevertheless, I also feel that to apply *in toto* Holbraad's suggestion to my Runa materials would be somewhat inadequate. The feeling emerges from the fact that, whilst the potency of certain forms was obvious to my Runa friends, this potency was not at all perceptible to me. If the storage jar spoke to the Runa, it didn't straightforwardly speak to me. Things make a difference 'as such' only because they are embedded within a space of attention which gives them form (cf. Kingston 2003). This attention is inherently aesthetic and thus, context-specific (Overing 1994). However attractive Holbraad's suggestion might be, I thus wonder: wouldn't the conceptual experimentations entailed in the 'thing itself' always be determined by our capacity of seeing 'the thing'?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Perhaps this would not be a concern for Holbraad himself: the thing 'I' see can never be the same as what 'others' see, what ultimately matters are the novel conceptual affordances granted by the thing in itself.

The Runa themselves could be said to be jostling with such a tension. If on the one hand, they emphasise that an ‘unmediated’ access to reality (to ‘things’) is available to everyone (for example through the drinking of *ayahuasca*), on the other, they are conscious of the need to teach one’s body to perceive it. This is why, in my account of object-making, whilst I strive to give an account of the ‘thing in itself’, I always recognise that the process of making entails the making of the maker herself: thus, alongside an analysis of the techniques of making, I also look at the ways these affect the maker (and user).

Indeed, as it will become evident in my chapters on the making of pots, the distinction between the two processes might be spurious. As suggested by Warnier (2001, 2007, 2009), technologies of the self and technologies of objects are intimately interwoven.<sup>24</sup> In his work, Warnier argues that we should consider the ways materiality shapes our subjectivity: the movements of the human body always necessarily implicate a relationship with the surrounding material world. My description of pottery making as a process which, for the Runa, involves becoming ‘proper’ beautiful women could be an example of what he calls a ‘praxeological’ approach: an account of the ways in which the Runa apprehend to ‘move’ their body in the process of making things. Yet, I must underline that the attention devoted to such gestures did not stem, in my case, from an pre-existing analytical interest: I did not go to the field with the interest of developing a praxeological approach to Runa culture. Rather, as I will show throughout the thesis, it is the Runa themselves who, during fieldwork, literally forced me to devote major attention to the body in movement.<sup>25</sup> It is through movements that people become ‘beautiful’ (*sumaj*) and ‘good’ (*ali*). As André Leroi-Gourhan wrote: ‘aesthetic sense rests upon a consciousness of form and movement’ (281). The Runa, I believe, could not agree more.

This last point really highlights the intimate relationship between material things, techniques of the self and ideas of beauty. Indeed, any discussion of making process in the Amazon, as elsewhere, entails a discourse on morality and ethics (cf. Overing

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<sup>24</sup> André Leroi-Gourhan (1945, 1964) was possibly the first to make this argument an anthropological concern in his work on technology.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, the two theories, on the one hand, the praxeological approach and on the other, Runa’s take on the body in movement should not be confused.

1994). For the Runa, beauty (*sumaj*) is inherently moral and, as such, fruit of proper knowledge. Through a detailed account of pottery making, this thesis also offers a portrait of the moral beauty of every day life. Beauty is a recurrent theme throughout the thesis but perhaps comes out more forcefully in the chapter dedicated to 'designs' where I suggest that the Runa attribute the capacity for creating 'external' relationships to their stunning complexity. Drawing from the work of Melanesian anthropologists on art (Forge 1970; Gell 1998; Roscoe 1995), in Chapter 5 I explore how beautiful designs exert an effective force upon those who view them. For Runa potters, designs actively set in motion a generative flow: people, beer and foreigners circulate prompted by the sight of beautiful patterns which adorn pottery. Women, as the makers of designs, play a fundamental role in this vital circulation.

It is in the very relationship which women establish with their pottery that my analysis of making also draws attention to the issue of creativity and novelty in Amazonia. The idea of creativity has been looked at with some suspicion in the regional ethnography and beyond (Descola 2013:323-325; Ingold 2013). This wariness is due to the particular meaning 'creation' (or 'production') holds within Western philosophical tradition. Anthropologists have rightly emphasised the transformational ontologies of Amazonia - in which nothing is created *ex-nihilo* but rather each being originates from a succession of transformations. However, I suggest that, if one pays attention to the technicalities of the making process rather than only to what is said about objects and their mythical origin, it becomes clear that the process of bringing forth a pot is conceived as a generative act, one which ultimately comes from one's body. Each pot, for example, despite conforming to more or less an ideal type, is unique and belongs intimately to the maker. Indeed, whilst homogeneity of shapes (of an 'ideal' type) is the norm, after little time nobody can fail to distinguish between the 'style' of a potter and that of another. As I hope to show in this thesis, making pots is undoubtedly the result of a *kind of* creation, in a manner similar to which babies are. In the look each woman gives to her finished pottery - shiny under the sunlight - it is possible to catch a glimpse of the wonder at witnessing the transformation of raw clay into a beautifully painted drinking bowl.

## Engaging with questions of being and knowing

*I was struggling with finding the ‘right’ words for my ideas, when a fellow anthropologist, a friend of mine from Manchuria, read my draft chapter on *paju*. He was struck by the fact that *paju* strongly resembled the logics which underpins many precepts of Chinese medicine. He then asked me why I hadn’t used the word ‘metaphor’ in my chapter, a word which constitutes a primarily device in Chinese thought and literature. I dismissed his suggestion with a movement of the hand. ‘No, no, using the word ‘metaphor’ would imply that this is not real’, I replied; ‘It would not be fair to the people I worked with. I can’t use it there’. He did not insist. However, a few days later, as we were again discussing my chapter, he confessed me he did not understand my reluctance to use the word ‘metaphor’. After I explained my reasons to him again, he commented thoughtfully: ‘You know, I think that when you and I talk about ‘metaphor’, we mean very different things. To us [the Chinese], metaphors are real’.*

In this introduction I have used, somewhat nonchalantly, the term ‘ontology’. As will be evident by now, I consider this work to be part of a large theoretical movement which is interested in questions of ‘being’. Such turn, in anthropology like in philosophy, has marked a shift away from epistemology. The question asked is no longer ‘how do people represent their world?’ but rather ‘what kind of world do people inhabit?’ A first consequence of this shift was the recognition that our knowledge, our ethnography, is the result of a powerful melange, a ‘third’ thing emerging from the fieldwork encounter with others but not entirely exhausted by it (cf. Strathern 2004[1991]; Wagner 1981). Such recognition requires us of taking our informants ‘seriously’, an adverb which has become the landmark of the ontological turn thanks to Viveiros de Castro (cf. Candea 2011). This means to take our informants’ concerns, and their sometimes cryptic assertions as axiomatic (Viveiros de Castro 2011).

Martin Holbraad (2010) describes beautifully this process when he writes that, instead of asking why the Nuer should think that twins are birds, we should rather be asking what twins *are*, what birds *are* for the Nuer, until we no longer think analytically of such assertions as absurd. Holbraad suggests that this move requires us to stretch our conceptual repertoire rather than applying old solutions to new

problems. These new concepts - emerged from the fieldwork encounter and anthropological analysis - are then used by some anthropologists recursively, that is, to shed light on the anthropological endeavour itself. Thus, for example, Strathern's (1988) 'relation', Viveiros de Castro's (1998) 'multinaturalism', Wagner's (1981) 'invention', Holbraad's (2012) 'truth', all come to provide a critique, and simultaneously, an alternative view of the discipline itself. The inspiration of the aforementioned works is perhaps most visible in my analysis of *paju*. In Chapters 2 and 6, for example, I suggest that, through *paju*, we can rethink concepts like 'similarity' and 'culture'. Nevertheless, my contribution to this body of literature is not limited to a rethinking of concepts through ethnographic materials.

The reader might have noticed from my brief discussion above that the word 'ontology' comes to hold different meanings.<sup>26</sup> For example, in an anthology edited by Clammer, Poirier & Schwimmer (2004) dedicated to intercultural relationships, 'ontology' is taken to indicate the 'reality' of the world our research participants live. Similarly, the authors of the edited volume *Thinking Through Things* (Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007) seem to link ontology to the possible existence of multiple worlds.<sup>27</sup> From yet another different perspective, Michael Scott (2007) deploys the term 'onto-praxis' to investigate the fundamental categories of being which underlay the daily practices of the Arosi of the Solomon Islands. Thus, if on the one hand, 'ontology' refers to 'the economy of anthropological argument itself' (Holbraad 2013:563) - as a heuristic device to generate new concepts - on the other, 'ontology' also seems to be concerned with the existential status of things in the world. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive: indeed I try to use them both in this work.

The difficulties entailed in the approach which seeks to study 'ontological' assumptions are many. In my view, the greatest risk one can incur in talking about 'ontology' is that of dealing primarily with what Keane (2013) terms 'weak ontologies'. He notices that much anthropology of ontology seems to be concerned

<sup>26</sup> I do not aim to provide here any exhaustive review of the so called 'ontological' turn in anthropology which is diverse and encompasses many different scholars. For this, see Scott (2013b). For critical reviews see Killick (2014), Heywood (2012), Laidlaw (2012).

<sup>27</sup> Martin Holbraad later recognised the ambiguity of the use of ontology as suggesting the existence of multiple worlds and redefined his use of 'ontology' as an 'essentially analytical procedure' (2013: 563).

with ‘weak ontologies’, that is, indigenous representations of the world, rather than ontology in a strong sense, as an ‘inhabitable reality’ (Keane 2013:189). Wary of what he calls ‘the didactic virtuosity of indigenous metaphysical theorists’ he wonders how far we should take indigenous theories at face value. Shifting the emphasis from what people say to what people do, Keane suggests an alternative:

If we want to speak of a Greek ontology in the strong sense, of an inhabitable reality, we should not be looking at their representations of reality but at the preconditions for making such representations in the first place, and the consequences that follow from them (2013:189).

In light of this suggestion, in this thesis I focus mainly on daily practices. If I do aim to elucidate what ontological assumptions my research participants hold about ‘things’ (such as gender, similarity or pots) I always try to do it through an ethnography of practice. I seek to answer admittedly complex questions about the status of knowledge or of gender difference through an ethnography which pays careful attention to unremarkable events or things. I believe my focus is in tune with the attention the Runa themselves devote to the minimal details of their daily lives.

Simultaneously I also try to let my own anthropological language to be affected by Runa unique aesthetics of resemblance. At the beginning of the process of writing up, I was reluctant to use evocative terms. My preoccupation was the direct connection between poetic language - in which metaphor plays a major role - and non-factual statements (Sperber 1982). If metaphor implies non-reality (or at least not ‘real’ reality), Viveiros de Castro’s caustic statement that, in anthropology, ‘metaphor is the wrong perspective’ (2004) seems particularly sensible.

Dealing with similar issues, Joanna Overing (1985) warns anthropologists of the danger of turning ontological statements as metaphorical ones. The danger, argues Overing, is that of presenting as metaphors things which for our informants are real. In a surprising twist at the end of the same paper, Overing however likens the anthropologist to the poet (cf. Guyer 2013; Ingold 2014; Reed 2004: 19 on Marilyn Strathern). In a passage which remarkably calls to mind Hobraad’s (2012) ‘ontographic’ method, Overing writes:

Our construal of a peculiar utterance given to us by an informant requires us to construe the world so as to make sense of the utterance: what gives is the world, not the word, the reverse of what occurs when we mistakenly treat literal statements as metaphor. The poet is creating an ‘impossible’ possible world, or a possible ‘impossible world’, as you will: a world where mountains sit on an eternal stool, or a thunderbolt is your next-door neighbour (1985:172, *reference omitted*).

This is admittedly my task too. In this thesis I seek to acknowledge the stunning capacity of the Runa to see resemblances between the most disparate things and events. I thus try to re-create this ‘impossible world’ through ethnographic writing. My use of *intermezzos* in Chapter 1 is perhaps the clearest example of how my own language became affected by a Runa aesthetics. There, I seek to evoke and elicit connections through the use of powerful images, as the Runa themselves constantly do. My gender undoubtedly plays an important role in this process of elicitation. From a Runa perspective, it could be said that my thesis really exemplifies what it is about. Given my status as a female ethnographer and my intention of elucidating the ‘shared’ forms of (apparently disconnected) things, I am indeed tangibly doing what I argue Runa women do all the time: making knowledge and ‘connections’ visible to the eyes of others.

Finally, my contribution to the literature on ontology also resides in my focus on ‘knowing’. Anthropologists who partake to this broad ‘ontological’ movement often emphasise questions of being over against issues of ‘knowing’. A concern with this latter is taken as symptomatic of our modern preoccupation with epistemology (Viveiros de Castro 1999) and thus guilty of reinforcing ontological dualisms. In my perspective, however, the question of ‘what there is’ cannot be separated by the issue of how we come to know what there is. The two movements are, in my view, necessarily implicated in each other (Toren & Pina-Cabral 2009): to be asking what knowledge is both an epistemological and an ontological question (cf. McCallum 2014).

Furthermore, I believe that sidestepping epistemological issues has the unintended consequence of ‘transposing every lived ontology into conformity with its own

eternally returning terms' (Scott 2013a:304), thus obscuring the existential ambiguities and doubts which characterise human experience. Attention to questions of epistemology - and thus to moments of doubt and skepticism - helps to question the 'unproblematic certainties' (Candea 2013:431) which sometimes characterise ethnographic accounts of indigenous ontologies. I give an example of this complexity in Chapter 6 where I explore, through the story of a Runa woman, how people can come to doubt some of the assumptions which underscore their process of transformation into proper Runa people.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Chapter 1 serves as a historical and geographical introduction to the Runa of Pastaza.. Throughout the chapter I use *intermezzos* which punctuate the text and give space to the direct interventions of Runa speakers. With this artifice, I hope to recreate the powerful evocations and analogies beautifully mastered by any Runa person who truly 'knows'. This chapter also gives a partial glimpse onto some of the themes which I will explore in more detail in other chapters.

In Chapter 2 I explore various means through which Runa people are made into knowledgeable persons. I begin developing a concept of 'forms' by exploring ethnographically a 'bodily condition' the Runa call *paju*. I suggest that such condition is underscored by the assumption that certain 'forms' are shared by all entities in the world. Through various examples, I show that, to become a knowledgeable Runa person, one needs to acknowledge and manipulate such 'shared' forms.

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between knowledge and gender through an ethnographic analysis of the different techniques to become 'proper' Runa men and women. If in the previous chapter I highlighted the importance of 'forms' for understanding knowledge, in this chapter I suggest that the reproduction of 'forms' is, in some ways, a specifically female 'work'. I link the difference between male knowledge and female knowledge to local constructions of gender. In particular, I show how female reproductive abilities - the capacity of engendering novelty out of one's body - serves as a model for understanding knowledge and craftsmanship among the Runa.

Following the suggestion that women's knowledge is about recognising - as well as actively enacting - 'shared forms', the Prelude to Chapter 4 and 5 constitutes a gentle introduction to the world of pottery making - the realm of female knowledge *par excellance*. In this chapter, I begin outlining the processes by which Runa women become 'knowledgeable' potters through the replication of 'proper' movements.

Chapter 4, along with Chapter 5, is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of Runa pottery and its relationship to women's knowledge. In Chapter 4 I explore the connection which Runa women draw between their own bodies and pots by attending ethnographically to the process by which pots are made.

Chapter 5 explores the designs Runa women draw on their pots. Through an ethnography of potters' discourses as well as an analysis of the practices surrounding beautiful designs, I explore the 'meaning' of designs. This 'meaning', I will argue, is profoundly linked to women's capacity for making knowledge visible - and aesthetically enjoyable - for others.

In Chapter 6, I explore ethnographically the states of doubt and 'ignorance' which often characterise Runa lives. Through the life history of a single woman I explore processes of 'acculturation' and knowledge acquisition. In particular, I highlight the process by which a single woman comes to doubt certain fundamental assumptions about what 'knowledge' is. Finally, I explore the relationship between gender and 'acculturation' processes in light of the ethnography presented in other chapters.

## Notes on the language and orthography

The Runa speak Amazonian Quichua (*Runa shimi*). For this reason, they are also called ‘Quichua’. Nevertheless, they always define themselves as Runa, which means ‘People’ in their language. In this thesis, with a few exceptions, I always use the term ‘Runa’.

Their language belongs to the Quechua family, widely spoken in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina and Colombia. There are three main dialects in Amazonian Ecuador (Orr and Wrisley 1965): Tena, Loreto-Ávila and Bobonaza-Curaray-Puyo. The people I worked with speak the last of them, which is also referred to as the Canelos Quichua dialect (from the village of Canelos).

In most of Pastaza’s bilingual schools today young Runa people learn to write their language in ‘unified Kichwa’ (*Kichwa unificado*). This version does not include many sounds which the Runa of Pastaza commonly deploy (for example, the *c* and *g* are both written as *k*). Despite its ubiquity in the classrooms, when I tried to write down terms using unified Kichwa, most people - with the exception of teachers - found the spelling very confusing and often different interpretations arose over the correct orthography. Thus, for this thesis, I opted to write in the older, pre-unification Quichua. An important exception is constituted by the names of communities which, in this thesis, are generally spelt as their members officially do.

I was aided in this task by the vocabulary redacted by Orr and Wrisley’s (1965). All terms were checked both in the field with research participants and at home with the assistance of my husband Franks Mayancha.

## Chapter 1. Moving across *unai*: resonances and evocations

This chapter presents the (hi)stories of Runa people and the places they live in. I deliberately chose to avoid a chronologically ordered version of the history of the Runa in the Pastaza region. There are already good and detailed ethnohistorical accounts of the region (Reeve 1988a, 1988b; Taylor 1999; Uzendoski & Whitten 2014; Whitten 1976, 1985, 2011; Whitten & Whitten 2008) which carefully untangle the sometimes very complicated interactions between different groups in the region and trace their movements throughout time and space.<sup>28</sup>

In this chapter I thus opt for eliciting history as I begin an imaginary trip to some of the places which marked my own acquisition of historical knowledge. In so doing I hope to give a general sense of the people and the atmosphere of these places. As I move through the landscape, I evoke the events and stories which the places themselves elicit in the memory of my Runa friends.<sup>29</sup> Tim Ingold wrote once that for the reindeer hunters he worked with 'you know as you go' which means 'not that you know by means of movement but that knowing *is* movement' (2013:1). The Runa would certainly concur with this assertion, but, they would probably add that history is movement too.

Movement is history because place and time, according to the Runa, were once undistinguished. This was *unai*.

All celestial bodies, trees, animals, rocks, spirits, souls - everything - walked upright and visited with one another from house to house, just as

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<sup>28</sup> For good ethnohistorical accounts of neighbouring people see Kohn (2002), Muratorio (1987) and Oberem (1970). Other works which do not focus specifically on the Runa but which are nevertheless very stimulating for comparison include Taylor (2007) on the Achuar and High & Reeve (2012) on the Waorani. I also purposefully leave out of this chapter the issue of the ethnogenesis of the 'Canelos Quichua' people which has been thoroughly treated elsewhere (see Taylor 1999; Uzendoski & Whitten 2014; Whitten 2008).

<sup>29</sup> In a similar manner, Norman and Sibby Whitten, the ethnographers who worked with the Runa since the 60s, pointedly remarked that it was only when they began trekking in the forest with the Runa that they really learnt about their history (2008:16).

people do today. People themselves were immature babies; they crawled on all fours and spoke only in two tone hums: *mm mm / mm mm* (Whitten & Whitten 1988:30)

*Unai*, otherwise defined as ‘mythic time-space’ (Whitten & Whitten 1988; Reeve 1988a:94), refers to a moment in which time was defined by the repeated peregrinations of all beings and where space was constituted by the movements of encounter and departure of the various animate things. Time and space only existed because of the movements of primordial human beings.

Today *unai* can be accessed only through dreams or *ayahuasca*-induced visions: nevertheless it is always there. In these visions, places and things reveal their hidden form and *unai* ‘appears’. I do not aim here to elicit *unai*: evoking the primordial time-space is the duty of the *yachaj*, not of the anthropologist and no amount of prose could substitute for an *ayahuasca* vision or a revealing dream.

Reflecting on the relationship between myth and history and Amazonian animist ontologies, Fausto & Heckenberger write:

The indigenous equivalent of what we term *historical* action would be *shamanic* action on the world, with the implication that transformative action is not limited to those cases in which human praxis is recognised as a condition, in and by itself, for social transformation (2007:13).

Following this line of thought, I hope in this chapter to elicit the multiplicities of agents - which might or might not be human - which contribute to the creation of a specific world. I do so by using the artifices conceded to the ethnographer. One of these is my use of *intermezzos* to break the more linear central narration. These are spaces for the direct intervention of some indigenous voices. Some of these are accounts from an imprecise time in the past, others are autobiographical narratives, in other cases other types of artefacts. All of these speak to the themes of the sections in their own way. The intertwining of myth and history, as it will be seen below, is a fundamental trope of narration for Runa people.

In response to criticisms of the use of mythical narratives in conjunction to historical accounts, Aparecida Vilaça writes: 'Myth and event are related because they are structurally similar, not because the event is confused with the mythical episode' (2010:7). No phrase could be more apt to describe Runa views of historicity.<sup>30</sup> Things are related because they are similar. The *intermezzos* are a witness to this capacity of finding 'similarity' between seemingly disparate events. They do not aim to represent 'a more truthful', unmediated indigenous perspective than those normally used in the text, but rather serve another strategy, that of *evocation*, which has nothing to do with claims of authenticity. These stories are deliberately left unexplained because, in my view, they already possess a power of their own, the power of evocation and resonance. This is a power much valued by the Runa themselves: the capacity of one thing to elicit another by virtue of a 'resemblance'. The approach I adopt here resonates with Viveiros de Castro's suggestion that:

Anthropology's constitutive role (its task *de jure*), then, is not that of explaining the world of the other, but rather of multiplying our world, 'populating it with all those things expressed that do not exist outside of their expressions' (2013:492-3).

This chapter is written so to artificially recreate - in an admittedly poorer fashion than my Runa friends - the same process of correspondences which the Runa constantly draw as they talk about history and life more generally. As such, *intermezzos* are there to *elicit* beauty and meaning, as the Runa do with their pots and objects.

### **The indigenous city**

Having taken a public bus from the centre of Puyo, the muddy provincial capital of the Pastaza region, we head to the Indigenous centre of Ņukanchi Allpa, in the Santo Domingo neighbourhood. At the entrance of the community, the road abruptly transforms into a dirt track. For a long time, the residents have been

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<sup>30</sup> Unlike the Runa living in nearby areas, my research consultants hardly ever used expressions which suggested they held a view of history influenced by an aesthetics of sudden transformation or *pachacuti* (cf. Uzendoski 2010) nor that they neatly divided time in tripartite schemes (cf. Reeve 1988a; Taylor 2007:55).

asking the municipality to properly pave it but, as people claim, 'we are always forgotten'. This is because, they add swiftly: 'Nobody cares about a neighbourhood of *indigenas*'.



**Fig. 3. The main road in Nukanchi Allpa**

The land where the Runa people of Nukanchi Allpa live in their wooden houses comes from a territorial re-appropriation (like some former indigenous leaders call it). According to most residents, however, their land came from an *invasion* - although this word is loaded with grave implications and uttered reluctantly only when I explicitly asked about it. People think that 'invasion' is an ugly word especially because many of Nukanchi Allpa residents are Catholics and the land they have 'invaded' was once property of the Dominican mission.

Nevertheless, Runa residents of this *barrio* (neighbourhood) are eager to clarify that the invasion of this land was the consequence of a larger invasion which came from

the highlands of Ecuador, after the opening of the road to Puyo in 1947.<sup>31</sup> As colonizers came to occupy the land where is now located the city of Puyo, the capital of the Pastaza province, people who previously lived there were forced to move to the Comuna San Jacinto, the only legally recognised indigenous community at the time (Whitten 1976).<sup>32</sup> But the Comuna did not have enough space to accommodate the growing indigenous population. So, when in the 1990s some indigenous leaders persuaded the Dominican mission to concede them some land, people from the overcrowded Comuna and other Runa territories came rapidly to relocate there.

People in Ņukanchi Allpa remember that these were not easy times. There was much tension between indigenous ‘invaders’ and the Dominican mission which, as soon as it realised that the number of people coming from all over Pastaza to live in their land was growing exponentially, did not hesitate to call the armed forces to expel the invaders. To face the counter-invasion, people, backed by indigenous organisations, gathered in groups of resistance, determined not to leave the land. The Dominican mission eventually had to capitulate and decided that for each plot people should pay the mission a certain amount of money. Tension also sprouted between different people who came to occupy land. Some current residents of Ņukanchi Allpa are still remembered for the ruthless manner with which they occupied large plots of land.

At the end, people managed to stay for good. They organised in a Comunidad Indígena, the *Centro Indígena of Ņukanchi Allpa* (Indigenous Centre of Our Land) and elected a president. Each resident became a member (*socio*) of the community. Every month there would be a session of communal work (*minga*) to clear the grass and woods which at the time entirely covered the area. People also cleared the way to build a road which crossed the community. As of 2013, the dirt track was still connecting the various sectors of the community and no street light was made available. Initially, people who repeatedly did not participate in collective work

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<sup>31</sup> According to official sources (Ledesma-Zamora n.d.), Puyo was officially founded on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1899 by Dominican priests and a group of indigenous families which lived in what is now the park facing the Catholic Church and the church-administered Radio Puyo.

<sup>32</sup> The Ecuadorian President Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra established the Comuna in 1947, after indigenous leaders had pleaded him to give them a space free from the threats of colonization (Whitten 2008:96).

were forced out of the land. Once the contracts of sale with the mission were stipulated, however, the number of *mingas* decreased and nobody could force anyone to participate in communal works.

As of 2013, in Nukanchi Allpa, an increasing number of people from outside have come to build their houses in the centre whilst the number of members of the community has not increased significantly. This is due to the fact that some previous members of Nukanchi Allpa have sold their plots to indigenous highlanders and *mestizo* families who do not want to belong to the indigenous community. The newly erected, massive cemented buildings built by *colonos* (non-indigenous occupants) contrast sharply with the modest dwellings of most community members.

Taking a stroll down the small paths, discovering small wooden houses hidden in the bush, in Nukanchi Allpa, one has the impression of being on the edge of the city. The sensation is that, beyond those dwellings, beyond the dense bushes, the city is over and the forest begins. No impression could be more mistaken: the areas surrounding the periphery of Puyo - to which Nukanchi Allpa belongs - have been already cleared and bulldozed to leave space to new buildings for the ever-growing population of Puyo. From occupying a peripheral location in Puyo, Nukanchi Allpa - a place which until twenty years ago was 'forest' (*sacha*) and where no white person would venture for pleasure - is now quickly being absorbed in to the city. Were it not for the old road sign which reads 'Comunidad Indígena' it would be very difficult to distinguish this area from any other poor indigenous neighbourhood in Puyo.



**Fig. 4. Houses in Ñukanchi Allpa**

Whilst the borders of the community may be invisible, people of Ñukanchi Allpa display an unequivocal awareness of who they are. One morning, as I was sitting in Valentina's house painting pottery, a man with a big pickup truck arrived at the house. From the street, he asked Valentina if she knew where a certain *señor Trujillo* lived. Valentina candidly shouted back from the courtyard: 'Trujillo? No, *señor*, this is a white man's last name! Here there are no white men, only poor *indios*! You must look elsewhere!' As Valentina's ironic, self-deprecating reply shows, there is no doubt about the indigenous 'face' of Ñukanchi Allpa. Runa residents indeed recognise it to be a well defined community, not simply an appendage of the city. This latter is seen from a distanced perspective. It is not unusual thus to hear some elderly resident of Ñukanchi stating: 'I'm going to walk to Puyo today', as they leave their house to go to the centre of town.

From the perspective of indigenous people who come from rural areas, however, the people of Ñukanchi Allpa are Runa who are 'rotten' or 'degenerated' (*buagliishca*). When I spoke with indigenous leaders about my work in Ñukanchi Allpa, they were often surprised that I could be interested in such a

place. People there, they told me, have forgotten they are indigenous. They have no land and no self-consciousness of who they are. This was one of the reasons the president of an important indigenous association approached me, with the intent of developing a project of 'socialisation' of urban indigenous dwellers. In his view, people needed to become aware of their position as indigenous people in the city because 'people like those in Nukanchi' were already turning *mestizo*. The teacher in the local bilingual school, a former indigenous leader, expressed his scorn too at the situation in Nukanchi Allpa.

I wanted to live in Nukanchi Allpa at first. Before it belonged to the mission, then people began to invade and we wanted to go too but people were very stingy with land, they would fight for a piece of land, so we decided that we weren't going to stay there. So we bought a house somewhere else. I am different, I belong to an organization, to a community, to a social movement. But my neighbour, (an indigenous man), he only has these 50 m<sup>2</sup> where he lives, nothing else.

He too often stressed the need to 'socialise' people of Nukanchi Allpa because, left as they are, they would become 'like *mestizos*' very soon and the process would then be irreversible.

### **Intermezzo I**

*Before we came to this place, it was forest (sacha).*

*This is where I found my misha (magic stone), the one you have seen.*

*It belonged to a shaman who once lived here before us.*

*You can't even imagine what a forest this place was when we arrived.*

*We used to hear a whistle at night and wondered who it was.*

*Then our neighbour told us it must have been one of the apamamas,  
the elders who used to live here a long time before we came, before the Mission.*

*You know, this was indigenous land.*

*That lagoon, which now almost dried out, just behind the school, used to be inhabited by a  
large anaconda (Yana amarun).*

*Then it left because she didn't like to be so close to people.*

*They don't like the noise of cars.*

*So apamama Clara told me.*

*Did you know that her parents used to live on this land before anyone else came?*<sup>33</sup>

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### ***Jista pasau!***<sup>34</sup>

Many residents of Nukanchi Allpa could not disagree more with the views of indigenous leaders. Runa women are especially vocal in this regard. For them, it is exactly here, in the rough environment of Nukanchi Allpa, that you can see some of the most tangible examples of a living Runa 'culture'. This is undoubtedly the case of Runa pottery. Indeed today Nukanchi Allpa owes its public status as *Comunidad Indígena* mainly because of the quality of its pottery. On some touristic leaflets handed out by the Tourist Office in Puyo, Nukanchi Allpa is presented as an 'accessible indigenous centre where tourists can buy beautiful traditional pottery from Quichua women'. A traditional thatched house near the school was built with the purpose of hosting a wide assortment of local women's pottery to sell to tourists. On most days, however, the house is generally left empty. This is not because of a lack of pottery - perhaps more than anything else, pottery abounds in Nukanchi Allpa - but rather due to women's preference for keeping pots in the security of one's own house, far from indiscreet and envious eyes and hands. Some of the most wonderful pottery which adorns the shops of the cities of Quito, Cuenca and Tena, come exactly from the modest houses of Nukanchi Allpa.

As the sun begins to rise from the nearby mountains but the sky is still dark and the air chilly, one can perceive a slight movement taking place in the obscurity of the houses in Nukanchi. Women begin getting out of their beds, cooking food and lighting the fire in the small huts adjacent to the sleeping quarters. Amidst the aromatic smoke of burnt wood, they sit down, add some water to the dry colour dye and slowly resume their painting, beginning from where they have left the previous

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<sup>33</sup> Told by one of the first residents of Nukanchi Allpa

<sup>34</sup> The festival is over!

night. Fire, smoke and the transformation of clay into pottery give the cadence to a tranquil day in Nukanchi Allpa. The routine is interrupted only occasionally by the visit of some distant kin coming from *adentro* ('inside' the jungle) or by the arrival of some buyers. In the (rare) events of tourists venturing to the centre to see the works made in the 'Artesanal workshop of Nukanchi Allpa', the news is spread quickly from house to house and soon women begin to gather in the communal house, each carrying a box full of pots. Neatly disposed on a large table, women's work makes its appearance in the shape of drinking bowls of various sizes, black cooking ware, animal-shaped vessels and sometimes even ingeniously decorated pencil-cases. Foreigners are usually stunned by the beauty of the polychrome pottery and dispense praising remarks. Women, in the presence of foreigners, relinquish their usual rowdy witticisms and slide into a bashful quietness. But often there is no need for much talk: as the potters know well, beauty speaks for itself. So does knowledge.

Women play a primary role in sustaining this beauty and are profoundly aware of it. Their stunning pots bring foreigners to the otherwise unattractive streets of Nukanchi Allpa. It is also their work which sets in motion a great movement of people, things and food in the months of December, on occasion of the annual ceremonial festival. For three days in December, the original members gather to celebrate the Runa festival. Many more people come, lured by the prospect of drinking beer from dazzling ceramic vessels.

Women in Nukanchi Allpa enthusiastically engage in the process of preparing a 'beautiful' festival (*jista*). They run back and forth from the designated ceremonial house to help cooking and making manioc beer. They spend the rest of their time making little figures or bowls to serve manioc beer to the helpers of the other ceremonial house and to the outside visitors. Nukanchi residents proudly stress that they live in the only place in urban Puyo which has an annual ceremonial festival.



**Fig. 5. Women going to the ceremonial house in Ñukanchi Allpa**

Nevertheless, despite the climate of general excitement, not everyone equally participates in the festival. For example, in the 2012 festival, a major issue arose: the men of a ceremonial house could not find snare drums to play. In truth, the women explained, they had not made an effort to make them nor to find someone who could lend them. Thus, they had gone from house to house to invite people to join the festival using some aluminium pots as drums. Some women laughed at the sight of the pots, whilst others were indignant. As a woman saw the procession of men with cooking ware crossing the road, she approached one of them and pointing to the pot, said ironically: 'Why don't you make a drum out of your penis's skin?'<sup>35</sup>

The tensions between men and women are far from unusual in the occasion of the urban festival. The previous year, as women were serving manioc beer to the men sitting in the ceremonial house, some had come back to the kitchen complaining that men were drinking canned beer. Infuriated, an old grandmother (*apamama*) went out shouting to the men. 'This is *jista!* You drink manioc beer (*asua*) not beer

<sup>35</sup> The snare drum is made with the skin of animal prey (usually monkey, peccary or anaconda).

(cerveza)!" Intimidated by the *apamama*'s forceful reaction, eventually the men gave up their beer cans and resumed the drinking of *asua*. But the women were still shaking their heads in disapproval. Such contrasts, albeit not rare, do not impede the smooth continuation of the festival. Indeed, to bring the festival to completion without conflict is everyone's aim. The rather quiet neighbourhood becomes the epicentre of life - if only for few days. Runa people from more or less distant places come, allured by the prospect of strong manioc beer and dancing. The sound of drums increase as the days go by, supported by the arrival of more drums from other Runa places, a continuous, incessant *tumtumtumtum* which penetrates the ears and the mind. This rumble is broken only by the sonorous laughs of women - *ajajaiiiii* - which resonate from one ceremonial house to the other.

## Intermezzo II

*Our festival is beautiful. We make asua, we dance. You have to drink asua, not beer, this is our festival, Runa festival. This is our culture. At the end we shout Jista tucuriiiiiiin or Jista pasauuuuuuuu [the festival is over] and we throw the purus (vessels) to the roof, because we are happy, we are happy that we made the festival and that it was good, that beer and meat were enough for everyone. When we shout jista tucuriiiiin we are happy, but also a bit sad, because the jista is over, and this makes you feel longing for a new one.<sup>36</sup>*

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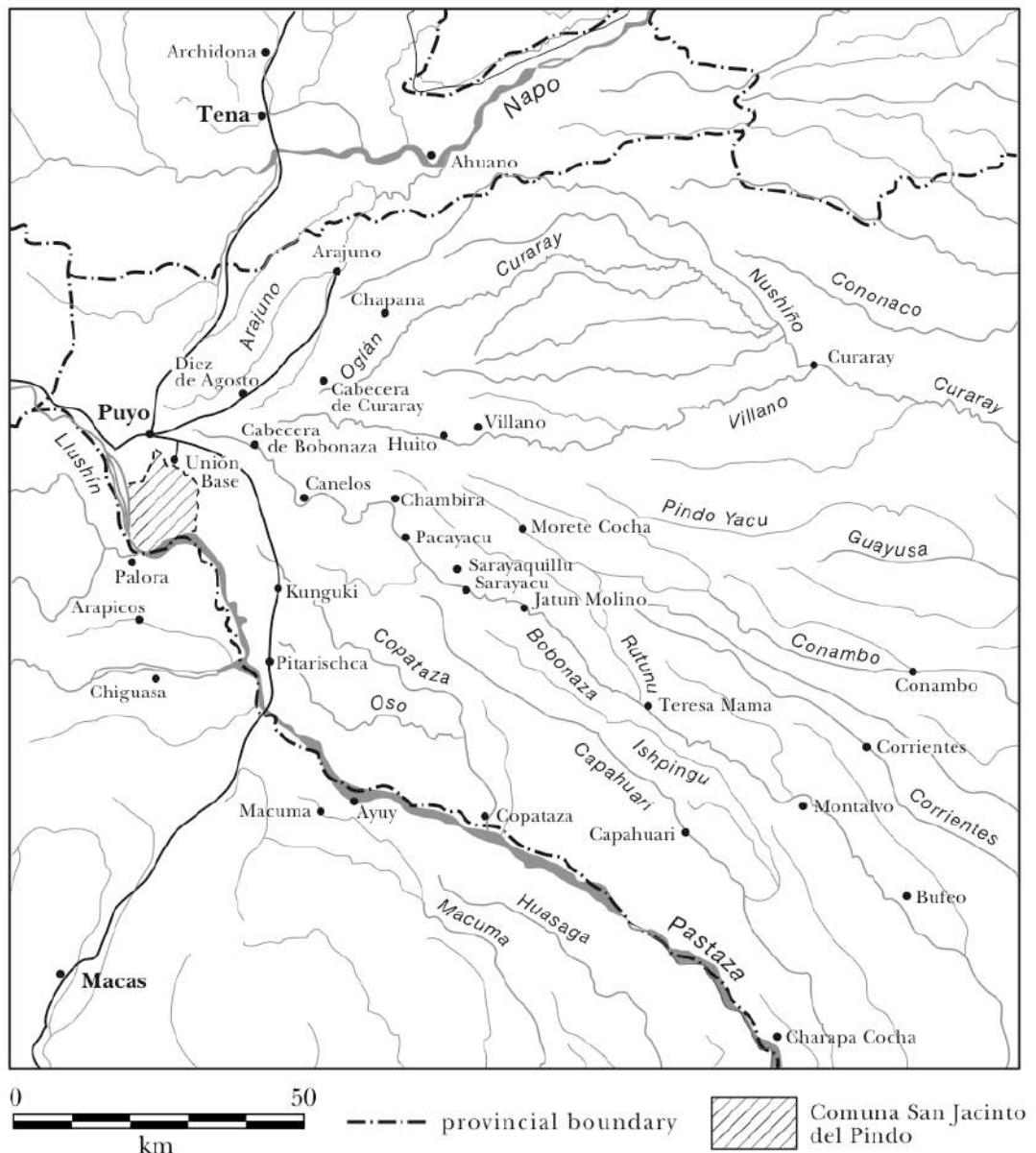
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<sup>36</sup> Told by a female resident of Nukanchi Allpa.

## The road to Canelos

If during certain occasions, such as the festival, the residents of Ñukanchi Allpa happily embrace their belonging to the community, they mostly define themselves in relation to the place they are born. As a man commented to me, pointing to the strikingly beautiful pottery of the women of a ceremonial house in Ñukanchi, 'these *Montalvoguna* (people from Montalvo) certainly know how to make pottery!' The intimate linkage Ñukanchi residents feel for their birth places is another reason for which they often question the claims, made by indigenous leaders, on their status as urban Runa. Montalvo, Canelos, Pacayaku, Comuna San Jacinto, Arajuno and Tena are just some of the localities from which Ñukanchi Allpa residents come from. The majority of my research assistants claim that there are not 'Runa from Ñukanchi Allpa' but only people who have come to live there for a certain period of time. They haven't forgotten their places of origin. They constantly go back to these territories: be it to visit their relatives, to make a new garden or to participate in a collective work party. Equally, people from the forest often come to Ñukanchi Allpa to spend few days in the city with their kin, dealing with bureaucratic issues, buying goods or selling forest products. Understanding 'urban' indigenous people (as well as forest dwellers) requires tracing their movements across different landscapes. Here I will follow one popular route of people and things: the one which connects Ñukanchi Allpa to the communities along the Bobonaza river.

This is a familiar route for residents of Ñukanchi Allpa, most of whom have close or distant kin who reside in the communities along the Bobonaza. Owners of motorised canoes leave from the infamous Hotel Jared, a greenish building situated little far from the main market in the centre of Puyo. Every morning at dawn, people wanting to travel to Pacayaku, Teresa Mama and Montalvo gather in front of the hotel to see whether there is any canoe available to bring them home for a small fee. A large pickup taxi collects people and stuff and, tightly packed, it proceeds towards Canelos, a Runa community located in the southwest, along the Bobonaza river, about an hour by car from Puyo. From there the trip will continue in canoe.



**Fig. 6. Map of Puyo and the Bobonaza river<sup>37</sup>**

As soon as we leave Puyo in the taxi, the landscape changes. Gradually houses leave space to pasture land. The grassy plots on which occasionally some cows can be spotted made their appearance in the 1950s - 1960s as colonization around Puyo encroached. In those years, the only recognised indigenous land was that of Comuna San Jacinto, which had been granted the status of communal territory in 1947. This included territories south of Puyo, comprised between the headwaters of the Pastaza and Pindo River. This vast area was nevertheless subject to the invasion

<sup>37</sup> Available in the article by N. Whitten (2008) Interculturality and the Indigenization of Modernity: A View from Amazonian Ecuador. *Tipití: Journal of the Society of Lowland South America* 6 (2):3-36. page 2.

(legal and illegal) of colonists looking for new land in the Ecuadorian Oriente. On our way, from the taxi, one can spot an old road signpost at the side of the road, which reads: '*Venta de té*' (sale of tea) a legacy of foreign investors who, since the 1930s, began tea and sugar plantations in the lands surrounding Puyo. Around the same time, Royal Dutch Shell founded the centre of Shell, located at about eight miles from Puyo.<sup>38</sup>

The patches of secondary forest on the side of the road - probably the land of some *mestizo* family - grow denser as we approach the road bifurcation which leads to Canelos. From there, the air becomes moister and the vegetation denser. At this lower elevation, we often encounter a violent rain storm which then dissolves as we descend toward Canelos centre. In the taxi, people gossip about relatives and acquaintances they have met in Puyo. Suggestions are often exchanged on shops where to buy cheap primary goods. People also speculate on the depth of the waters of the Bobonaza, trying to figure out how long it will take them to get home. Just as often, people recall the history of the paved road to Canelos.

For Runa people, the time 'when the road to Canelos was built' marks a neat disruption in the history of Canelos. To be precise, a footpath connecting Puyo to Canelos had existed for a long time but it was only navigable by mule or horse (Norman Whitten, personal communication).<sup>39</sup> After the road was paved things were no longer the same for Canelos. The road connecting it to Puyo engendered a higher movement of people and things between the two centres, but this movement was qualitatively asymmetrical.<sup>40</sup> Young people and goods (naranjilla, plantains, yuca and wood) moved out whilst *colonos*, alcohol and canned foods entered. To the eyes of my Runa participants, the change was sudden: in the last ten years or so, people in Canelos stopped speaking Quichua and ceased to eat

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<sup>38</sup> Today Shell is a rapidly expanding town whose life revolves around the military base and the airport connecting to communities in the forest. Indeed, to reach any of the villages along the Bobonaza, as an alternative to the long canoe trip, one can take one of the small aircraft which depart from Shell.

<sup>39</sup> A friend of mine remembers that when he began working in Canelos, around fifteen years ago, he could only go back to his house in Puyo on the weekends. Now, with the bus, he goes home every night.

<sup>40</sup> To be accurate, the movement of things and people between Canelos and Puyo had begun long before the construction of the paved road. For an exploration of the migrations and the tensions between the Comuna of Canelos and the *mestizo* colonizers see Guzmán 1997.

plantains and yuca, preferring to sell them in the market in Puyo. But even worse, due to a mixture of over-hunting, overpopulation and *colonos* invasion, in the surroundings of Canelos today there is hardly any game left. This is a great concern for the Canelos Runa themselves: at their annual ceremonial festival, the hunters are forced to travel further away in the forest or to merely bring large fish.



**Fig. 7. The road to Canelos**

In 2013, the Comuna Canelos had decided to sell some of their land to build a mysterious eco-project. To this day nobody clearly knows when this, if ever, will start. A few months after the news, only a few weeks before my return to England, rumours spread that a family of white people (*gringos*) had bought some hectares of land and they had opened a stationary shop in the centre of town where Runa families went to buy books for their children. According to some, they will soon build an evangelical church in what has been the first territory of the Dominican mission in Pastaza.

Disputes over who should convert the Indians' souls are not new. The most intense conflict had already begun in 1683, between the Dominican and the Jesuit order

over the missionarization of the Amazonian provinces of Ecuador (also called 'Oriente'). The Spanish Crown intervened and divided the zone in two sections: the Curaray area, situated north east from Canelos and stretching to Montalvo, fell under Jesuit jurisdiction whilst the area of Upper Bobonaza became part of the Dominican mission. The mission of Canelos was funded in 1684 by the Dominican order and it was the first mission to be established in the Bobonaza area.

In the following centuries, the territories of the Dominican mission, and in particular Canelos, became a place of refuge for different ethnic groups (Guzmán 1997; Naranjo 1977; Taylor 1999; Whitten 1976). In the XVIII century groups of Zaparos, Gaes and Semigae fled from the Curaray area rigidly administered by the Jesuits to the Domenican Mission in Canelos, whose general attitude towards the indigenous population was recognised to be laxer. During the XIX century, intertribal conflicts between the Shuar living on the Pastaza and the inhabitants of the Upper Bobonaza and Achuar groups from Capahuari-Copataza prompted these latter to migrate to the safer areas of the Domenican Mission. Again, during the *cauchu* (rubber) boom, which drastically reduced indigenous population in the Curaray and Lower Bobonaza and led to the disappearance of various indigenous groups, refuge was sought in Canelos and other Dominican missionary outposts.

The Dominicans did not have the same success at creating durable structures in their Bobonaza missions as other missionaries in other parts of the Ecuadorian Oriente.<sup>41</sup> Both historical/ethnohistorical sources and oral narratives signal the relative little control missionaries exerted over people's lives, if not the complete state of abandonment which marked some missions (Bravo 1907; Guzmán 1997: 147; Pierre 1999[1887]). People used to live scattered in their hunting territories or *purina*, only coming to the mission for the annual festival or other special events.

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<sup>41</sup> For the anthropological works which address missionary work among Curaray Runa see Reeve (1988a, 1993), among the Napo Runa see Muratorio (1987) and Spiller (1974). For Jivaroan groups, see Rubenstein (2001) and Taylor (1981) and for the Waorani see Cabodevilla (1999), High (2006) and Rival (1992, 1996). One legacy of the mission is the system of *varayuj* which is still in function in communities along the Bobonaza river. The *varayuj* were men appointed by the catholic missionaries to organise communal work for the church. Today, the *varayuj*, literally meaning 'staff holders' (due to the staff made of palm wood each of them is given), are young men appointed every year by the community to solve disputes arising in their hamlets and to arrange communal work parties.

From the 1930s, the threat of encroaching colonization, coupled with the opening of a school in Canelos, forced people to fix their residency close to the Mission. The process however was slow and once people settled down in the town centre, they continued to visit their hunting territories (*purina*) which are today used as areas for swidden gardens, hunting and fishing during the school holidays. One can wonder whether sedentarization was ever accomplished: it is sufficient to look at the empty villages during the school vacations or to witness the cheerful atmosphere of the *purina* camp to realise that residency in the village is like a strange food people have become able to swallow but which has never been entirely digested.

The partial sedentarization and modernization brought some benefits, but it also led to an equally obvious general 'degeneration' (*buagliishca*).<sup>42</sup> This term is used by the Runa to refer the moral state of degeneration which today seems to increasingly characterise so many Runa people, things and places. That people in Canelos have to eat cow meat rather than tapir is just one example of degeneration amongst many others.

It is no coincidence that Runa people from the Bobonaza point concernedly, in their narratives, to the degeneration of Canelos after the construction of the paved road. They do so with some worries in the hearth. They express a current anxiety over the building of a new road which will link Puerto Canelos (from where the canoes leading to the lower Bobonaza depart) to Chapetón (at about 2 hours from Pacayaku, see map above). A new development project by the current government, this road will dramatically reduce the time needed to reach communities such as Pacayaku with unforeseen but dreaded consequences. Even for those who maintain the status of *Comunidad Indígena*, with special rules and agreements, the possibility of colonization by external people remains a feared possibility. With young people becoming weaker, more corrupted by the habits of the city, and willing to abandon their own land, no one knows what really is going to happen next. That Canelos, one of the largest and strongest Runa communities so readily succumbed to the effects of the new road is certainly a worrisome sign. Remarking over and over on the paucity of animals and of young, intellectually prepared people in Canelos,

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<sup>42</sup> Schooling is one of the most important factors for which people state that they can no longer live in their *purina* territories. For an exploration of this theme in the Ecuadorian Amazon see Rival (1992).

people from the Bobonaza see in the community the image of their own turbulent destiny, an image, above all, of dreadful sterility.

### Intermezzo III

*During the time of the missionary inside the church of Canelos there was a marble statue of the Virgin. One day the sacristan saw that the feet of the statue were covered with mud. On the same day, a man had gone downriver to look for game and on the river shore, he met an old apamama. She only spoke Quichua and told him that she was there to wash her son's clothes. She looked like a Runa, so the man did not suspect anything. When he returned back, the old woman had disappeared. The following day the sacristan saw that the Virgin had her feet dirty with mud again. Annoyed, he cleaned it again but, as the mud had dried, he rubbed it away with a stick and, in so doing, he accidentally made a scar on the statue. On the scar blood appeared.*

*At that time Palati was the warrior-yachaj of Canelos and the Runa were under constant danger of attack by the Shuar of Pastaza. It was time of constant war. When a group of Shuar was on his way to Canelos, they met the old woman near the river washing clothes. They asked her 'Apamama, tell us, how many are the Runa of Canelos?' They wanted to see whether it was possible for them to attack. But the apamama told them: 'You'll never win, they are as many as the hair on my head. Don't go'. The Shuar, frightened by the old woman's assertion, decided to return to their territory. Hidden behind a bush, the same man who had met the apamama before, saw all this and went to Canelos to tell the sacristan. This latter finally realised the old woman had been the Virgin, who saved them from the attack of the Shuar. So he rushed to see the statue.*

*But the Virgin had disappeared from the church. It is said that, on that same day, on the track from Puyo a Runa man met an old woman who was walking in the opposite direction. He asked her where she was going and she replied to him that she was leaving Canelos because there nobody loved her. When the man came back to Canelos and told the story, the sacristan realised that this had been the Virgin who, offended by his treatment, had decided to walk off. But it was too late.*

*For this reason, no matter how many children are born here, Canelos never grows.<sup>43</sup>*

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<sup>43</sup> Told by a Canelos Runa.

## The brown Bobonaza

Let us resume our travel down the Bobonaza. After we pass the new bridge in Canelos, the paved road ends. A rough road begins in front of us. Sometimes this is interrupted by a small stream. The lush vegetation grows denser and denser. After about an hour, the road goes down a gentle slope and it ends in the muddy waters of the Bobonaza. Here, sitting in an always packed canoe, we begin our descent to the river. The vegetation is lush and abundant, and on a clear day, the blue sky contrasts beautifully with the brown water of the river. These waters, during certain times of the year, become replete with *challua*, *bulun quiqui*, *chambirima*, *jandia*, *bagri* and many more varieties of fish which the Runa avidly catch either with nets, hook or by using barbasco poison.<sup>44</sup> From the canoe, we can hear the singing of a toucan (*sicuanga*) or spot an eagle-like *ipanglu* near the shores. Runa travellers carefully observe and remark on the morphological changes of the landscape, on the specific sites where the river has changed its course, on the traces left by humans and non-humans such as some abandoned barbasco roots on the sandy shore or the footmarks of a solitary tapir. When another canoes approximates, usually with a kin or a neighbour on board, falsetto cries of greetings are exchanged between the two canoes. The river is the main way in and out for people living in the dispersed communities along the Bobonaza.

Before the recent advent of motorised canoes - a precious possession today for people along the Bobonaza - a trip from Canelos to Teresa Mama would take a few days. Now it only takes about ten hours. Most indigenous centres of the Bobonaza area are today concentrated along the river. One can see the oval thatched roofs amidst the vegetation as the canoe travels smoothly downriver.

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<sup>44</sup> December is time when fish are found with eggs (*lulun quilla*). Beginning from January till March, fish from downriver come up.



**Fig. 8. On the way to Teresa Mama.**

Unlike other wider and deeper Amazonian watercourses, the Bobonaza, with its unpredictable depth, does not offer optimal conditions for traveling. Despite this, the brown waters of the Bobonaza had been explored by many Runa and non-Runa travellers over the centuries. Many Runa people are fond of telling stories about their grandparents travels to the Ucayali or to the Huallaga rivers to gather salt and to the Marañon river to buy dart poison (Pierre 1999 [1887]:189; Simson, 1993:104; Whitten 1976: 211).

'Downriver' (*yacu uraima*) and 'upriver' (*yacu anagma*) are two referential concepts by which space and sociality are understood.<sup>45</sup> The two terms, indicating a direction from ego, are not symmetrical nor invested with the same power. Whilst 'upriver' is a term which appears rarely in narratives nor sparks much interest in Runa interlocutors, 'downriver' is invested with unusual potency. From there comes all that is new and dangerous. 'Downriver' is where the elders used to go to gather salt, 'downriver' is the place of *bueos* - the pink freshwater dolphins who are said to fatally seduce fishermen - and other deadly creatures. During the rubber boom,

<sup>45</sup> For an analysis of the concepts of downstream and upstream among the neighbouring Achuar see Descola (1996: 53-62 and 123-5).

people along the Bobonaza sold rubber to Peruvians coming from downriver and sometimes travelled directly to Iquitos to sell their products. To meet people from downriver (*uraimanda*), like going oneself downriver, meant facing unexpected resources as well as unknown threats. Throughout the years from downriver came the noisy Peruvian canoes and the indestructible shotguns, salt, pottery, various edible and inedible plants, powerful love potions (*pusanga*) and many more things. From downriver came also other indigenous people.

### **Intermezzo IV**

*Cocama people (Cocama runaguna) came from downriver. They were powerful shamans (sinzhi yachajs) from Peru. They were the ones who gave things and places their names. They would see things and give names. They named the river when they saw a plant of Runduma growing nearby. Two of them died on the way, thus there became Aya playa (the beach of the ghosts). They travelled and named places. They saw that inside that hill there were plenty of monkeys so they called it Hhill of the woolly monkey. When you reach this place from upriver, there is a large rock. There the Cocama shamans sat and took ayahuasca to see. They saw that under the rock, inside the river, sang a cock. So they called it 'Stone of the cock'. These shamans went until Canelos, naming everything. But as they went, some of them died, killed by other shamans. Of all, only one was left. He travelled downriver, crying all the way, back to his home, in Peru.<sup>46</sup>*

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### **The sounds of power**

After a good 5 hours of travelling, we finally enter the territory of Chiri Yaku. Outpost of the missionary centre of Canelos, Chiri Yaku is one of the most powerful indigenous community in Pastaza, if not in the entire Ecuadorian Amazon. One is immediately struck by its oval houses, by its well kept walking

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<sup>46</sup> Told by a former resident of Rumi cocha.

paths and last, but not least, by the intense trafficking that connects it to Puyo via canoe and flights.

The first impression of power is not misleading. Tying the canoe to the plaza harbour, one climbs the steep stairs which lead to the central plaza. An oval-shaped strip of bare, red earth, the main plaza conjoins the principal buildings, the wooden church, the meeting house and the *tenencia política*, which houses the jail. This latter represents the only State presence in Chiri Yaku but it is *de facto* administered by a local representative elected by the community. With a tin roof and wooden walls, the church is visited intermittently by a nun who alternates performing Mass and teaching catechism between here and Pacayaku.

From its inception, perhaps in 1817 (Reeve 1988a: 67), the mission at Chiri Yaku was less organised and thus less coercive than the mission in Canelos. It initially included people from the Canelos Mission and the ancient inhabitants of Chiri Yaku, a people called Tayak.<sup>47</sup> In the Bobonaza area, whenever a fragment of pottery or an old axe is found while digging for earthworms, this is thoroughly examined as a tangible remnant of the Tayak civilization. A hill in the forest located in what is now the Achuar territory of Shaimi is said to be scattered with animal and human bones. Some people say that the Tayak were never extinguished but that, instead, when the missionaries came, they simply entered these cavities and disappeared underground.

During the time of the mission, Chiri Yaku was an ethnically mixed community consisting of Jivaro-speakers (Villavicencio 1858) and Zaparo-speakers, each group occupying a different sector of the community (Pierre 1999 [1887]; Reeve 1988a:69). In this zone of refuge, like in Canelos, Quichua, the *lingua franca* of the mission, was adopted among the different groups of people who were, in fact, often bilingual and trilingual (Guzmán 1997:30; Reeve 1988a:74). Gradually more people from these groups joined the Chiri Yaku mission. In 1887 friar Pierre noticed the state of abandonment of the Chiri Yaku Mission and remarked how much these people still had too much 'Jivaroan' blood which made them more inclined to sin than the

<sup>47</sup> Whitten reports that in Canelos, Runa also spoke about the *tayac* as powerful soul-stones which raised against the attack of Zaparoan Gayes (Whitten 1976: 62). Guzmán (1997:24) also reports a story from Canelos about a war between Ushpa Auca, Tayac Auca and the Gayes. According to this account, from this war - which concluded with the victory of the Tayak - the contemporary Runa would be born. I also heard people from Montalvo identifying the Tayak as their ancestors.

'civilised' savages of Canelos (Pierre 1999 [1887]: 222-3). As in Canelos, until approximately the 1940s, people lived in their *purina* territories and came only occasionally to the Mission.

The church today does, on certain occasions, become full. One of these is the Sunday which precedes the beginning of the *jista*, the ceremonial festival celebrated by the Runa all over Pastaza, and the Sunday which marks its termination. On those days, the plaza becomes full of people, painted with *buituj* (*Genipa americana*), drumming their *cajas* (snare drums), and dancing in small circles under the inhospitable equatorial sun.<sup>48</sup>

Central to the *jista* as performed by Runa communities in the area is a dance with 'spears' (a wooden 'knife' made out of *puca caspi*, a hard darkish wood) and *hualingas* (bone and seed shoulder slings worn across the shoulders and the chest of each of the four men).<sup>49</sup> This is known as the *lancero* dance and according to Reeve (1988a: 126; see also Whitten & Whitten 2008:10), the communities which have *lanceros* are places which have some descendants of the Runa warriors from Canelos who fought against Shirapa, the head of Jivaroan tribes, during the XIX century (see above). Pierre describes a *lancero* dance which took place in Canelos in 1887:

The drums and flutes do not cease their sound inside the Church, this is part of the festival's plan. At the same time, four youths carrying spears begin to a warrior dance in front of the altar: with the spear held high, as if they were about to attack, they move toward each other and then move backward, they go back closer and, jumping, they cross each other, to then repeat everything: all this, to them, has a warrior aura. It is evident that the church should not be used as a theatre for such diversions; but let's not forget that we are in a country of savages and that each people translate in its own way the religious idea: in our case,

<sup>48</sup> The dancers are the *ayurantes*, the helpers of the four ceremonial houses. A woman and a man, usually husband and wife, are summoned by the ceremonial house couple to help them to organise the festival, which consists in four days of exchanges of manioc beer and food between the different houses. See more in Appendix 1.

<sup>49</sup> The objects of the *lanceros* are passed on within the community, but if they are 'lost' they cannot be recuperated for they are an ancestral substance, thereby irreplaceable. The loss of these artefacts is in itself a memorable historical event, as testified by many elders who remember how in the past the houses of *lanceros* would be many more, but then became less and less following the death of some *lanceros* whilst in charge, or by the abandonment of others to relocate in downriver communities.

for these warrior tribes, the supreme homage is to break a spear at the Divinity's feet (1999[1887]:238).

Quite in opposition to Father Pierre's remarks, which saw in the *lancero* dance an attempt (however rudimentary) at celebrating divinity, the staged dance, alongside other moments of the festival, has been interpreted as a 'symbolic aggression' against the foreign power of the Catholic church (Whitten & Whitten 1987:21). Simultaneously, all ethnographers are eager to state that, according to the Runa, the festival can only go ahead with the blessing of the Church.



**Fig. 9. Playing a snare drum during the ceremonial festival.**

This is why in Canelos as well as in other villages before the hunters' departure to their *purina*, a mass is organised in the church for people to receive holy water from the nun. Prayers are made to invoke the protection of God (*Yaya Dios*) during the hunt. After receiving these precious blessings the hunters exit the church and begin circling around the square, playing their drums as hard as they can. With their rhythm, they recreate the sonorous sound of the thunder of Amasanga, owner of

wild game. The sound of drums keeps resonating for the entire day and it only fades away at sunset, when it leaves space to powerful loudspeakers blasting out the most famous Peruvian *cumbia* hits of the moment. During festival times, it is said that the deep sound of hundreds of snare drums can be heard from as far as the Achuar territory, some hundreds of kilometers far away.

### **Intermezzo V**

*One day a mestizo man from Peru came. He was a cura [priest]. He had come to to build a church. With him, he had brought a big church bell. This bell, when bit, would produce a deep sound which could be heard from very far away. People were amazed by the bell and the sound it made. But this cura was very evil. He would force women to sleep with him. He also arranged people to get married, even against their will. People did not like this and decided to send the cura away, they burnt his house and sent him with his possessions on a canoe downriver. The bell stayed in the Church. However after he was gone, rumours spread that Peruvians wanted the bell back and that they would come at any moment to take it by force. Then other rumours came. People said that one night, after a minga, when everyone was drunk, a man climbed the church, removed the bell and replaced it with another one. He probably did this for money. The true bell, some say, is in Baños now. The bell we have now, you heard it, does not make any sound.<sup>50</sup>*

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### **Amazonian guerrillas**

Almost opposite to the Catholic church stands the communal house. It is here that Chiri Yaku leaders meet every week to discuss political strategies both inside and outside the community. The house fills with people on the days of General Assembly organised by leaders to assess the state of the community. The entrance doors of the communal house are adorned by colourful drawings which represent Runa men and women in their indigenous attire, surrounded by *guacamayos* parrots and other forest animals. Two figures, a man and a woman, stand upright on the

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<sup>50</sup> Told by a former resident of Teresa Mama.

doors. He wears typical *hualingas* (bone and seed slings) across his chest, carries a blowpipe (*pucuna*) behind his back and a crown of *guacamayo*'s feathers on his head. His chest, arms and legs are painted with lines of *huituj* (*Genipa americana*). The woman on his side has long black hair which graciously frame her finely painted face. She wears the 'traditional' Runa costume, a white blouse and a blue skirt (*pampalina*). In her hands she holds a ceramic drinking bowl (*mucabua*), probably conceived by the unknown painter to be full of strong manioc beer. They both seem images of a couple of ceremonial helpers during the celebration of the Runa festival (*jista*).

Simultaneously they are also the prototypical images of the *Indios* as they are imagined in contemporary Ecuador.<sup>51</sup> To find these representations on the walls of the communal house places us immediately into different simultaneous realms: the valorization of indigenous culture in contemporary national politics, the celebration of the ceremonial *jista*, the transformational power of facial paintings, etc. The two warrior-like figures on the entrance door also say something about the community as such.

Named throughout their history 'guerrilleros' and 'terroristas' or, more recently, 'custodians of the rainforest' for their fight against oil companies, these latter's repeated attempts at invading their territory marked the history and the politics of Chiri Yaku people from very early on. In 1989, the oil company ARCO's entered Chiri Yaku territory for oil exploration.<sup>52</sup> Its work was met with active sabotages by the indigenous residents to the point that a chief executive of ARCO, accompanied by governmental representatives, flew in to Chiri Yaku with the intention of luring the leaders into a smooth cooperation. However the Chiri Yaku leaders, with other indigenous officers, had different views on the matter. They blocked the airstrip with fallen trees so that for 12 days the governmental and ARCO officials were trapped in the village.

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<sup>51</sup> Images like those above described abound on the walls of many indigenous or intercultural institutions. They form part, in the collective imaginary, of a conscious effort at revitalising 'traditional' culture, a movement which has been expressly encouraged by the current government and which is today widespread in many indigenous countries of South America (de la Cadena 2010).

<sup>52</sup> ARCO stands for Atlantic Richfield Oil.

In those 12 days the state officers and indigenous leaders signed a document which established that all Indian land should be legalised, that seismic exploration should be suspended and that solutions to the problems brought by oil drilling should be properly investigated.<sup>53</sup> Successively, the treaties were proclaimed 'illegal' by the then Ecuadorian president Rodrigo Borja, who claimed they were drafted and signed under coercion.

It was however more recently, in 2002, that Chiri Yaku more notoriously became involved in the fight against oil exploration. In that year, the Ecuadorian state granted concession for oil exploration in Block 23, which included half of the Chiri Yaku territory to the Argentinian oil company CGC. The company entered the community without receiving people's consent and brought large quantities of pentolite, a dynamite like explosive to be used in the exploration process. When the company began seismic work in the Block 23, people of Chiri Yaku began to organise themselves in small groups which scattered all over the *purina* territories in order to protect the borders. As the seismic troupes accompanied by military staff entered the territory of Chiri Yaku, people got hold of them, confiscated the arms and kept them captives for days. After repeated clashes, the CGC workers and the military received the order to leave by the company executives.<sup>54</sup>

In 2003 the community, with the help of international legal aid, filed a complaint against the Ecuadorian state at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The State, in their opinion, was responsible of having given concession for exploration to the oil company without prior consent and acknowledgment of the community. The local leaders, supported by numerous foreign NGOs, flew to the Inter-American Court, in Costa Rica, to tell their stories.

To think of Chiri Yaku only in terms of this central plaza would thus be looking only at a fraction of the history of its people, who move continuously in and out, through the river, airplane or the internet. This is why we need to abandon the Bobonaza river to return to Puyo, where much of the regional indigenous politics takes place.

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<sup>53</sup> Susan Sawyer's work (2004) includes a discussion of the treaty.

<sup>54</sup> For an account of these events, see also Whitten & Whitten (2008: 242-244).

Nevertheless, as much as Runa politics alternates between the outside and inside, the global and the local, the village and the State, Runa leaders keep relocating in the forest the centre of power. Urgent problems are not to be solved 'outside' but here, 'inside' the forest. Summoning the powerful images of the jaguar - from which all Runa descend - and of the anaconda (*amarun*), Runa people continuously stress their resiliency and value as *sacha runa*, forest people. By operating a strategic reversal, by consciously choosing what to include and what to exclude, the forest becomes a microcosmos emanating real power.

## **Intermezzo VI**

### **Two-headed Anaconda**

She sits quietly there, beneath the river.

She comes out sometimes, but not that often anymore.

When she will come back, out of the river, there will be no world left for us.<sup>55</sup>

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### **The years of awakening: fighting for the right words**

The story I have just told is one particular trajectory the indigenous movement in Pastaza has taken. It is an exception, not the rule. As of 2013, they are the only Runa community in Pastaza which took a strong oppositional stance against governmental plans of a new oil exploration in Pastaza, the so called XI *ronda petrolera*. They are supported in their resistance by foreign NGOs and other indigenous organizations but not by any other Runa community in the region.

The era of anti-oil exploitation protests seems to have been forgotten, at least in Puyo and its surroundings. A tangible sign of this climate of forgetfulness is the building of the former OPIP, *Organización de los Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza*. The

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<sup>55</sup> Told by a woman from Puyo.

building would go almost unnoticed were it not for its strikingly dilapidated appearance. Some of the windows are broken and, as one walks in, chairs are abandoned on the floor along with fragments of glasses and other rubbish. This is the material carcass of the OPIP, once one of the most powerful indigenous organisations in the Ecuadorian Oriente. Today in the edifice only some old posters stuck on the walls speak of its more glorious past. The first time I entered the empty building, I was accompanied by a former OPIP leader, who, observing its poor state, commented to me: 'This place has been left to rot. Nobody today cares anymore about OPIP but once this place was full of people and ideas'.

How could a powerful organisation, one which won many important battles, end up like this? A friend of mine, another former leader of OPIP, rhetorically asked. According to some Runa, the answer must be located somewhere in the new buildings of indigenous organisations which adorn the streets of Puyo. One is the newly built headquarters of NAE (*Nacionalidad Achuar of Ecuador*), located not far away from the old edifice of OPIP. Inaugurated in 2013, the edifice stands in stark contrast to the old ruins of the OPIP. The contrast is not mine: for many OPIP former leaders find in the new indigenous associations the cause for the disintegration of the old organisation.

The dismemberment of the OPIP at the end of the 1990s in favour of the creation of ethnical associations, such as the *Nacionalidad Sapara* or the *Nacionalidad Achuar* was encouraged by OPIP itself. However, numerous Runa leaders now think that the disintegration of the central organisation led to a fragmentation and growing individualisation of political power. Each *Nacionalidad* cares about its own business, without taking into account the larger picture. Other ex-leaders swiftly state that it is time itself which has passed and that today OPIP would no longer be a viable weapon of fight.

The OPIP was created in 1981 by Runa people from Puyo, Comuna San Jacinto and other Bobonaza villages. A fundamental tenet of the political program of OPIP was to secure legal ownership of land to indigenous people in Pastaza. In the 70s and 80s the colonization process in Pastaza was encouraged by anti-Indian national policies: the legal appropriation of indigenous land seemed as an increasingly urgent issue to address. At stake, according to the early funders of OPIP, was the survival of indigenous people. The OPIP organised different ethnic communities all over

Pastaza, among which the Achuar, Shiwiar and Zaparas. In their majority, the leaders of OPIP were Runa from the Comuna San Jacinto.

In its initial stages, OPIP met a staunch resistance by powerful sectors of society. Accused of being 'communists' and 'guerrilleros', OPIP leaders were constantly opposed, even from within the indigenous world. Threats and violence did not dissuade OPIP leaders to keep fighting for the recognition of their territories. 'In difficult times', a former leader told me; 'we would summon the help of some powerful *yachaj*. We would ask them: Are we going in the right direction? Should we go ahead? They always answered us: yes, go ahead'.

### **Intermezzo VII**

*I began to be involved in politics in 1979, when I joined OPIP as education officer. Before I was indoctrinated by religion. My parents were Catholics but I had become an Evangelical since a pastor came to visit my house. I began to go to Shell to receive religion classes and when I was in secondary school, I was the only one who refused to go to Mass because I did not adore idols but the Gospel... My parents used to have a small hut near the main square. Then came the colonos [colonists] who used to have pigs which would break into the house, when my parents were away, drink all the manioc beer and break the tinajas. Then they were asked to sell the land and because my parents felt they couldn't live like this anymore they sold it for a pair of machetes and boots. My father was forced not to speak Quichua. I too thought that speaking Quichua meant to be backwards so I didn't learn it. Then I began to work in OPIP. My brother-in-law, who was also Evangelical, worked for OPIP, but when the leaders started talking about prohibiting missionaries from entering indigenous territories, he left the organization. A missionary would often come to visit me to warn me that I had put myself into a group of communists, socialists and revolutionaries. But for once I didn't listen. The leaders of OPIP would go to the office after secondary school - you see, we were all young students - dealing with complaints of people from forest villages. I used to type, because I was good at it, having learnt it in the evangelical school in Shell. I remember once near Dos Ríos, it happened that colonos had bought some land and placed some cows there but people complained that they*

*didn't respect the rules of the community, they didn't participate in mingas, they didn't recognize the authority of the Comuna San Jacinto, so we helped to organise a protest. Hundreds of people took their machetes and rifles to send the colonos away. The colonos took their stuff and ran away. The cura [bishop] of Puyo however was really concerned about us and asked to hold a meeting with OPIP leaders. He accused us of being subversives. We asked him to understand our fight and to give us an office where we could continue our work. He left the room calling us revolutionaries. It was when I came to OPIP that I began to take conscience. The evangelical missionary, my old friend, one day came to my house and told me that hell was waiting for me. I didn't listen, I had began to see things differently. In those years we all began to think about ideas and concepts, for example, about the difference between 'tierra' and 'territorio'. Whilst 'tierra' is the soil, 'territorio' includes the soil, the subsoil and the air. 'Territorio' is what matters to us, indigenous people. We used to fight for words. In Cuenca we had a meeting with other indigenous peoples, to establish 'who we are'. What does it mean to be Achuar? What does it mean to be Runa? We discussed this for a long time.*

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## **ALLPAMANDA, CAUSAIMANDA, JATARISHUN!<sup>56</sup>**

In 1992, after vain attempts at negotiating the legalization of indigenous land with State officials, OPIP changed strategy and organised a march of protest to the capital, Quito. The march, which would be named 'for land and for life' (*allpamanda causaimanda*), departed from the headquarters of CONFENIAE (*Confederación de Nacionalidades de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana*), in the hamlet of Union Base, located in the Comuna San Jacinto. Union Base was also the place where the then president of OPIP, Antonio Vargas lived. The 11th of April 1992, 2000 Runa, Achuar and Shiwiar gathered in the small hamlet to begin the march to Quito. With this, the leaders of OPIP wanted to force the government to grant territorial rights for the people of Pastaza and to create a new constitution which would recognise Ecuador as a multicultural and 'plurinational' state.

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<sup>56</sup> For land, for life, let us raise!

The march had taken months to organise. Antonio Vargas had travelled to the coast of Ecuador, to the highlands, to Quito, to other parts of the Amazon and to foreign countries to discuss about the march and its implications for the indigenous movement. Luis Macas, then president of CONAIE (*Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*) and the president of CONFENIAE accompanied Vargas in the march. Before leaving Union Base, a special mass to bless the march was performed by Victor Corral, the head of the indigenous ministry of the Catholic Church. After some hymns were sung, Monseñor Corral was crowned with a feathered headdress by Antonio Vargas.

The march grew bigger as it progressed through the Andean mountains. Indigenous people from the highlands provided the marchers with food and shelter, and many of them joined the march. Some people walked barefoot, everyone was adorned with warrior body painting and feathered headdresses. Men carried *hualingas* and spears over their shoulders whilst women carried ceramic vessels and fermented manioc packed in leaves (*maito*). Runa women wore all their colorful beaded necklaces (*huallca*) one upon the other. But what really announced the arrival of the marchers from far away was the incessant sound of the drums, the flutes, the ceramic horns and the shouts. Runa women danced as men drummed, swinging the upper part of their bodies and their long shiny hair back and forward.

Antonio Vargas remembers that many powerful shamans (*yachaj*) participated in the march. He himself was accompanied by his most trusted *yachaj* who had been a key agent in the organisation of the march. It was him who had given the necessary strength and courage to Vargas to face the perils and dangers intrinsic to this daring political action. He remained in the march, alongside other powerful ones, unnoticed by most people but vigilant of what was going on. Everyone was aware that the manifestation encountered strong oppositions within the indigenous sphere itself as well as amongst the circles of *mestizo* landowners who lived in Pastaza. According to Vargas, what motivated some indigenous people to be wary of the march was a strong *imbidiu* (envy), blinding people from seeing the ultimate common good.

Upon arrival in Quito, the march was accepted in the Parliament. There the march leaders intervened and spoke to the government, headed by president Rodrigo Borja. The first to speak was Antonio Vargas who opened his speech in Quichua

(*Runa shimi*), 'because I am indigenous so I speak my language'. In this, he pleaded recognition of the territorial rights of indigenous people of Pastaza. Following him, other leaders spoke. Bacha Gualinga, a Runa woman from Pastaza, was the only woman to address publicly the president on that day.

The desires of indigenous people were only partially fulfilled: after days of negotiation the government resolution was to concede only 58% of the land requested by OPIP. In addition, the land conceded was divided in such a way that created further tensions between indigenous communities (Sawyer 2004:55). Ultimately, the state retained rights over subterranean resources.

Despite its partial fulfillments, today the march is still remembered as a great success. Almost all Runa I worked with walked to Quito on that 11th of April of 1992 and enthusiastically recalled the atmosphere of those days. Antonio Vargas thinks of it as his most memorable political action.



**Fig. 10. Poster with the 1992 march slogan. (This adorned a square in Shell 2012 on the occasion of an indigenous youth festival to protest against the prospect of oil exploitation).**

To the Runa who were born after the event, however, the march comes to represent different things. One afternoon in Puyo, my friend Teresa and I were watching a documentary made by OPIP on the 1992 march. Teresa, a young woman from

Canelos, was only a child at the time so she did not walk to Quito. Nevertheless her mum and grandmother had done so: for this reason we were watching closely the screen, hoping to spot them among the multitude of marchers. As the documentary progressed and more footage of the march and the reunion in Quito was shown, my friend sighed. I too felt like sighing. For some reason, we both got caught in an inexplicable atmosphere of nostalgia as we watched the marchers shouting, dancing, laughing and walking. I did not dare to express verbally what we both growingly felt. So finally, it was her who gave shape to the mixture of unspeakable yet palpable feelings which had filled the room. She sighed again and then said: 'In those times, indigenous people really fought for something valuable. It was not like it is now. I wish I could have lived in those years'.

### **Intermezzo VIII**

*Mister Government, for a very long time we have been fighting for territory. As you have never replied to us, we came walking. Walking we came as Ecuadorians. How did we come?*

*Walking for twenty days.<sup>57</sup>*

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### **A path to Sumak Kawsay**

This imaginary trip has brought us to many of the places where I travelled and has evoked many stories from the past. We travelled from Puyo to the Bobonanaza river - considered by many of my friends the epicentre of Runa cultural resistance - to then return to the provincial capital. In moving across these places, I touched upon themes or only briefly alluded to matters which I will explore more in detail later in the thesis. A purpose of this movement across time and space was that of enlightening the complexity of Runa world(s) as well as bringing to the fore some of its most powerful images and ambiguities. To complete such trip, I need to return once again to the Bobonaza river, to its surrounding forest.

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<sup>57</sup> From the speech by Bacha Gualinga to the then Ecuadorian president Rodrigo Borja in occasion of the 1992 march.

Runa local leaders often summon a variety of non-human beings as political actors.<sup>58</sup> That this is a war of worlds, as Bruno Latour (2002) cogently put it, Runa people are certain. ‘We are like in the movie Avatar’, commented an indigenous leader from the region to a foreign NGO who had organised a screening of the movie in Quito.<sup>59</sup>

Recently the Corte Latinoamericana de Derechos Humanos found the Ecuadorian State neglectful of the territorial rights of indigenous people. A few days after the ruling came out, the people of Chiri Yaku danced again, celebrating with rivers of manioc beer, in their square. Journalists, indigenous representatives and tourists gathered in the plaza which was filled with palpable emotion.

The expression *buen vivir*, ubiquitous today in any governmental policy or document, is a poor, if literal, rendition of the concept of *sumak kawsay*, translated as ‘good life’.<sup>60</sup> If implicit in all translations is a betrayal of the language of origin (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2013:475), *sumak kawsay* does not make an exception. For inherent in the expression *sumaj* - and totally absent in its Spanish rendition - is a particular aesthetic appreciation of life. For the Runa, to do things beautifully (*sumacilla rurana*) is to do them ‘with knowledge’. *Sumaj* denotes a ‘proper’ and ‘beautiful’ way of making things, a basket, a drinking bowl, a new swidden garden. It also indicates a proper and beautiful relationship with others and with one’s work.

The concept of beauty is strongly related to that of knowledge. A beautiful blowpipe, a bowl of rich smelling manioc beer, an educated child or a well written school assignment are all results of a heightened aesthetic awareness and a sapient manipulation. Things are beautiful because created by someone who is knowledgeable (*yachaj*). *Sumak kawsay* is, in sum, a too complicated - and

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<sup>58</sup> The involvement of non-human agents in politics is so common in indigenous America that the issue has urged anthropologists to ask how we can account for a politics in which mountains, rivers and other beings become pivotal players (Blaser 2013; de la Cadena 2010; cf. Povinelli 1995).

<sup>59</sup> The interview can be found here: <https://www.pachamama.org/news/pachamama-organizes-avatar-viewing-for-amazonian-indigenous-leaders>

<sup>60</sup> In day to day use, the Pastaza Runa deploy the expression *sumacilla causana* (to live well) rather than *sumak kawsay* (the good life) which is the formula adopted by the State’s discourses.

simultaneously too simple - concept to be elucidated or even translated for it is deeply grounded in local notions of beauty and knowledge.<sup>61</sup>

It is therefore not a coincidence, I suggest, that the response to the oil company intrusion - and to the governmental politics of extraction - has been, at least in a particularly well-known Bobonaza community, to create a path of flowers which would delimit the boundaries of their territory.<sup>62</sup> Flowers are a primary sign of beauty, whilst the path itself evokes mobility and the knowledge which comes with it. Whilst people here may strategically emphasise forest knowledge (*sacha yachai*) as conceptually and existentially more 'central' than foreign knowledge (*caromanda yachai*) they too, alongside the majority of Runa people I know, see the latter as essential to *sumaclla causana*, 'living well'. 'Foreign' knowledge (*caromanda yachai*) is fundamental for the reproduction of life. The way beauty - and thus knowledge - can relate to 'foreign' forms - a paved road, a cemented house or the facilities of a satellite internet access - is still an issue with which the Runa are struggling today.

To the constitution of such 'good living' contribute things and animals, movements and substances. Some of them necessarily exclude the others. This is why *sumaclla causana* is so difficult: entanglements, similarities and differences - especially when these latter are perceived to be radical - require a great deal of work. The efforts and attention of Runa people continue to be dedicated to the fragile matter of 'living well', here and there, in time and space.

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<sup>61</sup> 'Local' by no means implies a closure to the global, that is, to the outside. On the contrary, beauty and knowledge encompass all experiences throughout time and space.

<sup>62</sup> The information about the project is taken from the following documentary: <http://prensalibrepueblosoriginarios.blogspot.it/2012/05/documental-ecuador-sisa-nambi-el-camino.html>



**Fig. 11. Tree (*chucu ruya*). Birds gather in the morning to eat its fruits and sing.**

*Song of Chiasai*<sup>63</sup>

*Chiasai chiasai*

*I am*

*Birds from everywhere gather around me*

*I am standing*

*from one place*

*from the sky*

*from the land*

*the ones I can't eat*

*the good ones*

*chiasai chiasai*

*turiritutitiri*

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<sup>63</sup> *Chiasai* is the sound of a bird when it cries and sings (*chias chias*).

Through an imaginary trip to some significant places of the Runa landscape, in this chapter I introduced some of the key concepts and themes which will keep recurring throughout the thesis. My principal aim was, however, that of introducing the reader slowly to the world of the Runa through the display of some powerful images. Images are often used by the Runa to connect and to show hidden resemblances.

I closed the chapter with an image of 'good living' (*sumaj causana*) because this is, undoubtedly, an underlying theme of the thesis. Although I do not address them theoretically, ideas about 'good living' are implicit in my discussion of knowledge and beauty. Indeed, from a Runa perspective, the three concepts - good living, beauty and knowledge - are not clearly demarcated one from another.

After having explored the capacity to elicit connections within the realm of history and place, in Chapter 2 I explore the ways Runa people see similarity between their own forms and those of others. I will thus show how finding resemblances in the forms humans and non-human share is for the Runa a fundamental aspect of becoming knowledgeable and thus leading a beautiful and meaningful life.

## Chapter 2. *Paju*: forms of knowledge

- *Ima imashi ishcai urcumanda chaupi urcumanda cushni llucshi mani?*

- *Supi!*

- What is it that is like smoke coming out from the middle of two mountains?

- A fart!

- *Chiga, ima imashi chaupi huasi urcuibi mama taquin ushushi tushun?*

- *Tacana mucu!*

- What is it that is like a daughter dancing in the middle of the house whilst the mother sings?

- *Tacana mucu!*<sup>64</sup>

- *Ima imashi ichilla huicsayasha mana cailla yacuta upij chani?*

- *Tinaja!*

- What is it that, having a little belly can drink a lot?

- *Tinaja!*<sup>65</sup>

(from a conversation between two Runa children)

In this chapter I introduce Runa practices of knowledge acquisition and of body-making. In the first sections I look at how the body is made knowledgeable through the incorporation of tangible and intangible substances coming from non-human beings. I notice, however, that notions of incorporation cannot exhaust the ways Runa people relate to others. The limits of such approach become evident especially in cases of a strange, yet diffuse, bodily condition the Runa call *paju*.

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<sup>64</sup> *Tacana mucu* is a wooden tool used to smash boiled manioc when preparing manioc beer. Here, the *tacana mucu* is described as a daughter in relation to the *batan*, the wooden recipient where cooked manioc is smashed. The rhythmic movements of the *tacana mucu* as it goes up and down to smash the manioc is here referred as 'dance', whilst the sound made by its hitting the *batan* is referred as 'singing'.

<sup>65</sup> The *tinaja* is the belly-shaped jar for storing manioc beer.

Conceptualised as a kind of disease, *paju* rests upon a logics of resemblances of movements between humans and other entities.

By introducing the concept of ‘form’, in this chapter I show how the ubiquitous condition of *paju* can be understood as a ‘disruption’ of proper movements. The efficacy of *paju*, I suggest, depends upon the assumption that movements or patterns - rather than subjectivity - are a shared condition of all entities in the world.

This chapter aims to show how a notion of ‘forms’ - as shared movements - is fundamental for understanding the ways in which the Runa think about themselves in relation to non-humans. Becoming a knowledgeable and beautiful Runa person, I argue, rests upon the ability of seeing and manipulating such ‘forms’.

### **Incorporating vital substances**

Anyone who spends a few days in a Runa community along the Bobonaza soon realises that little boys and girls grow in a relative constraint-free environment. Most of the time children roam free in the central plaza, along the pathways, without the direct supervision of any adult. As in many other Amazonian societies, among the Runa, personal autonomy and initiative are highly valued. *De facto*, children seem to live an almost autonomous existence from adults, often cooking by themselves or getting food from their nearby gardens or from neighbours. Rarely instructed verbally, they are encouraged to learn their respective work by watching their elder siblings and parents. Young girls sit next to their grandmothers whilst they make manioc beer, helping them by chewing some of it. Boys are expected to accompany their father or brothers in hunting trips, listening to the sounds of animals and smelling the traces of game.

Despite the apparent lack of coercive practices exerted by parents over their children, it would be misleading to think that Runa children live a life free from all constraints and rules. Quite the contrary: for the Runa, knowledgeable, strong people are the result of a mindful and careful process of ‘craftsmanship’, to borrow Fernando Santos-Granero’s expression (2009a:8). As I will show in this chapter and

the following ones, parents deploy several techniques to cultivate and enhance one's vital strength.

For the Runa, strength (*samai*) and knowledge (*yachai*) are interchangeable concepts. The first, *samai* is a polysemic term. Michael Uzendoski translates *samai* as a 'vital energy' (2010:68) possessed by all people. Norman Whitten translates it as 'will' (1985:108) whilst Maria Guzmán working in Canelos as 'breath, will, vigour' (1997:46). During my fieldwork, people used interchangeably the words *samai* and *alma* (from the Spanish, 'soul'). *Samai*, soul and knowledge are inextricable intertwined for which one term becomes often synonymous with the other (see also Guzmán 1997). Parental teachings need thus to be understood as processes of fostering and strengthening this vital will in order to make beautiful (*sumaj*) Runa persons.

This parental teaching (*yachachina*) or 'growing' (*buiñachina*) begins early, sometimes when the child is still in the womb. For example, when my friend Margarita realised that she was pregnant, she suddenly began to work very hard: she would spend entire days cutting weeds in her mother's *chagra* (swidden garden) and she firmly refused any help to carry heavy loads of manioc on her head. To make matters stranger, she seemed to be voluntarily looking for occasions to work more. One day, she suggested to her mother that they clear another plot of forest to make a new garden. This involved an intense period of hard work, beginning from the clearing of a site in the forest to the transportation and plantation of manioc sticks to the new garden. Surprised by her seemingly interminable amount of energy, I enquired as to the reasons for which she needed to work so incessantly. She shrugged her shoulders with a laugh. When I then suggested that she could take a rest whilst we continued to work, she answered negatively: she was working hard purposefully, so that her baby will not turn lazy (*quilla*). Then she went on to explain that when she was pregnant with her first two children, her first husband did not allow her to work: as a result, when those two children grew up, they turned out to be very lazy. On the contrary, when she became pregnant with her third child, she used to work in Puyo, sometimes from dawn to night without any rest. This third child, a seven year old clever boy, now happily helps her in any task and he always begs to go working with his father. So this time, Margarita declared, she was going to work as

much as she could, so that the newborn will learn not to be 'lazy', just like her third child had done.

Whilst cases like Margarita's are not unusual, it is far more common for parents to begin this process of making after birth, when the baby (*llullucu*) is soft and not yet ripe. Immediately after birth, a baby is bathed with the bitter juice of the *tsicta* plant to remove childbirth blood. The blood causes *ucatza* in the child's parents and kin. *Ucatza* is a sickening condition, which corresponds to an accumulation of fluids (*llausa*) inside one's belly (see also Chapter 3). The newborn is, at this point, considered to be dangerously porous and 'open'; thus, after a shaman has given the child one or more *supai* (forest spirit) souls, he proceeds in 'closing' the hands palms and feet plants so that the soul will not escape.<sup>66</sup> Babies feet and hands contain invisible passages which are 'open': through them babies can lose their vital breath (*samai*), soul (*alma*) or malignant winds (*buaira*) can enter, rendering the newborn ill.

Although Runa parents emphasize that babies are dangerously open and in need of being 'shut' or made 'harder' (*sinzhi*), they simultaneously stress the advantage of this very porosity. This openness in fact enables them to manipulate substances and things to make a child grow into a proper Runa person. Thus babies are subjected to physical 'moulding' through the application of specific plant concoctions directly on the skin. Substances are rubbed on the skin and specific body parts are massaged to give them the 'right' shape. The skin (*cara*) is a primary means through which bodily transformations are purposefully carried out. Throughout life, careful attention is paid to ensure that one's skin is beautiful, spotless and clear. Skin diseases - even those with the most imperceptible manifestations - are cause of great concern and medicine is always sought to eliminate all traces of imperfections. Parents often use herbal remedies to get rid of moles or any other imperfection of their children's skin, including some special barks and roots (*buira caspi* and *buibulan*) which are applied to make the skin look 'smooth'.

The kind of substances which 'penetrate' the body of infants encompass atmospheric, visual and olfactory phenomena. If carefully managed, these all

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<sup>66</sup> Souls (*alma* or *samai*) are given and 'stolen' by a *yachaj* (shaman). These multiple acquired souls increase one's strength and knowledge. Nevertheless, not all Runa acquire special souls throughout their lives.

contribute to the constitution of 'strong' (*sinzhi*) Runa persons. Working in the Napo area, Alessandra Foletti-Castegnaro (1987) reports the account of a Runa woman concerning the rituals performed on occasion of a birth. She described that, after a week the child is born, a shaman (*yachaj*) is called to the house. He makes everyone drink *pitun* bark to vomit, then he begins circling around the house, holding the baby in his arms.

The father plays the drum and, if the baby is a boy, he will be carrying a rifle and a blowgun. The mother carries an *ashanga* (carrying basket) and makes the machete sound '*tin tin*' as if she was working (*tarabashca cuinta*). If the child is a girl, pots and branches of manioc are carried inside the basket (Foletti-Castegnaro 1987:217, my translation).

First, it is important to notice that parental teaching here aims at fostering different gendered knowledge. This is a point to which I will return in the following chapter. For the moment, I will limit myself to observing the common mechanisms underlying both male and female processes of bodily fabrication. In the original Quichua version of the account, particular attention is paid to the sounds produced by the parents. The sounds of drumming - a rhythmic, incessant *tumtumtum* - introduces the child to a specific soundscape, that of ritual activity, characterised by male drumming and female dancing. As early as after childbirth, the child hears the sounds of drumming which will then shape its future movements either as a man or a woman, in the first case as a drummer himself, reproducing the thunder of the Owner of Game, *Amasanga*, in the latter case as a skilful dancer, who jumps rhythmically around the man-drummer, her hair moving back and forth.

A particular emphasis in the account is placed upon the sound produced by the mother as she works with the machete. She is described, in Quichua, as 'making the machete sound *tin tin*'. The machete (*sauli*), usually bought in Puyo, is an indispensable tool for the Runa. It is also the first working tool a child learns to use. Long before children are able to make pottery or go hunting, they readily learn to cut the weeds around the house and in the garden (*chagra*). Little children are encouraged to practice with the machete, cutting fruits and weeds, until they learn how to hold it properly and work rapidly. The sight of a five year old holding a nut with the left hand whilst slashing it with a metre long machete (an operation which

not only I was irremediably inapt to imitate but which I also couldn't bear to watch without a shiver of fear) is a very common one in any Runa community.

When groups of people clear a path or remove unwanted plants from the *chagra*, the communal work is accompanied by the metallic cadence of machetes' friction against stones and hard soil. Walking close to the ground, people hold their machetes by the blade moving them back and forth with a short movement of the wrist. Few leaves of grass are spared from people's clearing prowess. The metallic sound *tin tin* of the machete emitted when it encounters rocky surfaces is one of my most vivid memories of entire mornings spent trying to contain, somehow, the exuberant vegetation. In Foletti-Castegnaro's informant's account, the machete's *tin tin* acts upon the baby's ears to teach him about work. Clearing, which is associated with cleanliness and care, is a primary form of work. The rhythm of the blade is the first reminder of a central precept of Runa sociality: not to be lazy (*quilla*). The sound 'educates' the baby from her early days about a specific moral world where the *tin tin* of a machete is 'good work' (*ali tarabana*).<sup>67</sup>

I first became aware of the importance Runa people attribute to the porosity and susceptibility of infants' bodies as, one day, my Runa host in Puyo began telling me about her grandfather's wanderings to Waorani territories. A powerful shaman, he used to come back home with wonderful and incredible stories about the Waorani (the so called *auca*).<sup>68</sup> One of the stories she remembered the most was the way Waorani people rendered their bodies unbelievably strong. When a Waorani baby was born, she was left on the river shore for an entire night. Nobody would nurse her, nor bathe her, nor protect her with some cloth if it rained. Nobody was allowed to comfort her, even if she cried: the baby was simply left there, subjected to all kinds of environmental events, till the next morning. This, explained my friend with conviction, ensured that the bare body of the baby acquired 'strength'. Due to this early treatment, Waorani children could then grow bodies which were resistant

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<sup>67</sup> For similar acoustic teachings in Amazonia see Santos-Granero (2006), Brabec de Mori (2012). For the Runa, the importance of acoustic learning has been highlighted by Nuckolls (1996) for the Pastaza Runa, by Kohn (2002) for the Ávila Runa, by Uzendoski & Calapucha (2012) for the Napo Runa and by Gutierrez-Choquevilca (2012) for the Pastaza Runa on the Peruvian border.

<sup>68</sup> *Auca* is a term which is today used indiscriminately by Runa people to indicate non-Runa indigenous people (see also Whitten 1985; High & Reeve 2012).

to any injury or insect bite. In my friend's perspective, this episode also explained the remarkable hunting prowess which the Runa often attribute to the Waorani. These were often described by Runa hunters as being 'like animals' for their ability of camouflaging amid trees and plants as well as of imitating animal calls. There was no hint of depreciation in Runa hunters' commentaries: on the contrary, many of them wondered with some envy about Waorani's exceptional abilities.

My Runa host attributed this capacity to the penetration of smell, sounds, rain or wind into infants' bodies. Significantly, the depiction of this Waorani technique to enhance bodily skills resonates with the portrayal of shamanic apprenticeships given by elders in the Bobonaza area. As one man explained to me:

When young men wanted to become shamans they had to go to live far from people and avoid any 'strong' food. They lived alone in the forest. Only so the men's body could have the same breath and smell of plants ... a forest smell (*sacha asna*).

The bodies of the Waorani are 'from the forest' (*sachamanda*), like those of Runa shamans. What both kinds of people shared were heightened perceptual faculties, acquired by virtue of the broadness (or perhaps, wider penetrability) of their bodily apprenticeships.

Alongside these teaching 'on the skin', Runa children are also forced to ingest specific substances that affect their bodies from inside (*ucuma*). The ultimate aim is always the same: to grow (*buiñachina*) strong (*sinzhi*) and knowledgeable (*yachaj*) persons. A common remedy for children (and adults) to acquire bodily strength consists in the drinking of a concoction made of various types of bark (especially from the trees of *puma runduma* and *ursa caspi*). Such trees are only found at great distances from inhabited centres: parents often have to walk several hours to scrape off some of their bark. Throughout their lives, Runa people drink these dark, bitter concoctions, combining the barks of multiple trees. A friend of mine, father of ten children, proudly told me that for his younger son he had gathered the bark of twenty-three different trees of *puma runduma*. Another strategy for developing a strong body consists in drinking a beverage made with ground *uchu putu* tree core. According to the Runa, this majestic tree is the shamanic refuge of all game

animals. Its impressive size always provokes admiring remarks by passing people. This tree also possesses other qualities: at night its soul wanders around with a terrible noise and steals the soul of anyone who happens to be in its vicinity. In explaining to me why this concoction was particularly effective, my friend Tomás hit the giant root of the tree with the machete and then said: 'It would take hundreds of men to cut this down. Even so, we wouldn't do it easily'. He further elaborated: 'Once a boy has drunk its juice, he will become invulnerable like the tree, his body will become so heavy that nobody will be able to knock him down in a fight'.

So far, I have only explored cases of wilful incorporation of others' qualities. Equally widespread among the Runa, as well as in other parts of Amazonia, is the other side of the coin, namely, the involuntary acquisition of some 'negative' characteristics of other entities. Given newborns' fundamental porosity, the danger of being 'too open' to external agencies is always present. The idea that the involuntary ingestion or contact with certain stuff poses a threat to the child's well-being is perhaps more obvious in the domain of postpartum prohibitions. A friend of mine, who had recently given birth, received the visit of her brother and his wife from a village in the forest. They came to stay for a few days at my friend's house to do some business in the city and they had brought game meat as a gift. The meat in question was paca. My friend steadfastly refused to eat it explaining that, if she ate it, her child would become 'like the paca' and would not let her sleep at night. Her refusal was not surprising: the paca, with the capuchin monkey, is an animal described by the Runa as messy and trouble making. The capuchin is ill behaved and unsettlingly clever: as a pet animal he steals food from the owner and damages or loses objects. In addition, if male, he is sexually exuberant, chasing up girls and peeping under their skirts. The lowland paca is an animal which walks restlessly at night, eating manioc in the garden (*chagra*). If a mother eats paca meat, my friend claimed, the child won't be able to sleep at night, moving restlessly in the bed and crying the whole time. Faced with my friend's resistance, her brother gave up and the meat was thus shared among other kin members. Her brother, however, complained to me:

I told her to eat it but she would not listen. She insisted her child would then become like paca. But, I told her that, before eating it, we could

have the baby smell (*asna*) the meat. But she didn't want to. If he smelled it, nothing would have happened anyway.

The man's complaint prompted me to ask him to elaborate further. He thus explained to me that through smelling the meat, the baby would have 'known' it (*ricsin*) beforehand, and thus no transformation could have occurred. If the bodies of babies are inherently susceptible to acquire qualities from external entities, as my friend's refusal demonstrated, the possibility of avoiding these dangers is also inherent to the penetrable nature of bodies: for if the child is 'taught' in advance about the meat, this will not affect him any longer. The mechanism by which the baby learns about meat is smelling: smell here appears to work as sound did in the postpartum ritual described by Foletti-Castegnaro: it teaches about things (animal, work, etc.) by taking advantage of very particular permeability of a baby's nostrils and ears. So, when my friend's brother says that by smelling the meat beforehand, the child will not become restless, he is saying that by smelling paca as food (as dried smoked meat) and not as a subject (the tireless nocturnal rodent), he will not fall into an undesirable similarity.

The paca example is only one of the many food restrictions followed by parents immediately after the birth. Aparecida Vilaça (2002), on the basis of an analysis of similar food prohibitions among the Wari', suggests that, because the risk of metamorphosis and transformation into Other for indigenous Amazonians is always a possibility, people need to actively work towards establishing a distinctively human perspective. This can be constituted via the sharing of food and co-residence. Indeed, commensality is a core strategy for 'making kin out of others', to borrow Vilaça's (2002) expression, for in perspectivist terms, sharing the same food amounts to sharing the same point of view (of the animal as de-subjectified meat, see also Fausto 2007).

Without doubt, the example of the paca prohibition could be read as an attempt to protect a proper human body from an unwanted transformation into an animal Other. However, whilst the Wari's preoccupation with the instability of the human body form is shared by the Runa, an overemphasis on the dangers of 'turning other' can obscure another fundamental point, namely, that not all bodily modifications induced by animals (or things) are necessarily 'dangerous': many might even be

indispensable.<sup>69</sup> As I hope to have shown, the ‘deliberate process of bricolage’ (Santos-Granero 2012:183) of exogenous, non-human qualities is essential for the creation of strong, knowledgeable Runa persons. It seems to me thus that the point for the Runa consists not in avoiding entirely the animal-Others but rather in circumventing some undesired qualities of these beings whilst co-opting the valuable ones. In the case of paca, like others, the ingestion of the foodstuff does not imply a total transformation, but the modification of specific bodily traits. Thus, what is subjected to modification is not the body as a whole but rather certain forms of it. Elsje Lagrou (2007a) picks up on this point exactly when she observes that some animals are eaten (or avoided) specifically for the *form* of their body. In her words, ‘the matter consumed contains the potentiality of its form, and form indexes agency’ (2007:517). Taking up this observation, in the following sections I aim to show how, in order to account for a widespread indigenous illness called *paju*, one is forced to think about the relationship between human and non-humans through ideas of ‘form’.

### ***Paju chimbanga: Stumbling across paju***

During one of my stays in Chuya Yaku, just after sunset, I was sitting with my *compañeros* in the kitchen, eating our dinner. In the background, the voice of the local radio Puyo read out the latest messages sent by people from the city to their relatives in distant, rural communities *adentro* (in the forest). My *compañero* quickly turned the volume up. The message on that evening was sent by Ana, a neighbour. She urged her husband, who had gone to work downriver, to travel promptly to Puyo, for their newborn baby was dying. The message sparked a heated discussion amongst my hosts: why had Lenin (Ana’s husband) gone downriver without telling his child? If now he died, it would have been entirely his father’s fault. Not fully understanding what was going on, I asked my *compañera* for elucidation. She explained to me that the child had been in agony since his father left the village a few weeks earlier. The poor baby was ‘twisting’ horribly and his mother had decided to fly to Puyo to see a doctor. Obviously, my *compañera* added, the doctor could not do

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<sup>69</sup> This is a point well highlighted by the existing ethnography which stresses the constitution of ‘proper’ bodies via the ingestion and incorporation of exogenous subjectivities, animal and artefactual alike (Hugh-Jones 2009; Londoño-Sulkin 2000; Miller 2007; Santos-Granero 2012; Walker 2009).

anything about it: the twisting happened because the father went to work away and he did not tell the baby beforehand. ‘Why would this happen?’, I asked, unable to hide my disconcertedness. Unfortunately, the answer I received was the same I had been given on countless occasions without ever being able to fully understanding it: ‘This is *paju*’ (*paju man*).

Very early during my fieldwork I had learnt that the term *paju* was used to refer to a multiplicity of different situations: having a strange mole on the skin was *paju* as well as cracking one’s hand bones or throwing dirt into a pot. *Paju* could potentially include everything or so I used to think then. I grew so increasingly frustrated with the ubiquity of *paju* that I often succumbed to its apparent infinity. I failed to write down all the contexts in which it was mentioned simply because I found it impossible: for my Runa friends, neighbours and hosts, *paju* was everywhere.<sup>70</sup> For me, this was one of these ‘messy objects’ (Law 2004) which so often elude exegesis. My *comadre*’s answer ‘this is *paju*’ did not contribute thus to a greater understanding of what was going on. But, as I kept navigating through this state of ignorance which characterised so much of my fieldwork, I realised that events like this were neither rare nor went unnoticed. Numerous stories of fathers who went off hunting or mothers who washed their clothes in the river just after their baby was born were repeatedly pointed to me as examples of parental irresponsibility if not outward craziness.

*Paju* was often mentioned in relation to birth practices. Today, childbirth in the Bobonaza area is subject to little formal ritual elaboration. Assisted by some elderly women, Runa mothers give birth in the house, by holding with their hands onto a *chonta* pole placed above their heads. When a woman takes a long time to give birth, elderly women (*apamama*) speculate on whether the parturient during her childhood kept *ungurahua*, *urutza* or *cunchaya* nuts for a long time in her mouth. These are nuts which take a very long time to ripen (only once a year). *Apamama* Digna often told her grandchildren off when she saw them chewing *ungurahua* nuts and keeping them inside their mouth: she herself had done so when little and then, she had to go

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<sup>70</sup> Other ethnographers have noticed the importance of *paju* for the Runa. Galli (2007: 238–43) and Muratorio (1998:412) describe it as ‘power’ whilst Whitten (1976:144) as a ‘mystical danger’ which is everywhere. As I will show here and in the next chapter, both definitions are apt.

through a very prolonged labour. ‘This was *paju*, this is why I suffered’, she explained to me, sighing loudly. When the woman cannot push anymore, grandmothers may make her drink powdered *anguilla* bone or ground balsa bark (*balsa cara*). The first is the bone from a fish known for having a very slippery skin. Similarly the bark of the balsa tree secretes a slimy juice. ‘Slippery’ substances do not possess beneficial properties per se but rather they help to make the baby ‘slip’ out easily. Sometimes the child comes out tightly wrapped by the placenta. In this case it is said that the baby is tangled (*ligarishca*). When this happens, people usually claim that the mother must have played with fishing net (*lica*) or basket fibres (*tiamshi angu*) when she was a small girl. Again, this condition is referred to as *paju*.

Another set of postpartum prohibitions are mentioned as means to avoid dangerous *paju*. For example, the mother is prohibited from eating any meat whose flesh possesses too much blood: pheasants, chicken and fish, accompanied by boiled manioc or plantain are the only foods allowed. Were she to transgress the diet, she would be likely to get *paju*. Another common prohibition is that neither parents, after childbirth, can wash clothes, light a match or a fire. The father can’t travel with the canoe, nor go hunting with the rifle or the blowpipe. Again, any contravention would get the baby a dangerous *paju*. In the case of practices surrounding ‘heat’ (*rupaj*), such as the lighting of a match, the body of the baby will become covered with burn-like wounds, whereas for the washing of clothes, which involves wringing out the water, this is said to lead to horrendous bodily contortions. Women (and less so their husbands) avoid carefully these practices in the period following childbirth: if anything should happen, this would be because of his parents’ negligence.

The slow birth, the ‘placenta-trapped’ baby, the twisting of Ana’s son were all examples of a state of *paju*. *Paju*, for the Runa I lived with, has two distinct, yet interdependent meanings: disease and power/knowledge. In this chapter I will mainly focus on the first meaning of it, whilst I will return to *paju* as knowledge in Chapters 3 and 6. Even if I loosely translate it as illness, *paju* is neither conceived nor called, for that matter, a proper illness (which is termed *ungui*). *Paju*, unlike *ungui*, does not require the complex intervention of a specialist. It is not thought to be caused by an evil wind nor by a shamanic attack, no one is behind it. Most instances of *paju* are accidental. You simply happen to stumble across *paju*.

Given that I have so far considered only postpartum *paju*, one might be inclined to interpret it as just another example of couvade prohibitions, very common among Amazonian societies.<sup>71</sup> However *paju*, as I will show below, is ubiquitous and is not linked to any specific life-stages. Nevertheless, the resemblance between *paju* and couvade prohibitions is not entirely fortuitous. What indeed *paju* shares with couvade restrictions and food taboos in other parts of the Amazon is that many of them rest upon a logics of analogical relationships between human and non-human entities.<sup>72</sup> For the Runa, this analogical relationship is expressed through the use of the suffix *-shina* (like). This is explicitly deployed to explain instances of *paju*. Being something *-shina* means being similar to something, yet not quite the same. Identity between two terms is never expressed in Pastaza Quichua, unless a transformation has occurred, in which case *-shina* is replaced by the verb *tucurina* (transformed). Thus in the above examples, the child's body will twist 'like' clothes and will burn 'like' the match, but the two never share more than this fugacious similarity (a point to which I will return later in the chapter).

These analogical relationships have recently been the subject of an article by Santos-Granero (2012). In a comprehensive review of Yanesha and other Amazonians' processes of body-making, Santos-Granero proposes an alternative to the Frazerian logic of 'contagious magic' which is often invoked to explain many of food taboos and the like in the Amazon:

I propose an alternative explanation, namely, that the acquisition of the powers, knowledge, capacities, and properties of animals, plants, and things is realized, not through contiguity and contagion as Frazer would have it, but rather through the actual incorporation of the bodies and subjectivities of such entities ... Such incorporation is realized through two modalities: embodiment, which entails the incorporation through objectivation of external substances and subjectivities, and ensoulment,

<sup>71</sup> On couvade prohibitions see Gregor (1985), Rivière (1974), and Rival (1998) for the neighbouring Waorani and Uzendoski (2010:60-3) for the importance of *sasina* among the Napo Runa .

<sup>72</sup> These set of prohibitions based on analogical thinking constitute the ethnographic materials upon which James Frazer (1959[1911]) built to create his theory of contagious magic.

which involves the incorporation through subjectivation of external artefacts and bodily substances (2012:198).

Whilst Santos-Granero's approach rightly stresses the importance of subjectification and incorporation which underlay much of the rituals he analyses, I suggest that the emphasis placed upon notions of incorporation of substances might overlook other important processes at play in the constitution of people. An example might be useful to elucidate the point.

Take the rather abstruse assertion made by people along the Bobonaza that if you want to grow a solidly built body, you have to drink 'surface water' when the river overflows (*yacu shamun*). When a friend's father died, his corpse was so heavy that it took six people to carry it to the village cemetery. 'You see', my friend laconically commented to the onlookers; 'when he was small, his mother used to make him drink when the river overflowed'. This 'surface water' is thus one of the myriad materials which contribute to a person's individuality. However, its potency remains unintelligible if we focus our attention only on 'water' as substance.

I accidentally had the occasion to stumble again upon the issue of 'surface water' one day, as my friend Teresa and I were travelling on the canoe through the currents of an overflowing Bobonaza. On the scintillating surface of the river, small and larger whirlpools were created by the strong waves and by our own movement with the canoe. In these whirlpools, sand was floating gracefully. Prompted by the vision, I asked Teresa how could one possibly drink 'surface water' when there was so much sand in it. 'What do you want to drink then?', she answered back. Seeing my puzzled expression she quickly went on to elaborate: 'When the river grows, the sand jumps on the water (*tiyu huamburin*), it stays there for a moment, then it sinks deep down'. It was only thanks to Teresa's phenomenological depiction of the sand floating on the water surface and then descending to the bottom of the river, that I finally understood the analogy. Like sand goes down in the water, a person's body becomes solidly pulled to the floor. But why, one may ask, has one to drink the sand when it is floating on the water surface? This is not because of technical reasons (although, admittedly, it would be quite unpleasant to ingest handful of dry sand), but also because this quality of sand, namely its heaviness, becomes only evident and, importantly, more aesthetically powerful, when it is placed in relation to water.

Could it be said, in light of this example, that a substance (sand) gives the drinker a particular quality (body heaviness)? I would answer yes and no. Surface water *is* undoubtedly a substance but the quality transmitted to the drinker is produced by the setting in motion of different elements (the water, the sand and the overflowed river), not just one discrete 'thing'. The quality of surface water becomes clear only by disclosing the sequence in which 'sand' reveals its heaviness. Thus, it is not just a 'material' what gives a quality, but a *movement*. The quality (of being 'heavy') rests upon the notion of a shared form, crystallised in the sequences of sand floating in the water and falling down and in a human body which is pulled to the ground. What this ethnographic detail also suggests is that, as I explore more in detail below, the ability of seeing 'similarity' between processes is indissolubly linked to a deep phenomenological sensitivity and an aesthetic propensity for bringing forth images.

In many of the above examples, the similarity of 'forms' can be obscured by its means of transmission; namely, bodily incorporation of substances. Substances are discrete and bounded, whilst forms are constituted by sequences or movements. Forms become diluted or sometimes simply lost in the analytical focus on substance transmission. Take the example I mentioned earlier concerning the drinking of ground *uchu putu* tree core to make one's body unmovable. Whilst admittedly the tree is a strikingly massive presence in the forest - for which we may readily understand why it would possess qualities to render one's body strong - the quality of this strength for Runa people resides in a specific form. When a man hits with the machete the giant roots of *uchu putu* (as Runa people do when they walk in the forest), he gets to know the solidity of the tree. If a person attempts to cut it, he will soon realise that it will be a vain attempt. When a man is hit, just like when *uchu putu* is hit, he will not move, just like no human alone can ever hope to eradicate the majestic tree from the ground. It is this very specificity of patterns - the sequence of hitting and not moving - which I call a 'shared form'. However this

very form, which makes the *uchu putu* concoction efficacious, becomes obscured when simply labelled ‘incorporation’ of (a general, undefined) strength.<sup>73</sup>

To conclude: as I showed above, *paju*, whilst being perhaps the example where the saliency of ‘form’ becomes more apparent, is not the only instance in which an attention to forms is at work. There are two reasons for which ‘forms’ become so readily evident in *paju*. First, because in the vast majority of cases of *paju*, no substance incorporation is involved. Even when there is, for *paju* to be intelligible, it often requires the setting in motion of other movements, just like in the case of the surface water. Furthermore, in *paju* cases, often the dyad of the relationship of similarity is not formed by a human and an animal but rather by a human and one or more objects. This makes the notion of incorporation more problematic because many objects do not seem to possess any inherent quality to be easily transmitted to the human person. This point leads me to a second observation concerning Santos-Granero’s use of incorporation. Incorporation seems to be able to take place only insofar as substances are ‘subjectified’, that is, possess some degree of subjectivity. However, in the many instances of *paju* involving non-living entities, such as artefacts, these never become ‘subjectified’. To elucidate these statements I turn back to the ethnography.

### Of logs and baskets

During my sojourns in Chuya Yaku every evening I would put all my effort to help my old host to prepare the meal of the day. As it normally happened in the initial phase of my fieldwork, despite all my good will, I generally represented an impediment rather than a real help for my patient host who would encouragingly show me, for the umpteenth time, how to cover the pot with plantain leaves or how to properly hold the machete to peel some sweet potatoes (*cumal*). At that stage, I felt compelled to do as much work as I could do to repay my hosts’ generosity. So when, one evening, my elderly host leaned forward to push the logs into the fire to augment its intensity, I hastily imitated her until she told me that it was enough. In

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<sup>73</sup> The clarifications could be endless. The child whose mother eats paca meat does not simply turn restless: he begins to imitate the nocturnal patterns of the animal itself. It is the pattern of restless movement which comes to be shared by the two. This is why my friend’s sister greatest worry was that if she did eat, she would not be able to sleep anymore.

a last impetus of good will, I pushed a sided log into the fire with my foot. Then, my host raised her index finger, as an admonishment. 'Never push a log into the fire with your feet', she explained to me seriously; 'for, if you do so, when you give birth your child will get stuck'.

This admonition was repeated to me many times as I distractedly pushed a log into the fire or, for example, when after returning from a long tiring day in the *chagra* I would mindlessly leave my basket (*ashanga*) full of manioc on the floor of the house without emptying it immediately. 'Tas tas tas, empty the basket now', I would be gently instructed as my host saw me walking out of the kitchen to go to the river, completely oblivious to the basket which sat forgotten on the floor, full of peeled manioc. In both cases, I was gently but firmly reminded, I could 'get' *paju*. Slowly I became bodily aware of 'it': even if tempted by my lazy nature to kick a log into the fire, I would lean forward to push it with the hands. I also began to empty my basket as soon as I got home, before rushing to do any other, admittedly more pleasant activity.

There are two 'objects' which appear in my account: the logs and the basket. The logs are situated within a larger system for cooking food which is called *cullu*. The term *cullu* refers to the three large logs where fire is light to cook. Pots and pans are positioned on the top of the three logs' extremities which become a sitting place. One or more *cullu* are always present in a family's kitchen. People are prompt to notice the lack of *cullu* or the presence of a very small one in the house, a sign of the indisputable laziness of the male owner of the house. When I asked my friend Ana why I shouldn't push the logs with my foot, she explained:

If you push the logs with the foot, the child will come out alike, with the legs. If you push it with your hands, it will come out alike, with the hands, as it should be.

The 'pushing' out of the baby is replicated in the sequence of pushing a log into (or out of) the fire. The inward/outward direction (into the fire, out of the fire, out of the body) seems to be unimportant. What seems to matter here are the 'feet'. A relationship of similarity here is drawn between the foot of the person who pushes the log and the feet of the future child. What is shared in the sequence are two

movements: one concerns the action of ‘pushing’, both the child and the log, whilst the other concerns the similarity between the ‘feet’ of the person and those of the child. In both cases, both pairs, respectively the log/baby and the person/baby come to temporarily share a similar sequence of patterns.

This shared patterns become all the more evident in the basket’s *paju*. The basket (*ashanga*) is weaved with *tiamshi*, a forest fibre widely used by the Runa. It is only men who weave (*ahuana*) baskets, albeit it is only women who carry them, with bark straps over their forehead and the bulk on their backs. Men begin the weaving of baskets by making the bottom (*siquinchina*) and then circularly weaving the large ‘belly’ (*buicsa*) and narrowing it to the ‘neck’, which is called *ashanga huallca churana*.<sup>74</sup> The basket is modelled upon human body forms, the buttocks, belly, neck and mouth. When the *ashanga* is left standing in the house, full of upright manioc roots, its sight to Runa onlookers recalls a condition of being improperly ‘stuck’. Manioc roots are always placed upright in the basket so that they jointly form an interlocking whole. When left in a ‘standing’ position inside the basket, the manioc roots remain uselessly inside. On the contrary, the manioc contained in a basket, upon returning home, should be immediately cooked. My elderly host, faced with my question as to why my (future) baby would get ‘stuck’ if I didn’t promptly empty the *ashanga* of its contents, had no better answer than turning up side down the basket full of manioc in front of me. The proper ‘sequence’ of the basket/manioc combination would be that of emptying, as my friend’s actions clearly demonstrated.

There are different ‘shared’ forms here: one between manioc and children, the other between uterus and *ashanga* and a further one related to the passage between interior and exterior (inside and outside the basket). Both manioc and children, the fruits of women’s work, grow ‘inside’ respectively in the earth (*allpai*) and the belly (*buicsai*). In this specific case, however, it is not only the resemblance of the two which is salient but most importantly, the respective upright position of the baby and the manioc *inside* the uterus and the basket. The manioc is always placed in an upright position inside the basket, just like the baby is conceived to be ‘upright’, in

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<sup>74</sup> The term indicates literally the place where the *huallca*, glass beaded necklaces, are worn.

a vertical position, in his mother's belly. The other salient movement is the movement of expulsion from the basket and the uterus.

Significantly, there are further 'shared forms' involved in the movement of 'coming out' (*llucshina*). After a woman gives birth, she has to rest for a week. When she finally abandons this period of rest, her movement of coming out is called *huabua tasinmanda jatarishca* which means literally 'coming out of the nest'. Now, the nest is the object from which, according to the Runa, baskets were created. During ancient times, shamans had seen through *ayahuasca* the way birds made their nests. They thought it looked beautiful and decided to copy its shape to make baskets. In fact, a type of plain cylindrical *ashanga*, called *pitaga*, is said to closely resemble the original bird's nest (*chaua mango tasi*). Nests, baskets, mother and children become entangled in a web of resonances and echoes. Forms get entangled, one evokes another, the other is internal to yet another one.

For example, when I further enquired about turning the *ashanga* upside down, people also claimed that 'this [movement] is like' (*shinalla*) a woman's expulsion of the placenta (*huabua mama*). This is why blockage is particularly dangerous: a main preoccupation of Runa women who give birth at home is that the placenta will get stuck in their uterus. In these cases, a string of the interior root of the manioc is placed into the woman's mouth. The reflex of the throat makes the muscles tilt as to expel the placenta. As the placenta is expelled, this is buried underground. But not too deep inside, I was warned. Placentas buried deep in the ground cause children a particular *paju*: they will develop very deep dental roots and their milk teeth never fall. Again a form is shared between the burying of placenta and the depth of dental roots: the 'interior' ('deep' and 'inside' expressed by the same word: *ucuma*) of the land and of the gums.

In light of the ethnographic examples described above, *paju* seems to be concerned with the ill-shaped reproduction of certain movements. The disruption of one form triggers the disruption of another. *Paju* could then be thought of as an ill-state which stems from the 'improper' sequences of movements, in other words, a disrupted form. The definition seems to entail a further implication: that, in order there to be a disrupted form, an idea of what 'proper' forms consist of is necessary. This is true: however, I would suggest, this properness is not located in a Platonic

hyper-uranium but rather in a specific aesthetic awareness of life or in what Eduardo Kohn (2005) has aptly termed ‘Runa realism’. Forms are phenomenally accurate and readily perceptible to Runa eyes, ears and nostrils in the flow of everyday life. Take for example the following episode from my fieldwork.

One afternoon, in the village of Wituk Sas, I was sitting with my friend Sabina in the hammock, chatting and eating raw peanuts, lazily swinging back and forth. When I stood up to get some more peanuts, I inadvertently stepped on the shells which we had thrown on the floor. Then Sabina’s mother said to me, pointing to my feet: ‘Careful! You stumble across *paju* (*Yashpangui paju chimbapki*)!’ She came closer and began to swipe the floor, whilst she told me that this happened to her too: she walked on peanuts shells and her bones began to sound (*tullu uyarin*). ‘Sound what?’, I asked with some concern. ‘Like this (*shinalla*)’, intervened Sabina crushing some peanuts in her hand. ‘*Cas cas*’ (cracking sound), reiterated her mum; ‘my bones sound like this’. The sound of crushed peanuts - the auditory phenomenon of the accident - becomes replicated by the human body. This happens only when one crushes peanuts with the feet and not by hands. The mistake is one of form (crushing peanuts with feet) and the consequence is equally of form (the cracking of bones): the sound *cas cas* comes to be shared by peanuts and bones alike. The *paju* reveals a heightened perceptivity to phenomenal experience, here expressed by the cracking sound of bones and peanuts alike.<sup>75</sup> For this reason, most of instances of *paju* were not readily understandable to my untrained eyes and ears.

### **Manipulating forms**

So far, I have taken into account only those instances in which *paju* is seen as an altered pattern of movements between things and humans. In this kind of *paju* only the human subject is affected by this ‘alteration’ of forms. As it stands, my ethnographic analysis might seem to imply that ‘forms’ belong to the realm of ‘nature’ – to a material reality independent of human action – which people can simply appropriate or reject. In other words, my analysis may suggest that forms are things of nature which affect humans in a way or another. *Paju* would then simply figure as an instance of a momentary ‘alteration’ in the ‘natural’ object world, with

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<sup>75</sup> Indeed sounds may be for the Runa a privileged mode of expressing a shared similarity between humans and non-humans (cf. Nuckolls 1996:101; Gutierrez-Choquevilca 2012).

tangible consequences over human lives. However, I believe that my Runa research participants would find this depiction quite misleading. If it is true that *paju* affects humans when it takes the shape of a disruption of forms as described in the ethnography above, the reverse is true in instances in which *paju* takes the shape of a subtle manipulation of forms. Here human subjects, thanks to mimetic enactments, act directly upon the lives of other beings.

Take, for example, a case from a hunting context. Sometimes, during a monkey hunt, the female animal, trying to escape from tree to tree, may be holding a baby in its arms. Runa hunters have well trained sight and they can spot the presence of a baby monkey with a glance. When they do, they make a sudden pause from running, rapidly break a small stick from a nearby plant and insert it upright in their belt, as they resume the chase. They do this so that the mother will drop the baby down and they will be able to take it home to raise as a pet. This is an infallible *paju*: the baby monkey will fall down, vertically, replicating the upward position of the stick inserted in the hunter's belt.

I had a further example of this subtle manipulation of forms one day, when a relative had come to visit my host house in Wituk Sas and he began talking about his *barbasco*, the poisonous root used by Runa men to fish in small streams. He complained that his *barbasco*, which he had recently planted, did not grow but simply sunk into the ground.<sup>76</sup> My host began laughing, suggesting that he should not have had sex after planting the root. Sensing vaguely that some sort of proscription had been violated here, I asked for further explanation from my host. Obviously amused, he replied that, after planting, the man needs to rest on the bed. By lying down, the *barbasco* will grow 'like' his body, that is, on a horizontal plane. If he stands up, or worse, has sexual relationships, the *barbasco* will 'sink' deep. This is because, my interlocutor explained with an expressive wink, the human penis enters deep into a woman's body. In this case, the grower will not be able to pull the *barbasco* out. 'This is called *barbasco paju*', concluded my host. 'One should be pay attention to it!', he added with a loud laugh.

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<sup>76</sup> The planting of *barbasco* is a strictly male activity.

A few months later, on another occasion, some friends began talking about *barbasco paju*. The exchange took place between some Puyo Runa and a man from the nearby region of Napo. The latter was explaining that, if you want to grow *barbasco* well (*palandata alli sumacta huinachingahua*), when you kill a tapir you should insert a finger into its anus. The suggestion generated great laughter, but the man insisted. When later the man left, my two friends kept recalling his obviously hilarious advice. However, when I then asked them whether they thought it was a useless *paju*, one told me: 'Surely it must work for the Napo Runa! But we have other ways than sticking one finger in a tapir's ass!'.

It is obvious that in both cases, this particular kind of *paju* revolves around an alignment of movements between the human body and the *barbasco* root - which I call their 'shared form'. Both proper and ill alignment have the consequence of affecting the growth of the poisonous root. In the first case, the behaviour of the grower seeks to prevent unwanted forms, that is, the sinking of the *barbasco* into the ground (resembling thus the *paju* as illness). In the second case, on the contrary, a positive manipulation of forms is sought, through the purposeful imitation of a specific movement. Forms thus cannot be located into the realm of a 'natural' independent world for they are consciously used by humans to impinge upon other non-human entities. If the Runa are natural realists of a sort, as suggested earlier, their 'nature' is certainly an unfamiliar one to us.

As a further remark, one may wonder why, in the case of all the *paju* mentioned above, should be one particular form and not another what spurs the condition of *paju*. The question also applies to cases where no *paju* is involved, like in the case of transference of a non-human quality to a human body. Why, for example, amongst all the characteristics of the giant *uchu putu* tree, should be its heaviness - and the impossibility of eradicating it from the ground - the salient quality to incorporate? I think that there is no reason for this not to be possible. *Potentially*, I argue, all forms are infinite. This is why, although in this chapter I presented *paju* and quality-transmission as traditional practices, in fact, *the content* of such instances is not shared unanimously by everyone. Whilst the notion of *paju* is readily understood by people all over the Pastaza region, what might cause *paju* differs. People may take

up or dismiss resemblances, depending on their sensorial perceptivity.<sup>77</sup> When, for example, I dreamt of carrying an *ashanga* full of manioc, a friend of mine immediately interpreted it as a dream foretelling a pregnancy. The woman who was then visiting the house of my friend interrupted our exchange by saying that she did not know that. To her, it was dreaming of making a large storage jar which foretold of pregnancy. But after my friend briefly stated that you carry the baby like you carry the *ashanga*, she readily endorsed the interpretation.

### **On forms and life**

At the beginning of the chapter I described ethnographically the ways Runa people actively ‘make bodies’. As many other Amazonian people, the Runa too incorporate into their bodies external substances (of tangible and intangible kind) to acquire certain qualities. However, as I showed in the last part of the chapter, notions of incorporation are not always able to account for the ways Runa people say that ‘things’ momentarily ‘are like us’. This is particularly true of instances where no transformation nor incorporation takes place. In these cases, the entities, while partaking to a similar movement, remain other to each other. This is where I suggested an idea of forms might prove to be a fruitful conceptual tool to understand the similarities the Runa draw between humans and non-humans.

The analytical shift from substance to form has some repercussions. Scholars of animism have characterised all the relationships between human and non-humans in terms of a shared soul or subjectivity (cf. Rival 2012; see Introduction). Thus, for example, Philippe Descola (2013) identifies ‘interiority’ as a unifying principle within animist ontologies. He opposes it to ‘form’, intended as a mixture of physicality and ‘ethology’ which differs for each species. Similarly, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) posits the ‘soul’ as common to humans and non-humans, whilst the body as the site of difference. Both approaches take relationships between human and non-humans in Amazonia as being underlain by this pervasive subjectivity. In the aforementioned review of Amazonian practices of body-making, Santos-

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<sup>77</sup> This of course leads to the question of whether some people (e.g. shamans) are in a better position to ‘impose’ perceived forms over others. This could indeed be the case but the specificity of the process by which some forms become more accepted than others needs further investigation. I believe that research in this direction could shed important insights on issues of authority and power among the Runa.

Granero suggests that for incorporation of alien qualities into a human body to succeed, the human and non-human entities need to be conceived as consubstantial (2012:198-9). They are so, in his opinion, in virtue of the animist ethos for which all entities can be (potentially) imbued with subjectivity. What is similar between different entities is thus their shared subjectivity, materialised in substances which can travel between different persons.<sup>78</sup>

While agreeing with Santos-Granero's observation that, for incorporation to be possible, human and non-human entities need to share *something*, I locate this 'similarity' not in a shared subjectified substance, but rather in 'forms'. No notion of shared subjectivity underpins the idea of forms. This is not to deny that the Runa *do* see many non-humans as *subjects*, but rather that subjectivity, or, for that matter, a common 'soul', is not an indispensable condition for an *agentive* relationship between human and non-humans to take place. In other words, I don't think we have to recur to notions of subjectivity, nor ensoulment, to grant non-humans - including objects - a particular form of 'life' such as that described in *paju*. For, if the Runa often think about animals and stones as subjects, it is equally true that many things *never* become subjects. This is for example the case of matches, water and many other such entities which, in cases of *paju*, are not 'subjectified'. The cloth soaked with water is not endowed with a special subjectivity: there is no *inherent* quality *in the thing itself* which can be transmitted to a baby, nor, for that matter, any Runa would claim that an ordinary piece of garment possesses a soul or even an agency *per se*. Yet, in the moment of *paju*, the fabric is no longer an object disconnected from the human world. In the movement of being torn - which I call 'form' - it becomes temporarily aligned to the baby's body. Within this movement, the cloth ceases to be 'simply' a piece of cloth. In light of this, by maintaining a focus on the agency and subjectivity of non-humans beings (especially animals), scholars engaged in the study of animism, may risk neglecting that what is 'alive' resides not only in discrete 'person-like' entities but also in the movement across these entities. I would suggest that the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive.

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<sup>78</sup> 'Subjectivity', as used by Santos-Granero, does not correspond neatly to the possession of a soul as perspectivist scholars would have it, nor to the 'interiority' described by Descola (2013). Clearly, Santos-Granero aims at developing a more comprehensive and fluid notion (2012:187).

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the ubiquitous nature of *paju* which I came to conceptualise as an awareness of forms. To avoid or to manipulate forms is a basic knowledge practice for Runa people, one in which they become trained from very early on. This attention to forms is quintessentially aesthetic and it is grounded in phenomenological attentiveness and appreciation of the different shapes life might take. Indeed ‘proper’ forms - the carrying out of movements - are inextricably linked to ideas of beauty (*sumaj*). The capacity of witnessing similarities of forms - a virtuous ‘attention’ (Kingston 2003) - is not a superficial happenstance, but rather a constitutive part of the ways people become knowledgeable.

If the capacity of seeing and manipulating forms is shared equally by all Runa, it is also true that such ability takes different shape, according to whether one is a man or a woman. In the next chapter I will examine how ‘movements’ - or ‘forms’ - are particularly important for becoming knowledgeable Runa women. Simultaneously I will show that the process by which Runa men become ‘strong knowledgeable’ people depends not so much upon the proper management of ‘forms’, but rather upon the constitution of an ‘inner’ male strength. Such difference in knowledge regimes can only be explained, I suggest, by looking at local constructions of gender.

## Chapter 3. The gender of forms

Ethnographer (myself):

*So do you think that women and men are the same? At least we could say that they are similar....they are both human aren't they?*

Runa man (interrupting me):

*Well, tell me then, if you think so, if you think we are the same, why is it that if I touch women's clay my penis will no longer harden? If I were the same as a woman, surely this would not happen.*

In this chapter, I continue my exploration of Runa knowledge practices. Having introduced the idea of 'forms' which, I argued, was necessary to understand the ways Runa people relate to non-human entities - in particular in cases of *paju* - I explore here the gendered dimension of knowledge. Before proceeding to a discussion of gender, it is worth recalling here my usage of 'forms' in the previous chapter. I defined as 'forms' a set of particular, stylised, movements which often become the focus of Runa knowledge practices. In the previous chapter, 'forms' mainly referred to sets of movements shared by non-human and humans alike. Thus, I called a 'shared' form the patterns which make two different entities temporarily 'alike'. Likewise, in this and the following chapters, the term 'form' indicates a movement which can be shared by a human and a non-human, or by a Runa and a non-Runa and so forth. Forms are the means by which two previously distinct entities become temporarily aligned. Thus, for example, a stranger can become a Runa by appropriating certain forms. Equally a potter can become 'knowledgeable' by imitating - and thus coming to share - the 'movements' of the Owner of Clay. I suggest that the capacity of 'sharing' forms through imitation is particularly important for becoming 'proper' Runa persons; however, this is true to a different extent for men and women.

In this chapter I argue that, while learning techniques for Runa men aim to manage and affect an interior state, for women, all pedagogic efforts are focused on the reproduction of visible beautiful forms. If men learn to be ‘proper’ persons primarily through the ingestion of substances which affect their interiority, women learn to become ‘proper’ Runa through imitating and reproducing specific movements. This difference in knowledge regimes, I argue, is based upon a priori conceptualisation of men and women as distinct kinds of beings. This chapter is thus an attempt to show how knowledge practices - which are predicated on the ability of managing and seeing resemblances - are informed by the specificity of Runa gender constructions.

This chapter thus wants to contribute to a reconsideration of the importance of gender within Amazonian anthropology. Sometimes neglected in favour of the dichotomy affinity/consanguinity, I suggest that, among the Runa, gender is key to understanding different regimes of knowledge practices as well as processes of ‘acculturation’ (see Chapter 6). However, my analysis departs from current approaches to gender in Amazonia in one important aspect. If, on the one hand, gender has received scant analytical attention in structuralist-inspired literature, on the other, ethnographers have often emphasised its processual nature, highlighting the ways ‘women’ and ‘men’ are constantly made through daily and ritual fabrication (MacCallum 2001; Santos-Granero 2009b). Paradoxically, both contrasting approaches - the one which de-emphasises gender and the one which stresses its inherently processual nature - seem to willingly circumvent the difficulties of talking about ‘essential’ or ‘given’ differences. In both cases, the failure of taking into account ‘essentialist’ constructions of gender has interesting consequences: whilst in the first approach this omission renders the association between women/consanguinity and men/affinity arbitrary, in the second one gender becomes just one of the myriad characteristics which is ‘made’ *ad libitum* throughout life.

While the Runa undoubtedly believe that men and women are made into ‘proper’ Runa through continuous practice, I also suggest that, for them, difference between men and women is not the result of an open ended process of fabrication but, rather, it is something constituted at birth. In this chapter, I will explore this difference by looking at the different knowledge practices deployed to forge ‘proper’ Runa women and men. I suggest that the difference between techniques

for teaching boys and girls to become ‘proper’ men and women can only be understood with reference to a pre-established ‘essential’ difference between the two. An analysis of such techniques reveals certain assumptions about what men and women are. In the last sections of this chapter, I suggest that, to understand the source of difference between men and women, we need to look at their different capacities for engendering novel life.

### **Of men and women**

Runa people, like many other Amazonian groups, live in a world where reciprocity and communal work between men and women is foundational not only to a good marriage but also to the sustenance of life beyond the human realm (see Mezzennanza 2014). Such equilibrium is shown in daily life, as well as in ritual activities such as the ceremonial festival (see Appendix 1). This harmonious complementarity rests upon a strict division of work where only minimal transgressions are allowed.<sup>79</sup> For the Runa, to live beautifully (*sumaclla causana*) men and women need to be industrious and good at their respective activities. In rural communities, men’s activities include hunting, fishing, building houses, clearing gardens and making specific artefacts, while for women typical occupations encompass the growing and harvesting of sweet manioc, the making of pottery and of manioc beer (*asua*).<sup>80</sup> The recurring sight of a woman fishing alone evokes in Runa minds images of abandonment and scarcity: if she is there to fish, it means that her husband cannot provide enough food for her and her children. In the same manner, a house with empty storage jars is a sad sight for any Runa onlooker.

The importance of a harmonious and symmetrical division of labour could not be stressed enough. The ‘good work’ (*alli tarabana*) of women and men is often brought as a central issue when discussing how one should live a happy life. To reach the harmonious living much desired by the Runa, from an early age, girls and boys are

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<sup>79</sup> There are cases of people who perform the opposite’s sex activities. In my fieldwork, this was the case of two unmarried men who had taken up pottery making. Whilst not stigmatised, these people were nevertheless laughed at, and became often the object of malignant speculation and gossip. These men were referred to as *huarmi illaj* (without a woman/wife) which was often translated in Spanish as *maricon* (homosexual). For similar issues amongst the neighbouring Napo Runa, see Uzendoski (2010:79–80).

<sup>80</sup> In rural communities, participation in the market economy – for example in trade and wage work – is limited but open to both men and women (see also Chapter 5).

oriented towards the development of specific gendered skills. As early as five year old, little Runa girls are expected to follow their mothers and help them in their daily tasks. Unlike girls, young boys enjoy greater freedom and are not severely reprimanded if they do not contribute to daily domestic tasks. If much of the learning is done through observation, as shown in the preceding chapter adults also deploy specific bodily techniques to shape specific selves. These aim at fostering one's strength, transforming children into knowledgeable Runa people. Whilst some of these practices are genderless, they become increasingly oriented towards the development of gendered qualities as children grow up (see also Uzendoski 2010: 76–80).

A large part of this chapter will be devoted to exploring some of these techniques, firstly by focussing on the nurturing of bravery and fierceness among young Runa men, and then, by exploring the particular *paju* (power) transmitted to young girls. These examples represent widespread instances of 'gendered' knowledge. However, I will argue that such techniques do not 'make' women and men: women and men are, for the Runa, already different at birth (or perhaps even earlier). I will suggest that, through an analysis of the different practices girls and boys undergo during their life, we can glimpse at what the Runa conceive as 'essential' or 'innate' differences between men and women. In other words, knowledge practices render manifest the different kinds of beings women and men are.

The Runa often talk about gender as if it were something 'substantial'. This characteristic had already been noticed by earlier ethnographers working in the region. For example, Guzmán relates that her Canelos Runa informants were adamant in stating that men and women possess different kinds of blood (1997:57). For example, she recounts the case of a man in Canelos who, after receiving a blood transfusion, had asked whether he had received female or male blood as he thought this could affect his personality. Similarly, my Runa research participants were often horrified at the idea that, through blood transfusion, male and female blood could get mixed and often asked me about the consequences of such abnormal blending.

But blood is not the only substance which differs for women and men. *Samai*, a term often invoked to describe the vital breath of a person, is also thought to be different

for the two sexes.<sup>81</sup> For example, Whitten (1976) writes in the 1970s that according to the Puyo Runa, a male child inherits his male ‘soul substance’ or *samai* from his father, whilst a Runa girl receives hers from the mother. Guzmán (1997) makes a similar remark for Canelos where people think that, at the moment of conception, men ‘make’ male children, whilst women ‘make’ female ones. While my own research assistants never speculated on the technicalities of procreation, they were unanimous in stating that the *samai* of men and women substantially differs: indeed, when I told some of my friends about Whitten’s reports of conception beliefs, they thought it was logical that a girl should be made by her mother, given that both possess ‘female’ blood and strength.

These substantial differences are continuously reasserted through sex-specific prohibitions. A myriad restrictions prohibit men from engaging in women’s activities, least they lose their strength and vitality. One such restriction seeks to avoid the undesirable condition of *ucatza*. During intercourse, vaginal mucus is said to accumulate inside the man’s body, thus rendering him prone to a condition called *ucatza*. *Ucatza* is a word used to refer to a man who cannot hunt or fish. Often *ucatza* is linked to excessive or unregulated sexual relationships, but it can also be associated with any polluting fluid (bloodbirth and menstruation). For example, if a man has sexual intercourse with a woman who is menstruating (*buarmi ungushca*), the smell of menstruation is said to attach itself permanently to the man’s body. Whenever he goes to the forest, animals smell him from a distance and run away.

*Ucatza* accumulates inside men’s stomachs in the form of a foamy froth. *Ucatza* needs to be expelled from the body by ingesting great quantities of emetic infusions (e.g. the *huayusa* plant). During early morning drinking of this herbal concoction, Runa men can often be seen examining scrupulously their vomit, looking for traces of froth and commenting with each other on the state of their health. But *ucatza* does not occur only with sexual penetration. When my *comadre*’s son Flavio, usually an excellent fisherman, began to return home empty handed and with a desolate expression on his face, his mother immediately linked this fact with Flavio’s new

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<sup>81</sup> Sometimes conceived as a substance, others as a ‘breath’, *samai* it is often used interchangeably with ‘knowledge’ (*yachai*). I came to understand *samai* as a ‘knowledgeable will’, one which can be strengthened throughout life but which is also somewhat ‘fixed’, having been given at birth.

'secret' girlfriend. Scolding him lightly, she commented: 'A hand which touches a woman's vagina does not work'.

To talk about 'essential' gender differences in anthropology is hazardous. In the 1990s, the important work of gender theorists and feminist anthropologists has successfully deconstructed the essentialism - and its intrinsic power structure - which permeates conception of gender and sexuality in Western societies. Within anthropology, Marilyn Strathern's work (1988) in Melanesia has questioned the meaning of gender within indigenous conceptions of the self, showing that what we straightforwardly assumed to be 'women' and 'men' was a matter of more complexity for Melanesians - one which could not be reduced to essential categories but which rather emerged from within relations.

In Amazonian ethnography too gender has been analysed through a processual, non-essentialist approach, one which often draws on Strathern's work itself (MacCallum 2001). More often, however, gender has received scant attention, being subsumed under the affinity/consanguinity dichotomy (which is itself eminently relational). Within this schema, women appear to be 'naturally' predisposed to the matters of consanguinity - in charge of making kin - whilst in turn men 'naturally' inclined to deal with affinity - through politics, hunting and feuding. This 'division of labour' is clearly enunciated by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro who, in an analysis of Amazonian kinship, suggests that:

Pure consanguinity seems only to be attainable by and among women, just as pure affinity is a male condition (Viveiros de Castro 2001: 34).

I do not wish to dispute the validity of such an assertion - which is certainly accurate in some contexts - but rather question its tautological nature. To state that among many Amazonian societies consanguinity is associated with women whilst affinity with men does not really explain why the four categories should be paired as such. The issue of 'what it is in men that turns them into a predatory force, and what it is in women that gives them such domesticatory powers' (Hernando 2010: 304) is ultimately left open.

I suggest that this tautology stems from a reluctance, on the side of ethnographers, to talk about what indigenous people think of as 'essential', 'fixed' or 'given'. The case of gender is perhaps even more special because essentialist constructions of

gender can bear a close resemblance to many well known and longstanding dichotomies (sex/gender) we recognise as ‘ours’.

If, on the one hand, this attitude can be justified by the self-awareness that we should not apply alien dichotomies to the people we study, on the other, this approach itself stems from a specific theoretical distaste towards ‘essences’, distaste which is traceable to the recent developments of post-humanist anthropology and philosophy (Barad 2007). The antipathy towards ‘essences’ or whatever is ‘fixed’ and ‘given’ becomes even more acute in cases in which others’ essentialisms come to resemble what we also think of as ‘given’ (like the difference between men and women).

As Michael Scott (2013) suggests, taking non-dualism as (theoretical) truth not only runs the danger of neglecting indigenous points of views, but also that of identifying other people’s ‘essentialisms’ with our own. Thus, in the case of gender, when faced by Runa essentialisms, we may too readily recognise in those the well-known dichotomies of sex and gender. My suggestion in this chapter is that we should attend to what Runa people think of being ‘given’ or ‘fixed’ without necessarily assuming these categories to neatly coincide with what we too think of as intractable. I will show that taking seriously Runa essentialisms enables us to observe that, if consanguinity and femininity are undoubtedly linked in the Runa case, they are not so in any straightforward way.

To state that men and women are essentially different would probably be considered by my Runa friends – and possibly also by many readers – as a truism. In this chapter I suggest that to understand this truism, we need to look at the different knowledge practices aimed at making men and women ‘proper’ people. A close analysis of such practices discloses the specific ways men and women are reputed to be more apt for certain tasks. By looking at the different pedagogic techniques and at the form these take – their aesthetics – I will draw out some unspoken assumptions on the nature of masculinity and femininity among the Runa. I begin this task by exploring, in the following sections, the particular techniques deployed by adults to transform boys into proper Runa men. In so doing, I will pay particular attention to the ideas of interiority and invisibility which inform such practices.

## Cultivating male strength

'You are a man, pull hard!' (*Cari angui, sinzhi aisangui*), shouted grandmother (*apamama*) Rosa, as she incited her grandson to pull the canoe against the currents of the river. He was struggling against the currents of water, paddling hard so that we could climb the river upwards, back home. Then *apamama* turned to me and said: 'When he was little, to make him strong I made him drink *ursa caspi* (the bark of a particular tree) so many times'. Then she added, with a reassuring tone: 'Don't be afraid! We will reach home!'

Like *apamama* Rosa who was proud of having raised a healthy and strong grandchild, most Runa parents give their male children all sorts of concoctions and substances to ingest or rub onto their skins to develop specific qualities such as fierceness and bravery. The concoctions do not only require an admirable effort from the parental side, but also a great amount of determination from children. In fact, the drinking of various herbal remedies is always followed by two or more weeks of fasting (*sasina*). This consistently excludes hot (*rupaj*), spicy (*jayaj*) and salty (*cachi*) food stuff to which one is even forbidden to get close. The boy needs to remain in a state of coolness (*chiri*) throughout this time.<sup>82</sup> The strenuous diet is accompanied by a ritual bathing in a cold stream which takes place at sunrise. Were thunder to rumble in the middle of the night, children would be sent out to bathe in the river and encouraged to hit their bodies with stones at the terrifying crack of thunder. The diet and the bathing constitute vivid memories for my male informants, who, whenever they feel unwell, resort to these strategies to 'revive' and strengthen their bodies.

If a person needs to be made 'strong', this quality goes hand in hand with the development of fierceness and bravery. The adjective to denote these states of being is *piña*. To attain this desirable state, children are made to swallow the pulverised tooth of a peccary, an animal which, when attacked by a predator, is notorious for the fierceness of its response. Elders along the Bobonaza like to recount that, in the past, when a jaguar was killed, the parents prepared a particular exercise for their children. The animal's head was severed and placed onto a pole, far from the

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<sup>82</sup> The avoidance of 'hot' stuff also applies to other contexts (e.g. healing treatments or certain *paju*). Whilst a 'thermal' theory of the body is widespread in the Andes (Bastien 1978), it is less so in an Amazonian context. See however Chiappino 1997 for similar Amazonian examples in Venezuela and the Guianas.

community. Then, they would order the children to go and pull out jaguar's whiskers by using the teeth. Many children could not bring themselves to do this. The jaguar's head, placed onto the pole, was too frightening. The ones who returned with some hair in their mouths would turn into fearless warriors and gifted hunters.

To prepare a child for dangerous forest encounters, Runa parents usually place a jaguar tooth, dipped in hot chilli, into the child's cornea.<sup>83</sup> The child will scream and cry, and remain temporarily blind for a day or so.<sup>84</sup> The application of chilli makes the child's body 'hot' so that when he walks in the forest, if a jaguar crosses his track, it will feel the heat of his body and run away with fear. Some people also claimed that, after having applied chilli pepper, if one looks straight into a jaguar's eyes, this latter will start to cry, just like the human person did when he underwent the practice.

Placing a parasite found in the eyes of toucans in the eyes of male children is also a very common practice to enhance their hind sight (see also Descola 1996). The sharp sight of the toucan (*sicuanga*) is replicated, via the parasite, in the eyes of humans. Most Runa tell that when the parasite is placed into the eye's cornea it begins to move, crawling inside the eye. It causes terrible pain and temporary blindness. Little by little, the eye gets used to the parasite and can resume its normal feeling and perception. While many people described to me the practice as unbearably painful, most of them agreed it to be also highly effective.<sup>85</sup>

All these parental techniques are aimed at fostering one's *samai* by enhancing one's qualities of fierceness and bravery. A man who is too *manso* (tame) is criticised unrelentingly by his own family and often openly laughed at. He is thought to be

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<sup>83</sup> This technique aims at preparing the male child for life in the forest and should be differentiated from the practice of applying hot chili to the eyes of unruly children as a punishment (see Uzendoski 2010:66).

<sup>84</sup> A similar technique is described by Kohn for the Ávila Runa for whom the practice serves to incorporate jaguar souls, contained in the teeth (2002: 203). Whilst no mention was made to me about the jaguar soul in the Bobonaza area, people often emphasise the role played by the hot chilli in acquiring a new, sharpened sight.

<sup>85</sup> Adults often act upon specific body parts. The eyes (*ñabui*), the knees (*cunguri*), the mouth (*shimi*), the head (*uma*), the hands (*maqui*) are body parts which progressively 'learn' through various parental techniques. Knowledge is thus not diffused through the entire body but localised in specific parts (cf. MacCallum 2001).

unable to provide his kin with meat nor defend his people from external enemies.<sup>86</sup> These particular techniques aim at fostering a fearless, brave and knowledgeable *samai*. As mentioned above, to possess ‘a strong *samai*’ is synonymous with being strong and knowledgeable. Thus, to develop a strong *samai* (as well as the capacity for managing and controlling it) is essential for becoming a competent adult. In the case of men, this entails the protection and the provision for his own kin.

It is important to note that such pedagogic techniques aim to affect an interior state. The drinking of concoctions and the application of herbal remedies are thought to effectively foster an ‘internal’ disposition, that of bravery and fierceness. This is an important point to notice, for, as I will explain below, no transformation into ‘proper’ Runa women involves practices designed to affect women’s interior dispositions. If women too possess *samai* or strength, this does not take the form of an ‘interior’ state.

In the next section, I will continue my investigation of male *samai* through an analysis of Runa ideas of a warrior male self. In particular, I will highlight how such construction is underpinned by the idea of a ‘male essence’ which often remains hidden but is bound to re-emerge when necessity arises.

## **The Good and the Wild**

During one of my stays in a village along the Bobonaza, I was sitting at dawn in my *comadre*’s kitchen, waiting for my goddaughter to walk to the swidden garden. Myriam, a cousin of my *comadre*, reached the house running and, after briefly greeting us, she asked: ‘Did you hear the radio last night?’ Her expression seemed particularly concerned. Then she continued: ‘The Achuar said that they heard too many shotguns near their territory. They said that if they encounter any people from here in their territory, they will apply their own law’. She paused for a minute, giving time for my *comadre* to digest the news. We all knew too well what ‘their own law’ meant. The problem was that three men of our family had gone hunting to

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<sup>86</sup> Admittedly, today there are many other ways for men who are not fierce enough to provide for their families. Education is such an opportunity. However, the existence of different occupations has not diminished the value of ‘fierceness’ for Runa men. The ‘parental techniques’ described above are still widely used by Runa people in rural and to a lesser extent, urban communities. Runa youths have no ‘masculinity’ crisis such as that described by High (2010) for the Waorani (see also Conclusions).

their hunting territory, on the Achuar border. The men could risk their lives if left out there unwarmed of the threatening radio message from Radio Puyo. About fifteen minutes later, Adrian, my *comadre*'s younger son, was running to bring the news to his family. He would only be returning at night because the hunting outpost was at about 8 hours walking distance. We looked at him disappearing quickly into the woods. I must have looked very worried because my *comadre*, as she saw my face, said with a reassuring voice: 'Don't worry. Our men know how to fight. Nothing will happen to them'.

This brief ethnographic moment well conveys how normal, seamless routine in a Runa village can, all of a sudden, be quickly overturned and transformed into a emotionally intense, life-threatening situation. But, most importantly, this vignette seeks also to suggest that such sudden changes are relatively 'normalised' among the Runa. Outbursts of violence are, to some extent, predictable and 'normal' events, as expressed by my *comadre*'s reassurance: 'They know how to fight'.

The warrior ethos is indeed one of the most highly valued aspects of Runa masculinity. In the Amazon, this 'warrior' type of masculinity has been described by a number of ethnographers (High 2010; Overing 1989; Rival 2005). For the Runa, like other Amazonian people, being a warrior is synonymous with being able to protect one's family against external dangers. Indeed this warrior character of Runa masculinity is best epitomised in the ritual figure of the *lancero* who makes his appearance during the annual Runa ceremony (see Appendix 1). Such warrior figure is unique within the festival context and many Runa men aspire to become, at some point during their lives, a *lancero*. The *lancero* group is composed by four men who, accompanied by their wives, perform a special dance during the festival. The *lanceros* wear headdresses made with the heads of an eagle called *acangau*. The *acangau* flies, guiding other birds, over the majestic trees of the forest: he is their owner (*amu*) for it guides them and defends them from other animals and human hunters.

*Lanceros* have an unmistakably warrior look. On their shoulders they wear stripes of a natural fibre adorned with seeds and bones (*bualinga*). Tied to their feet they wear seeds bracelets which make noise as they perform their ceremonial dance. As they dance they emit animal-like shouts whilst holding their dark wooden spades back and forth. The *lanceros* are said to descend from Runa warriors who fought against

Jivaroan peoples during the mission times. This is why *lanceros* are present in Pacayaku, Canelos and Teresa Mama, the places where the descendants of the famous Runa warrior Palate - who defeated Shuar people in the late 1800 - are said to live until these days. The wooden knives (*macana*) and the body adornments are passed on from one *lancero* to another.

According to elders living along the Bobonaza river, the *lanceros* dance used to be executed by warriors before going to a raid. The warriors would be standing in line in front of a storage jar with a child inside. They would then begin to dance slashing their knives in the air in front of the frightened child. In their exegesis of the dance, people simply told me that as the warriors danced, they 'took the enemy's soul'. Reeve (1988a) refers to the *lanceros* dance as reproducing the attack of a puma. Whitten similarly suggests that 'the dance of the *lanceros* in the ceremony represents the pre-attack pawing behavior of a snorting deer about to lower his small, sharp horns and protect his family and his territory' (1976:179).

The sight of the *lanceros* dancing has to be intimidating: drunk and aggressive, they hop back and forth, screaming with fierceness. Indeed, the *lanceros* willingly maintain an aggressive stance towards everyone during the festival. Whitten recounts of how, during the final ceremonial meal, the *lanceros* of the Bobonaza village of Pacayaku talked loudly about killing enemies and offending people of Jivaroan origin (1976:193). It is still Whitten who describes that, since not too long ago, once the priest had departed from the village, *lanceros* organised raids against Jivaroan tribe to bring the severed heads of the enemies back to their community where they would have another ceremony, the *runa buanchisha jista*, or 'the feast of killing people' (1976:179).

If the *lanceros* represent a special, and indeed, ritualised version of warriorhood, this forceful disposition is present in every Runa man, manifesting itself in different ways, on countless occasions. One day, for example, a friend who works as a leader in an indigenous organization in Puyo began recounting me how, a few years before, his family had been harmed by an evil shaman. His eldest son fell severely ill and no doctor could cure him. Suspecting of a particular shaman, he decided to go to confront him. He described this moment to me as such:

You see, I work as a leader for my people. But it is not because I wear these clothes, because I wear this watch, that people can feel safe. Because under these clothes, I am still like my elders (*rucuguna*), I am still a warrior inside. If they wake me up, I have no fear to take arms and kill them. I am not afraid of killing.

Indeed, it was through the display of this potentially ravaging will, that my friend was able to save his son. As he explained, eventually the shaman got scared by his threatening stance and renounced to his murderous plans. The sudden transformation of a quiet man into a fearsome killer is indeed a common trope of Runa masculinity. If incited to take arms to defend their families, Runa men, as I witnessed on a number of times, do not hesitate to do so. Seemingly tranquil men did not take a minute to transform into belligerent, fearsome warriors. For instance, on one occasion during a rather normal communal meeting, a leader mentioned, in passing, the possible existence of *cortacabezas* (head-cutters) in the nearby forest. Within an hour from the man's statement, all male members had gone home and collected their shotguns and munitions to prepare to 'defend' their wives and children. What struck me as an overreaction to a statement pronounced somewhat casually, was seen as legitimate response - indeed as the *only* legitimate one - by my hosts.

I will never stress enough the importance, for Runa men, of behaving with fierceness against enemy others (human and non-human) to defend and provide for their families. However, this warrior disposition is not limited to physical bravery but it rather entails many other capacities such as, for example, the ability of running fast, of promptly recognising prey, of cunningly moving in and out the forest.

More than defining exactly what masculine knowledge and dispositions consist of, I am interested here in the visual form this male strength assumes. In my examples above, as in many others I gathered during fieldwork, male strength is depicted as dormant or hidden. It is not readily visible, except when it is 'awaken'. On a daily basis, for example, Runa men struck the attention for being rather joyful, peaceful and easy going. However, as highlighted above, this peaceful character can be quickly overturned, and the person can be overcome by sudden fierceness. The warrior-like will which is hidden, but not entirely buried under the wearing of

certain clothes or a different *habitus*, is bound to explode if the circumstances dictate so.<sup>87</sup>

This movement - the latent will which surfaces when needed - bears interesting resemblance to another cultural trait ascribed to the Runa, their, so to speak, 'double face' (Whitten 1976; Taylor 2007). This designation refers to the existence of two different modalities by which the Runa have historically related with non-Runa people (and, in particular, with whites). Whitten describes this doubleness as such:

As Christianity made tenuous inroads there developed a duality of ethnic patterning between the native person of the hamlet, of 'civilization', of Christianity - Alli Runa - and the person of the forest, of the spirit-filled sentient universe - Sacha Runa (2008:53).

He links the emergence of the identity 'Alli runa' with the advent of the missions and describes it as 'the refuge zone providing a trade locus in an expanding purchase society' (1976:219). In this perspective, the Alli Runa would function as an adaptive identity which coexists alongside its forest counterpart. Whitten emphasises the consubstantiality of the two identities and, although he positions spatially the first within the realm of the Whites and the Church and the other within the space of the forest, he suggests that the dichotomy is internal rather than external, for 'Alli Runa and Sacha Runa are one and the same' (1976:219). The *sacha runa* - always present - is often 'eclipsed' (cf. Kelly 2005) by the *alli runa* aspect.

The dichotomy was later amply deployed by other ethnographers of Western Amazonia to shed light on processes of colonization and 'acculturation' (Gow 1991, 1993; Taylor 1999, 2007). The Runa dichotomy became a useful concept to define the 'two-sides' of Western Amazonian people who have established peaceful contact with colonists. For example, Anne-Christine Taylor (1999, 2007) deploys the

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<sup>87</sup> The example above mentioned cannot but call to the mind the idea of an internal 'natural' self versus a socialised cultural skin (cf. Turner 1980). However it is not my intention to draw a distinction between an authentic 'inner' self and a social clothing which covers it. For the Runa, this inner male strength and their outward behaviour coexist unproblematically. What I find interesting however, especially in the context of 'acculturation', is to see how this interiority, conspicuously absent in women, plays out (see Chapter 6).

category '*alli runa*' interchangeably with the term '*manso*' (tame) to indicate those indigenous people who, having developed a regular contact with missionaries, became cultural brokers between the world of the whites and that of the more isolated indigenous groups. In the work of Peter Gow (1993) too the figure of the *alli runa* is conflated with that of the *manso* Indian, submissive with white intruders (be these missionaries or not).

It is not my aim here to deny that Runa people might adopt strategically a 'good', submissive or victim-like attitude towards whites, downplaying their own Indianness, with the aim of obtaining goods and favours from non-indigenous people (see also Bonilla 2005; Kelly 2005; Walker 2012). Nor do I wish to neglect that the Runa might sometimes draw comparisons between themselves and other groups in terms of an opposition between wild and civilised where they inevitably identify themselves with the latter category. What I wish to suggest here is that the category *alli/sacha runa* might be an inherently gendered construct. Let me explain this.

In my fieldsites, the term *alli runa* was used mostly by my consultants to refer to a man who works hard, who brings home food and cares for his family's well-being. No explicit mention was made with regards to Christianity nor, for that matter, is *alli* (literally 'good') meant to be coterminous with *manso*, as suggested in some of the literature. On the contrary: as shown above, Runa people are openly critical towards those who are *manso*, deemed to be incapable of being true Runa men. Note thus that *alli runa* is a term which describes first and foremost a desirable masculine 'role': that of provider and carer.

On the other hand, the term *sacha runa* was hardly ever used by the Runa I worked with. The term could be jokingly used to describe an excellent hunter, or someone who could move rapidly in the forest. *Sacha runa* was thus used by the people I worked with as an expression to indicate the intimate relationship between knowledge and maleness within the dangerous domain of the forest. The capacity of being a fierce hunter and a fearless warrior are indeed capacities enhanced by knowing and being in the forest (*sacha*). Could it be argued, then, that the dichotomy *alli Runa/sacha runa* is an expression of the two contrasting poles of

Amazonian masculinities (Rival 2005), corresponding respectively to the affectionate, tranquil husband and father and to the fierce warrior/hunter?

From an aesthetics perspective, the image of an ‘inner’ side beneath one’s good appearance, susceptible to reemergence when needed, is common to both cases. The alternation between a state of *alli runa* and *sacha runa* seems to correspond to a dynamic between two different - yet coexisting - states of ‘maleness’. Indeed it is conceivable to see this male inner strength as the *sacha runa* ‘side’ of Runa men, latent but ready to ‘come out’ when the circumstances require so. Whitten’s suggestion about the internal character of the dichotomy *sacha runa/alli runa* is certainly valid: however, I would add that such doubleness stems a gendered construction of the self, rather than from an encounter with Christianity.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps the gendered character of the dichotomy could be enlightened with a concrete example. Due to their nature, Runa men, like their Achuar kin and neighbours (Descola 2001), are thought to be prone to outbursts of forceful will. For example, when I asked my friend why her father, being otherwise a very calm and pious man, became so violent to her mother and to other people when he got drunk, she laconically answered that he had killed an anaconda many years earlier and that, instead of cutting the head and bury it far away, he just left the dead animal there. The anaconda had then resuscitated and he, in turn, had become subjected to these fits of madness. From then on every time he gets drunk he has an ‘attack’ which makes him lose his mind and mistreat whoever is around him. The power of the anaconda overcomes his full persona. When I questioned my friends on whether women could be similarly overwhelmed by craziness after having failed to bury an anaconda, all of them admitted that this had never happened. What my friends doubted was not a woman’s capacity for killing an anaconda (there were certainly some grandmothers fierce enough to do that), but rather the reaction which a misplaced burial would ensue into a woman. Could she go crazy and violent? Most decidedly not, concluded my friends. The eruption of violence does

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<sup>88</sup> This is not to deny that Runa people may readily identify some of the good qualities which make a *alli runa* as Christian. However, people equally identify as morally ‘good’ many of the qualities which characterise a *sacha runa*.

not emerge from the anaconda's action *per se*, rather, this latter 'activates' a will which is already potentially there, in a man's body.<sup>89</sup>

At this point, it is important to notice the conspicuously absence of any similar idea of 'strength' amongst women. Whilst women are certainly strong, their strength is not manifested in the same way. Even in the case of extraordinary fierce women, their outspokenness is not understood as stemming from a warrior-like inside, nor would they be justified in case they 'lost control'. The dichotomy *sacha huarmi* / *alli huarmi* seems bizarre if applied to women. If an *alli huarmi* - namely, a 'good' woman who works hard and cares for her children - certainly exists as an ideal for Runa people, nobody expects Runa women to possess an internal aspect corresponding to *sacha huarmi*. *Sacha huarmi* or woman of the forest, is only used - interchangeably with the word *supai* (forest spirit) - to refer to female forest spirits. Whilst the implications of being a *sacha runa* are immediately clear, given the relationship between men and the forest domain, those of being a *sacha huarmi* (if such a thing ever existed) are definitely more ambiguous. Most importantly, no pedagogic practice is undertaken to create in women an internal disposition or an internal 'substance' little affected, as in the above example of the indigenous leader, by external changes. This difference becomes all the more striking if we compare the practices described so far with the ones through which Runa girls are thought to become 'proper' women. I now explore this difference by bringing as an example the commonest practice through which women become knowledgeable and strong. This transformation takes place when they receive the *lumu paju*, the 'power' of manioc.

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<sup>89</sup> What I have outlined here might, at a first look, resemble Rival's (2005) description of the predatory life force *pii*, among the Waorani. She describes *pii* as an attack of furious madness, to which Waorani men can sometimes succumb. When overwhelmed by *pii*, Waorani men can end up committing ferocious killings. The states I am describing here are not 'institutionalised' to the extent of being classified as a condition, like *pii* in the Waorani case. This male strength - which lacks any specific designation - can only be glimpsed by witnessing the informal yet usual instances in which it outbursts or, as in the case of my friend above, when it is willingly put into display. Even without a name, like in the Waorani case, this strength is undoubtedly there.

## **Reproducing women's knowledge**

On a morning of August 2012, I was accompanying grandmother Digna, her daughter, daughter-in-law and granddaughters to plant manioc to the swidden garden we had recently finished to clear. This had taken us over two weeks of felling trees, cutting weeds and burning. We had spent the last three days cutting manioc stems from an old garden to carry them to the new one, which was located about forty minutes downriver.

On that morning, once we reached the garden, each of us dropped the manioc stems on the soil and we began to cut them in smaller pieces, gathering them in a pile. I had noticed that, at home, Digna had filled her old bag with a ceramic pot and some plants of an unidentified origin. I had quickly forgotten of this detail in the rush to carry the manioc stems to the canoe: it was only when she made her appearance holding the drinking bowl and some annatto (*manduru*) in her hands that I realised that she was going to plant the manioc (*lumuta tarpuna*) using her power of manioc (*lumu paju*). With tranquility, Digna proceeded to mix the annatto seeds in the bowl along with two kinds of leaves (*lumu lisan* and *lumucha ulla*) in an old ceramic drinking bowl brought for the occasion. She immersed her thumb and index finger and painted our faces with the red mixture. Then she took some papaya branches, dipped them into the liquid and began to whip the bundles of manioc. It was then that her daughter-in-law, an irreverent and playful woman I had recently become *comadre* with, shouted at me: 'Take *paju* *comadre*, take *paju*! Ask the grandmother for it' (*Pajuta apingui comadre, pajuta apingui! Tapui apamamata! Ajajajajiiii!*). As she was telling me that, she opened and closed her arms like in a hug, encouraging me to imitate the gesture and to grab the grandmother's arms from behind. But I did not grab Digna's arms. Having noticed my reluctance, my *comadre* directly addressed her mother in law, telling her in a joking manner: 'Give her *paju*. Don't be stingy. Why are you so stingy to us? (*Pajuta ama mitsanguichu, imangabua ñucanchita mitsanguichu?*)'. Then she looked at me disapprovingly and said, shaking her head: 'You should have taken it *comadre*'.

Unlike the *paju* I analysed in Chapter 2, this kind of *paju* belongs to a different category, one which I call ‘*paju* of power’.<sup>90</sup> When the Runa say that someone ‘holds’ *paju*, like in the above example, they refer to the holding of a special capacity. However, as I will show, what exactly a ‘*paju* of power’ consists of is not so straightforward.

In the episode mentioned above, the ‘power’ my *comadre* was urging me to take is, undoubtedly, the most important a Runa woman can hold. The most desired of all women’s *paju*, the ‘power’ of manioc gives a woman the ability of growing healthy and large manioc. If a girl wants to acquire this power, she needs to firmly grab the arms of a woman who already ‘holds’ this power. The young woman has to follow the movements of the *paju* holder as she ‘bathes’ and whips the manioc with the red juice. Upon termination, the person who is receiving *paju* needs to ingest ten tiny balls of wild tobacco. These have a very strong taste and make one ‘drunk’ (*machashca*), sometimes causing the person to vomit out the content of her stomach. After the ingestion of tobacco, the receiver needs to pull the fingers of the other woman, one by one, until each of them emits a cracking sound (*tias tias tias*).

A few months after I witnessed Digna’s ritual bathing I visited another garden, with a friend and her mother, in the nearby village of Canelos. We had just finished carrying new manioc stems to the garden when my friend’s mother made her appearance carrying some annatto. ‘Ah!’, I exclaimed with surprise; ‘You have the power of manioc (*lumu paju*)!’. The woman looked at me and shook her head. ‘No, I don’t’. She then continued to bathe the manioc stems, following the same procedure I was familiar with. I watched her, bewildered: how could she do the bathing and so on and *not* hold the power of manioc? Wasn’t the power of manioc just *that*?

This episode left me wondering for some time. I had imagined *paju* to be the set of prohibitions and ritual practices which surrounded the planting of manioc. For instance, I had thought that the ‘power of manioc’ resided in the ritual bathing and whipping with annatto. But I was mistaken: as my teacher in garden matters, Cecilia, explained candidly to me, one can ‘hold’ the power of manioc - and thus

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<sup>90</sup> Even if the Runa themselves do not deploy a different terminology, they nevertheless recognise the different nature of the *paju* I am describing here.

grow large tubers - without necessarily undergoing the whole business of bathing, whipping, etc. But then, I asked myself, if none of these practical activities surrounding the growing or making of things was *paju*, then, what was *it*? What did this *paju* consist of? To answer this question I suggest that we need to look at the only thing all the different *paju* of power share: their peculiar mode of transmission.<sup>91</sup> It is worth then focusing on this exact moment to see what this might reveal to us.

Despite the relative orthodoxy of the practice, Runa views on the matter of *paju* transmission are discordant. For example, some people declared that the ingestion of tobacco and/or the cracking of fingers are not essential for an efficacious transmission of this power. A few Runa women even conjectured that these might have been practices invented by those who are *mitsa* (stingy), purposefully creating obstacles to avoid passing their knowledge on to others. On the contrary, everyone was unanimous in stating that what matters most, for *paju* to be acquired, is the replication of the movements of the elder's body.

I became myself increasingly aware of the potency of the moment of imitation one day, as I was sitting in Maria's kitchen, making pots. She had given up the 'traditional' Runa pattern of pottery drawing (see Chapter 3 and 4) and instead she was trying to draw the figure of a monkey on her pot, admittedly with very poor results. Her cousin, who was sitting nearby, stopped painting her own bowl and stood behind Maria to watch her drawing. Then, she suddenly grabbed Maria's arm from behind and with a grin she muttered: 'What a wonderful design! Give it to me, give it to me'. The sudden gesture provoked everyone's hilarity: the irony resided in the fact that the cousin, in grabbing Maria's arm, was making fun of her scarce ability at drawing. She did so by reproducing the moment of *paju* transmission: holding Maria's arm, she ironically begged to receive her power at drawing ill-shaped monkeys.

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<sup>91</sup> I have here limited myself to a description of the *paju* of manioc. There are many more of such *paju* which can be transmitted from one person to the other. They all differ for purpose but unanimously share the same mechanism of transmission: the holding of arms and the replication of movements.

The saliency of ‘mimicking’ for *paju* transmission is more visible in instances in which the replicated patterns involve a succession of movements. For example, during the Runa ceremonial festival, when women helpers finish to chew manioc, they ask an old grandmother to store the purée in the storage jars. When the grandmother leans forward to fill the inside of the jar with the manioc mass, a young woman grabs her two arms from behind and begs her to bestow her with *paju*. As the grandmother slowly fills the jar, the girl never loses hold of her and accompanies her movements. She squats on the floor to gather the manioc purée as the grandmother does, then stands up again, whilst holding her arms. She gently fills the manioc inside the jar until this is full. Once the process is over, the *paju* is transmitted: just like old grandmothers know how make fine manioc beer in large quantities, so will the girls who have ‘learnt’ their movements.

It is obvious here that we are dealing here with mimesis or the replication of another’s person movements. The role played by mimesis in learning has been thoroughly explored in anthropology and beyond. In Amazonia, ethnographers have long noticed the importance of mimesis at a cosmological and mundane level (Choquevilca 2012; Lagrou 2007b). Regional ethnography is full of such references. For example, Gow (1999:241) reports that, among the Piro, the verbs ‘to teach’ and ‘to imitate’ are expressed by the same word. Amongst the Runa themselves, imitation is an essential learning tool. Children are expected to mimic their parents to become knowledgeable adults, given the little deployment of verbal exegesis. Young girls go with their mothers to the garden and help her to make manioc beer since a very early age. They often also take care of their younger siblings by imitating what their mothers do. Similarly, boys walk in the forest with their fathers, listening to the various sounds, looking at traces on the ground, whilst following closely the movements of the adults.

Amongst the Runa, the widely known story of the bird *Chaua Mango* is perhaps the clearest example where the relationship between knowledge and imitation becomes clear. Marcia, a forty year old woman from Pacayaku, recounted this story to me:

*Chaua Mango* was a human person (*Chaua mango Runa*). With other Birds-Humans, *Urcu Pacui*, *Chiali*, *Urcu picchin*, *Palanda pishcu*. They all sang very well. But *Chaua Mango* was the one who learnt the songs faster

(*buairashina yachara taquinata*) and he imitated all the songs by the other shamans (*brujo taquishca shinallata Chaua Mango*). The other Birds-Human-Shamans put him inside a *tinaja* because they didn't want him to learn all the songs. Then all the youth transformed into birds, ones into toucans, into the present day birds. Nobody could learn like him. Chaua Mango too, inside the *tinaja*, had become a bird. He too flew away. Because of this, he now can repeat all sounds.

*Chaua Mango* was the most powerful of the shamans because he could learn (*yachara*) the shamanic songs very quickly. He would imitate (*shinallata*) the songs so well that he was trapped in a storage jar (*tinaja*) by the other envious birds. By reproducing the shamans' songs, the bird had become knowledgeable. Today you can hear *Chaua Mango* songs as he flows from a tree to another, imitating perfectly the sounds of other birds. *Chaua Mango*'s most valued quality is its mimetic ability, which is translated directly in Quichua as 'knowledge'.

Indeed the story of the *Chabua Mango* as well as the peculiar transmission of *paju* could be read as metaphorical parables which highlight the importance of mimesis for acquiring knowledge. However, I suggest that the example of *paju* offers us something beyond this understanding of mimesis. In the case of *paju*, we are faced with a rather different concept of mimesis. In this case, mimesis is not a means through which knowledge can be acquired, but rather, mimesis is that knowledge itself. Holding a grandmother's arm as she fills the inside of a storage jar does not 'teach' you to fill the jar with beer by virtue of an attention to its technicalities. It is not 'normal' learning based upon observation and imitation. Rather, knowledge resides in the movements themselves. By replicating these movements, one automatically acquires *paju*, or knowledge. The replication itself *is* knowledge. The *paju* example requires us to erase the distance between imitation and knowledge.

If knowledge is imitation, what ultimately counts in order to be knowledgeable is to make this visible. In other words, the conflation of mimesis with knowledge prompts us to consider another important issue: the apparent lack of interest shown by my Runa consultants for 'inner' states of knowledge. An example from fieldwork perhaps will elucidate the contrast. My hosts would often indulge in taking pictures of me, carrying a basket with the string over my forehead, or in the

moment I was peeling manioc, in the desperate attempt to imitate the confident gestures of other women whilst trying not to slice my fingers off. 'These pictures', they assured me enthusiastically; 'will show your mother how much you know now!' I felt deeply embarrassed by their enthusiasm for these portraits, which I found like a caricature of both myself and the Runa. For my Runa friends, however, the picture of myself replicating some salient movements, was the visible proof of all the knowledge I had so far acquired. Whilst I thought that I was just imitating 'real' knowledge (knowledge which I hadn't interiorised), to them, the simple fact that I was following specific movements meant that I indeed knew. Little mattered how I felt: my feeble assertions of ignorance were swiftly dismissed by my Runa friends who, at various stages of my fieldwork, always insisted that I truly knew, even when I felt totally helpless. My knowledge was visible in the forms I was replicating.

Leaving aside the interiorization of knowledge which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 6, I now want to notice some salient characteristics of the *paju* described above. The first one concerns its gendered character. This particular *paju* - as most *paju* of power - is transmitted from women to other women, and, more specifically, from grandmothers (*apamamas*) to younger women. Although men do have some *paju* involving a similar technique, these latter are not described as foundational for the constitution of one's knowledge and, certainly, not in the way the *paju* of manioc is for Runa women.<sup>92</sup> But *lumu paju* is not the only instance in which we can witness a stress upon women's reproduction of visible movements or patterns - what I call 'forms' in this thesis. As I will show in the following chapters of this thesis, women's life revolves around the proper replication of forms.

With this observation, I do not wish to imply that the idea behind the acquisition of *paju* (mimesis = knowledge) is restricted to women but rather to notice that the process of reproducing visible forms is more conspicuous in women's realm. As I will suggest in the following chapters, the learning of pottery making is indeed a primary example of the capacity of reproducing 'proper' visible forms. I suggest that it is exactly the *visibility of knowledge* which differentiates Runa men and

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<sup>92</sup> To my knowledge, only *barbascu paju* (*paju* of barbasco) and *sara paju* (*paju* of maize) involve a similar process of imitation. One important exception to this is the *paju* for curing illnesses in which the person who wishes to acquire it needs to grab the donor's arms. However, this latter is a specialised *paju*, distinguishable from the kinds of *paju* described so far in this thesis.

women knowledge practices. This, in conjunction with the lack of emphasis on women's creation of an interior, hidden forceful will suggests to me that, beyond strikingly different knowledge regimes, lay different assumptions about what women and men are and what they should be 'naturally' apt to do.

In fact, the difference in body techniques not only suggests that girls and boys need to learn different tasks to become 'proper' Runa men and women but also, more importantly, that *women and men need to be affected differently because their 'nature' is different*. So far I have only mentioned briefly that the Runa often distinguish between the life strength, blood and other substances of men and women. Where is, however, the original locus of such difference? In the following section I will explore this question by highlighting the emphasis Runa people place upon women's relationship to the babies (and things) they grow.

### **Reproducing difference**

Whenever I enquired my friends on the difference between men and women, they would promptly point to a fundamental, distinguishing factor: the different reproductive capabilities of the two and, in particular, their role in procreation. In Quichua, the common expression for making babies is 'placing the baby' (*buahuata churana*). The expression refers to the male action of placing the 'seed' in a woman's womb. In this sense, men are seen as the necessary stimulus for a pregnancy to occur. Accordingly, women can complain that their husbands never stop 'placing children' into their bellies, while men proudly enumerate the children they have 'placed' (see also Belaunde 2001). Nonetheless, despite the linguistic expressions stressing paternal conception, as I will show below this is the only instance in which emphasis is placed upon a paternal creative act. In fact, Runa people emphatically claim that it is the woman, successively, who makes the baby in the womb, gives him birth and thus 'owns' him. Whilst generally the Runa display very little interest for the details of conception, they are fond of talking about the process of gestation and giving birth.

In particular, the event of giving birth is a source of wonder and excitement for everyone. Childbirth usually takes place in the privacy of the parturient's house, where she is assisted by female kin. Although there are not formal prohibitions

against witnessing childbirth, very few men do. The majority of the men I worked with preferred to spend time out of the house because, as one explained to me: 'we are scared' (*mangiarishca*). Many Runa men expressed this fear, as well as the feeling of disorientation they felt during the birth of their children. 'I didn't know what to do, so I stayed outside', was my neighbour's answer to my question of why he didn't help his wife during labour. Women's exclusive capacity for giving birth (and the consequences this entails) are the subject of both intellectual and emotional engagement for Runa men. Consider the following example.

One day, during a walk to the village centre, my host Diego and I came across a couple who was fighting loudly in the middle of the track. It had been well known for a while that the couple was about to separate: the fight we witnessed represented one of their last outbursts of rage. Their children and with whom they should live after the separation were the issue at stake in the discussion. The man insisted that, in case of separation, his newborn son should stay with him, rather than with the boy's mother. The woman, outraged, answered him fiercely:

From me [my body] the baby came. I am the mother [so] he will stay with me.

The man lowered his head with shame and went away silently. As we proceeded walking, my host, usually an irreverent and loquacious man, kept quiet for an unexpectedly long period of time. After a while, he sighed and commented to me:

This is what scares us [men] about women. She said she is the mother, the baby came from her, so she will keep it. It is hers. What can we do? We might feel sad, but we have to keep quiet.

In this example, the issue of creation as a distinguishing factor between men and women comes forcefully. *Men do not 'create' as women do* and, for this reason, as my friend affirmed, 'we have to keep quiet'.<sup>93</sup> I will return to the issue of 'keeping quiet' later in the chapter. I want for now consider the ways in which the episode of the fight described above made my friend pensive about his own relationship to his children. He emphasised the qualitative difference of 'ownership' for women-as-

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<sup>93</sup> Women's 'innate' capacity for engendering forms are, as I show below, a reason for which they might claim exclusive ownership over their children. Men may suffer for this, as in the example offered earlier, but also often take this as a justification for not taking care of their own children, leaving them with their mothers.

mothers versus men-as-fathers.<sup>94</sup> In particular, he stressed that maternal ownership can not be disputed as the child comes from the woman's body. This example reveals the peculiar status of Runa women as privileged owners vis-à-vis men.

In her work in Canelos, Guzmán cogently observes that Runa women, unlike men, 'own' virtually all foods (be it manioc beer or meat) which enter the household (1997:126). Wives are practically entitled to all the meat (amongst other things) obtained by their husbands. As soon as a man returns from a hunting trip, he promptly hands all the meat over to his wife, saying: 'take your meat' (*canba aichata apingui*). Were he wanting to give any meat to his female relatives, he should suggest this to the wife who would be ultimately in charge of taking the decision and giving it away. In my fieldsites, men often emphasised their wives' status of owners by calling them explicitly *dueñas* in presence of visitors. Indeed, I was always referred to the *dueña*, whenever I wanted to borrow something from the house or talk about household matters. Being in control of the flow of goods which enters and exits the house, Runa wives have also a key role in producing sociality with outsiders through the drinking of manioc beer and the cooking of meat (see Chapter 5). Guzmán finds in this special status of wives-as-owners the reason for the widespread criticism to which newly wedded women are subjected by their in-laws.

Accusations from parents-in-law to daughters-in-law of being *quilla* (lazy) and *mitsa* (stingy) are by far the most common complaints by in-laws in both urban and rural communities. I always found these complaints particularly striking given that the majority of young women who were being criticised seemed to me indefatigable and generous towards their husband's kin. Both epithets, *quilla* (lazy) and *mitsa* (stingy), refer to key concepts in the making and the circulation of substances. The first, *quilla* denotes the absence of work and it is, by far, the worst insult any Runa, male or female, could receive. *Mitsa*, on the other hand, indicates an unwillingness to distributing substances and things generously. Whilst such accusation can be directed towards son-in-laws, throughout my fieldwork, whenever I heard such remarks, they always targeted women. In Guzmán's analysis, women, due to their

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<sup>94</sup> Ownership is expressed by the Runa using the possessive adjective, *ñuca* before the object owned, or by using the Spanish derived name for 'owner', *amu*.

special place within the flow of things, are thus more liable to be targeted with accusations of stopping or impeding the flow towards in-laws.<sup>95</sup>

This sociological fact is based upon *a priori* conceptualisation of women and men as different kinds of makers. This difference also entails an asymmetry within the apparent complementarity of Runa marriages. This imbalance is forcefully brought to light by posing a question: given that women are the legitimate owners of anything which enters the household (and especially of meat), could we advance the argument that men too 'own' their wives' manioc beer? I believe the idea would be totally unconceivable to most of my Runa friends. A woman is the *amu* or *dueña* of the meat she receives from her husband but she is even more so of her manioc beer and pottery. This is true notwithstanding that manioc beer is univocally said to be made for male desire - and Runa women are unequivocal about that. Men can never 'give' away manioc beer as a gift like women do with meat when they decide to give it to other kin or neighbors.<sup>96</sup> Manioc beer always belongs ultimately to its 'mother' (*mama*) who is the one who transforms cooked manioc with her saliva. Whilst meat is 'taken' by men from somewhere else, the forest (*sacha*), manioc beer, just like pottery, is created by women from their own bodies (see below and Chapter 4).<sup>97</sup> Beer and pottery are, in this sense, inalienable possession. This is further evidenced by usage of a maternal idiom to refer to both manioc and pottery (cf. Uzendoski 2004), which is unparalleled in men's realm. If women occupy a special place in the circulation of things, they do so, I suggest, because of their exceptional status as generatrices.

Indeed, an ulterior hint that the difference between men and women may be directly linked to women's capacity for engendering novelty out of their bodies was

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<sup>95</sup> It is interesting to notice the different kind of counsel men and women receive during the preparations for the ceremonial festival (see Appendix 1). Whilst men are only admonished to avoid fighting, women are advised not to be lazy nor stingy. The specific warnings are thought to temper the naturalness of such gendered tendencies.

<sup>96</sup> Even in the case of working parties (*minga*), where men often serve their wives' manioc beer to the female and male visitors, the beer ultimately belongs to the woman maker.

<sup>97</sup> Indeed, Guzmán herself points to this difference when she writes that the act of hunting is fundamentally different from that of planting of manioc. See the following paragraph:

Like the relationship between manioc and its female grower, the relationship between the hunter and its prey is important, but different. Hunting is conceived as an act through which a man takes a forest animal to kill it without this entailing a process of creation of the prey. Men, unlike women, do not contribute to the growing of animals (1997: 75, my translation).

given to me in the field by some elderly grandmothers from Canelos. They claimed that fully grown up women possess ten souls whilst men only have one or few more.<sup>98</sup> When I asked for the reasons behind this difference, none of the *apamamas* showed any hesitation: women are born with many souls because they will give birth to children.<sup>99</sup> The surplus souls are explicitly linked to women's capacity for parturition. This is why, according to my older informants (some of which were men), women have always been discouraged from becoming shamans: their many souls represented a tremendous, yet dangerous advantage in shamanic warfare. With an excess of souls, women could have been much stronger than men in their visions and powers.<sup>100</sup>

With this emphasis on the role of women as generatrices, I do not wish to suggest that men do not engender novelty. They surely do, but in strikingly different ways. When men make canoes or baskets, or 'place a baby' into a woman's womb, they are undoubtedly involved in the process of making new 'things'. However, Runa men do not deploy an idiom of fatherhood to talk about the things they make nor do they conceptualise things as coming out of their bodies (like in the case of clay as I will show in the next chapter). Making things is rather depicted as a process where strength and vitality need to be continuously tested and controlled. It is another kind of 'making', one which does not share the form of 'growing'. On the other hand, women's object-making is never presented as the result of a dangerous struggle with multiple forces. Instead, a 'maternal' idiom suffuses all the pottery and agricultural work done by women. Thus, women may refer to manioc as their children, or might weep over a broken tinaja 'as if they lost a child'.

As I noted earlier, many ethnographers have noticed the correlation between women and consanguinity in Amazonia. In her work on Achuar kin terminology, Anne-Christine Taylor (1983) demonstrates how men relate to other men in affinal terms and modes, whilst women often act as 'operators' to transform affinal relationships into consanguinal ones. Her important work was later used by Descola

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<sup>98</sup> Powerful shamans similarly possess a multiplicity of souls which they acquire, throughout their lives.

<sup>99</sup> Some women claimed that these multiple souls are then passed on to the children.

<sup>100</sup> Interestingly this resonates with the widespread idea in the region that female shamans are much more dangerous than male ones (cf. Guzmán 1997; see also Perruchon 2003 for the Shuar).

(2001) as evidence to support his argument that gender, in indigenous Amazonia, is encompassed by the consanguinity/affinity dichotomy. However, if the Achuar case could be applied to the Runa in many instances, the relationship between consanguinity and femininity is not straightforward. In the first place, Runa women, unlike their Achuar counterparts, do not 'consanguinise' affines by manipulating kinship terminology. Both men and women call their female and male affines respectively as *cachun* (daughter-in-law or sister-in-law) and *masha* (brother-in-law or son-in-law). Men, instead, use the term *ala* (mythic brother, see Whitten 1976) to refer to other men - be they kin or non-kin. Women never use the term *ala* and call non-kin simply by first name.

The only realm where women indeed 'consanguinise' is that of pottery and beer making, as I will show throughout the thesis. This is due however not to a propensity to follow an abstract idea of consanguinity, but rather because of the 'shared form' of technical processes of pottery making and the process of growing children, as I will show in Chapter 4. Motherhood, in this case, becomes a template for thinking about craftsmanship.

Most importantly perhaps, the association between femininity and consanguinity does not preclude women from entering 'outside' realms and actively participate in them as it is the case in other Amazonian contexts. As I will show in Chapter 5, amongst the Runa, unlike in other parts of Amazonia, women play a major role in dealing with the 'outside', the non-Runa world of whites, *mestizos* and other indigenous people. Interestingly, it is by virtue of the things made out of their own bodies that Runa women can interact with this 'outside' world.

The external/internal dichotomy and its relationship to gender is an interesting perspective through which we can look at difference between women and men. Throughout the chapter I have highlighted the fact that male knowledge does not need to be always visible. Equally, the techniques by which knowledge is strengthened do not aim at producing immediately visible effects. In this sense, male knowledge almost seems to be immune to external influences. It remains hidden and safe. On the other hand, women's knowledge exists only insofar as it is visible through specific movements (as in the case of *lumu paju*).

This aesthetics of knowledge has important consequences for the different ways men and women are reputed to be knowledgeable. I was always struck by the fact

that my Runa friends never questioned the knowledge of Runa men who have decided to live away from their natal communities. I had expected, recalling other Amazonian examples (cf. Gow 1991), 'Runaness' to be constituted by continuous social interaction and food sharing, rather than by some sort of 'essence'. However, men who came back to the communities after living in the city for a long time were never reputed of having 'lost' their knowledge or Runaness, even in the most extreme cases in which they could no longer hunt. In people's discourses, going to live far away never initiated, at least amongst Runa men, a radical transformation. The opposite, however, is true for women: those women who, having spent years living away, return to their communities are often openly criticised for their incapacity at doing female tasks. It thus seems that two different regimes of knowledge apply to men and women. The latter, unlike their male counterparts, in order to be knowledgeable need to constantly make it visible to everyone. I would suggest that we can understand this process of exteriorization of knowledge only by linking it to the uniquely female capacity for bringing babies out of their bodies.

The possibility of engendering 'new' forms - the issue of *creation* - seems to be conceptualised by the Runa as an intrinsic, a 'given' characteristic of women. The movement towards the exterior - the giving birth - is simultaneously a process of bringing forth, and thus of making things *visible*.<sup>101</sup> I think women are involved in a similar process with regards to knowledge. Knowledge happens on the 'surface' and it is only recognised insofar as it is visible to others. Rather than simple physiological difference or 'sex', it is this movement outwards - 'on the body and from it' - which distinguishes women from men. Be these movements pots, children or designs, women's role seems to make these 'things' visible for others to see.

This difference should not be underestimated because Runa people themselves take it very seriously. In fact, the difference between men and women might sometimes go even further than that between Runa and non-Runa people. I would go as far as

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<sup>101</sup> I am here at pains for finding the right words. My term 'exterior', for example, seems to presuppose an 'interior' self. Read under this light, what gets materialised in 'external' practice seems to stem from an unconscious knowledge, in a manner reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1977) *habitus*. However as I specify in Chapter 6, this would deeply misrepresent Runa people's conception of knowledge. At any rate, if there is a repository of 'true' hidden knowledge this is not to be located within the individual mind but rather in the world as seen through *ayahuasca* visions. Here I rather wish to stress that for women knowledge only exists in 'movements': it is 'exteriorizing' insofar as such knowledge is visible and leaned towards the 'others' (see the case of designs in Chapter 5).

stating that there is no such a thing as a 'Runa knowledge' disjuncted from gender and sexuality. Even when certain basic assumptions about what knowledge is are shared unanimously by all people (see Chapters 2 and 6), different knowledge regimes apply for men and women. This becomes evident in the reluctance which often accompanied assertions about the other sex's competencies. While among the Runa a man often shares the knowledge and competencies of the other sex - albeit he does not put it into practice - a silent respect was always observed for each other's knowledge. Whenever I enquired on women's pottery, for example, I could eventually elicit some information from male consultants but, more often than not, men would accompany their thoughts with an humble admission of ignorance. For example, when I enquired a friend about the shape of the *tinaja*, he answered me:

I don't know really. I think that when a woman sees it, she might feel happy thinking about childbirth. But I don't know, I am not a woman.  
You should ask a woman.

Another said, answering my question of what pottery designs meant for him:

You know, you should be asking a woman. I don't really know much about this. You yourself know better!

On countless occasions I heard this refrain: 'as a woman' - and one which had been initiated to Runa knowledge - I was in a better position to talk about pottery matters than Runa men themselves. To be clear, it was only because I had been taught 'to see' (for example, the 'proper' shape of a storage pot) that my friend assumed I would know better. Nevertheless, in my friend's answer there was also the implicit assumption that *as a woman* I could be able to discern the 'maternal' character of the *tinaja* in a way which was not readily available to him. Unexpectedly, I faced the importance of gendered difference when investigating on the multiple souls of women. I had asked an elderly Runa woman how many souls would I, a white woman, have. She looked at me perplexedly for a moment and then said: 'Ten, like us'. Surprised by her answer, I asked her: 'Even if I am not Runa?' 'Of course', she replied emphatically: 'You are a woman. You can give birth!'

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to delineate the different knowledge regimes which exist for Runa men and women. In particular I highlighted how for the latter to be knowledgeable consists in making 'knowledge' visible via the imitation and reproduction of specific movements, whilst for the former knowledge is something more 'essential' which does not necessarily become 'visible'. I suggested that this difference can be linked to local conceptualisation of gender and, in particular, to the special role women occupy within reproduction. It is as if the innate capacity of women of making things out of their own bodies - like in the case of birth where the child suddenly 'appears' out of her mother's body - made them more 'suitable' to deal with reproducing 'visible' knowledge.

This suggestion goes against the argument recently advanced by Fernando Santos-Granero (2009a) a propos of Amazonia that an 'artefactual' mode of production may serve as the model for thinking about the making of people. Instead, in line with Paolo Fortis' (2014) suggestion, I too argue that, for the Runa, it is childbearing which functions as the prototype for craftsmanship. As I will show in greater depth in the following chapters, the Runa often conceive of these two processes as coterminous; making children and things share the same 'form', that of growing. The likeness of different processes and entities is continuously constituted and reasserted through manual practice. Pottery making is the realm where the 'shared form' of motherhood and craftsmanship becomes manifest. In the next chapter I will focus on such quintessentially feminine activity, exploring the process by which women, through the making of pottery, come to perceive their own bodies and movements as similar to those of others.

## A first encounter with pottery: A Prelude

*'Upi upi upi!' (Drink! Drink! Drink!)*

*Clemencia draws the drinking bowl closer to my face and forcefully pours a river of strong manioc beer down my throat and my dress. In a glimpse - around me the circles of dancers and drummers - I see the shiny black and white patterns of an amarun (anaconda) painted on the mucabua. I also notice the head of the anaconda, graciously sticking out from inside the bowl and, even if I am not in control of my senses - my mind overwhelmed by the beer and the incessant drumming - I cannot but admire the subtle beauty of this fragile drinking bowl.*

Pottery is a powerful tangible medium through which the visitor or the anthropologist comes to know Runa people. Often it is to buy the perfectly shaped, beautifully decorated drinking bowls and figurines that non-Runa people eventually engage in relationships with Runa women. Used to cook, store and serve manioc beer, pottery is a ubiquitous presence among the Runa of Pastaza. A primary female activity - one which occupied most of the time of my Runa female friends - pottery making is deeply connected to ideas of beauty as well as properness and knowledge. As such, it offers a fertile ground for both the Runa and the anthropologist to draw connections. The following chapters (Chapters 4 and 5) explore such connections and, more specifically, the ones Runa people draw between pottery and women's bodies.

In this brief introductory section I begin exploring Runa pottery making by giving an account of a 'first encounter' with clay. These first encounters are marked by the presence of *mangallpa apamama*, the Grandmother and owner of Clay.<sup>102</sup> To talk about Runa pottery without mentioning the Grandmother of Clay (or grandmothers more generally) would be impossible. Thus, before moving to the central and more analytical chapters on pottery making, in the following section I seek to slowly introduce the reader to the world of Runa pottery by giving an

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<sup>102</sup> This is the spirit of clay which Whitten (1978) calls *manga allpa mama*.

account of the relationship which links pots, young women, grandmothers and the Grandmother of Clay.

### **Meeting the *apamama***

Grandmother (*apamama*) says that here lives the owner of clay. She is a small woman with long white hair. She is the one who takes care of this place. We should be careful not to make noise nor to leave rubbish around here.

So Beatriz told me, passing a hand on her forehead, obviously fatigued by the long digging on the river shore. We had left the community few days earlier to reach a hunting outpost few hours downriver. From there the group of women – an old grandmother (*apamama*), her two granddaughters, her daughter-in-law and myself – had departed at sunrise to go downriver to gather clay (*mangallpata apagrina*) while the men walked into the forest for a hunting trip. After few hours of travelling, the women stopped by the river bank and we began climbing on the steep edges, our feet sinking in the muddy, slippery soil. I could not see what we were looking for until *apamama* began removing some fresh green leaves from the ground and, with the aid of a machete, she cleared a small part of the river bank. Under the intricate and lush vegetation some grey cavities began to appear, dotting the red earth. The youngest of *apamama*'s granddaughters began to dig with the machete into the cavity, taking out handfuls of smooth grey clay and amassing it onto some fresh leaves. I was standing there, watching the women's silent work when Beatriz told me about the Grandmother of Clay. This took me by surprise.

It was my first month in Chambiracocha – a 12 people settlement reachable only by a 40 minutes flight from the town of Shell – and I spoke no Quichua yet. In the community, people did not speak Spanish or, when they did, were reluctant to speak it with me. Only Beatriz, a Runa woman from Puyo and her husband spoke fluently in Spanish with me. Establishing a relationship with Beatriz's mother-in-law, an elderly lady who only spoke Quichua, represented perhaps the greatest obstacle in those first months of fieldwork. In the evenings, when the grandmother conversed at great length and laughed with her granddaughters sitting by the firelight, I often had the depressing thought – certainly a common experience of any fieldworker – of

being there and yet missing out something invaluable, which was encrypted in the succession of strange sounding words. The grandmother, on her side, did not seem interested in my existence nor she seemed willing to share with me any particular thought.

I thus greatly welcomed Beatriz's statement which began with 'the grandmother says'. I felt pleased that the impenetrable grandmother thought that I should partake in this special moment. As Beatriz began to talk in Spanish to me, *apamama* stood nearby, attentively watching her daughter-in-law telling me about the owner of clay. When she finished, I asked Beatriz how this 'owner' was called. She answered: '*mangallpa apamama*'. I repeated softly the name, to memorise it well. *Apamama* looked at me and nodded her head affirmatively, repeating once again '*mangallpa apamama*' as if she was making sure that I would not forget this name, like I used to do with most Quichua terms. It was the first time since I had arrived she explicitly demonstrated that she wanted me to know something.

I believe that it was no coincidence that the first thing the *apamama* wanted me to learn regarded clay and its owner, the Grandmother of Clay. Upon return to the village, she took great pains in showing me the various stages of pottery making: the experience I had with her, albeit brief, marked my first steps into the process of learning Runa pottery, and, consequently, into the process of transformation into a proper Runa woman.

Successively I went through this apprenticeship innumerable times: I was taught to choose clay on the basis of its appearance and texture, encouraged to feel its metallic taste on my tongue or smell its different fragrances. I began accompanying my friends and hosts to their clay deposits, which are always found on river banks and whose exact location is jealously guarded by each woman. Runa women may find new deposits or leave old ones; others, recently married, might join their mother-in-law's expeditions to gather clay: in fact, there is no straightforward rule which dictates where clay should be gathered from. Each family I met across Runa territory could be said to 'own' a particular deposit site; nevertheless, claiming exclusive rights over clay was always presented to me as a problematic issue. This is because clay can never be totally and uncontestedly appropriated by any human agent for it ultimately 'belongs' to its mythical owner, *mangallpa apamama*

(Grandmother of Clay). She, at her own will, could take it back just as she brought it to the human world.



**Fig. 12. Gathering clay in Canelos.**

### **Of *apamamas* and their knowledge**

Before talking in more depth about the Grandmother of Clay, I want to ask a more general question: what does it mean to be a grandmother (*apamama*) amongst the Runa? When I posed this question to a Runa friend, she swiftly answered: 'When one becomes hard' (*shuj sinzhi tucucpiga*). *Sinzhi*, as I explained in Chapter 2, refers both to an exceptional physical endurance as well as to a corpus of well-grounded knowledge. Bodily strength is indissolubly linked to the strength of one's life force and soul(s), and it is expressed by formulae such as *sinzhi yachayuj* or *sinzhi almayuj* ('with strong knowledge' or 'with a strong soul').

Both male and female elders have been strengthened throughout their lives by the ingestion of multiple substances. They also have attuned their bodies to 'proper' forms (see Chapter 1). Indeed, it is elders who most often admonish children of the 'improper' movements which can lead to the ill condition of *paju*. Equally, it is elders who are in charge of the transmission of knowledge to younger generations.

They do so through a variety of means, from giving advice to the gift of special stones. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the giving of *paju* is a particularly common 'gift' dispensed by elders to younger people. Grandmothers (*apamamas*) are considered to be the primary holders of *paju*. This is unsurprising, given that this kind of *paju* is mainly used for activities, such as growing plants, generally undertaken by women.

The importance of *apamamas* within the Runa household should not be underestimated. Grandmothers are highly respected members and vocal participants in community life. Cared for by their children and grandchildren, *apamamas* teach, scold and give advice to younger people who always treat them with tenderness and respect. In kinship terminology, *apamama* is a generalised term. Unlike the term *mama* (mother) which can be used only to call one's biological mother and one's husband's mother, *apamama* (like its male counterpart, *apayaya*) is a term denoting any woman beyond reproductive age, despite one's relationship to her. It would be then erroneous to think that it is only 'biological' granddaughters who can ask for special gifts from them. The generalised status of *apamamas* enables women to relate to the grandmother as if they were benevolent granddaughters. Indeed, grandmothers can dispense their knowledge (and *paju*) to anyone (men included).

By being accessible to all women, whom they call daughters (*ushi*), grandmothers become emblematic figures, condensing the idiom of maternity. One might rightly wonder: why should grandmothers rather than mothers embody this status? This preference could be partly explained by Uzendoski's (2004) remark that, to be an *apamama* (or *apayaya*) one needs to have a history, namely, an extended family network (*ayllu*). Grandparents are not 'merely' parents but they represent the apices of a wider ramifying set of relationships. I would add, to Uzendoski's observation, that the importance *apamamas* are endowed with could be also explained by their 'bodily' status. 'Hard' and 'dry', *apamamas* have accumulated, throughout their lives, numerous substances and forms within themselves. Their bodies know how to move and what to do, how to avoid dangerous conditions as well as how to act in order to produce desirable effects. Unlike the softer and weaker bodies of children who clumsily and dangerously move around, elders know how to reproduce 'proper' movements. Young people will need to be 'straightened up' and made hard through continuous practice. The learning of pottery making indeed constitutes one of such moments of 'straightening up' in which one's body is taught about its proper

movements and its place in relation to other entities. Such learning, for many women, takes place thanks to the encounter with *mangallpa apamama* from whose body originated clay.

### **A grandmother made of clay**

The name of *mangallpa apamama* is often summoned, as in my opening example, when women extract clay from river banks. Clay needs to be neatly gathered and not thrown away, the deposit left in order and restored to its former smooth look: to do otherwise would mean attracting the anger of *mangallpa apamama*. I was constantly reminded of this principle of neatness and often reprimanded when I mindlessly disseminated the floor with some clay leftovers or when I left some bits to harden in the open air. To become a skillful potter, one needs to do things 'beautifully' (*sumaclla*) at every stage of the process. To illustrate the beautiful way of making pottery, many of my teachers evoked the story of *mangallpa apamama*. A version of this story was recounted by Rosa, as we were weaving pottery in her house in Puyo.

It was time of *jista* (Runa festival). A man had become *ayurante*. His wife didn't know anything about pottery making and she was very worried about the festival. She begged other women to help her and reveal her where she could find clay but the women didn't want to. 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 standing near the clay deposit. The *apamama* was very upset and the woman heard her saying: 'Clay is my poo, why do you waste it like that?' (*manga allpa ñuca isma imangata chasna ichunguichi?*). As the woman came out, she told the grandmother that the other women didn't want to help her. The *apamama* then gave her the left over clay, the one which the other women had thrown away, tapped her hands with *huibuishcu* [a special nutshell] and told her to go home to weave her pottery. So the woman went home and, all of a sudden, she began making beautiful pottery. She filled her house with drinking bowls, animal-shaped vessels and storage jars. Her pottery would never break when fired and she was

able to give her husband many vessels for the festival, while the pottery of the envious women broke and they had nothing to give to their husbands.

Rosa confided in me that, like the girl in the story, she too had encountered *mangallpa apamama* in dream. She looked like an old small woman, covered with mud or ashes (*ushpa cushni tica*). Such dreams are not rare among the Runa women I worked with. Like in Rosa's dream, *mangallpa apamama* often makes its appearance in the shape of a woman made of clay herself. In dream, she may tap their hands with *huibuishcu*, the polished shell of the *pilchi* fruit, which is used by women to smooth the surface of pottery. Were a woman to have such encounter, she will become a master potter, able to create beautifully shaped storage jars and drinking bowls and her creations will never crack during the firing.

Sometimes women dream of older women, not specifically the *mangallpa apamama*. For example, a friend of mine, a woman from Puyo, only learned to make pottery when she was already married. She did so by taking a course in Puyo taught by an old Runa pottery maker. She told me how her pottery skills suddenly improved after that she had dreamt of two widely renown pottery makers from Puyo. In dream, the potters had taught her how to make animal or spirit-shaped vessels. Today, she claims proudly, these characteristic vessels are her specialty.

I want to focus now on the precise gesture through which such 'special' knowledge is usually transmitted. In the first example, and indeed, in most cases, it is through the tapping of hand with a nutshell (*huibuishcu*) that the grandmother transmits her knowledge to the dreamer. Let us pause for a moment on this 'tapping'. The nutshell used to smooth the pot's surface, *huibuishcu*, is generally used in two different moments of the pottery making process: first, to remove the excess clay from the pot in the process of moulding and then, to give it the proper shape (see also Chapter 4). The removal of clay, assisted by continuous tapping, ensures that the pot reaches a harmonious shape. By gently 'tapping' the pot when the clay is soft, the woman 'straightens' it as well as giving it balance. Just like the soft clay is molded and gradually assumes a proper shape under the masterful use of *huibuishcu*, so the hands of young girls are transformed and 'made right' (*allichina*) by the tapping of the Owner of Clay.

The tapping of hands with *huibuishcu* is not solely a prerogative of the mythical grandmother. For visitors of a Runa community the sight of an old woman tapping the hands of their granddaughters with *huibuishcu* is a common occurrence. The ‘working upon’ female hands is also evident during festival time when, before women begin to make pottery, old *apamamas* hit young girls’ hands with nettle, forcefully inciting them to ‘weave’ hard (*sinzhi abuangui*).<sup>103</sup> Grandmothers’ gesture suggests that female bodies and clay are somewhat similar. The similarity between female bodies and clay is disclosed by the same gesture – tapping. This is a standardized movement, virtually identically among all the women crafters and one which an experienced maker automatically executes at the right moment of the process.

There are also other means through which grandmothers teach women about pottery knowledge. Sometimes, when women are gathering clay, they encounter, hidden in the mud and water, some old *huibuishcu* or some human nails (*shillu*). When these are found, they are brought home and hidden away in some safe place, along with other secret treasures. These objects are in fact endowed with the power of the Grandmother of Clay, the nails and the *huibuishcu* being her own, left in clay for us humans to find and use. In a similar manner, if a girl wants to learn the art of pottery making, she can cut a grandmother’s nails. However, one should not cut indiscriminately: in fact, not all nails are effective. Only those of the thumb and index fingers (respectively the *mama riru* and *jatun riru*) ‘work’. I often pondered about this detail, until one day, as I was finishing a pot, it occurred to me that I was using exactly those two nails to cut and level the soft edges of the drinking bowl. *Apamamas’* nails – which contain within themselves the exact movement through which the edges of a pot are made beautiful – are just like the naturally occurring nails of *mangallpa apamama*, endowed with the ‘frozen’ movement of cutting. ‘Beautiful’ proper movements are, in this case, congealed in body parts.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> As I explain in more detail later, the verb which indicate the process of making pottery is *abuana* which literally means ‘weaving’.

<sup>104</sup> These ‘congealed’ movements recall Nancy Munn’s (1970) discussion of Walbiri and Pitjantjatjara subject-object transformations. In her work, she describes how, for Australian Aborigines, the physical features of landscape are conceptualised as the ‘frozen’ movements of ancestors. The grandmother’s nails example, as well as many other instances discussed in this thesis, similarly reveal the intimate relationship (and tension) between movement and congealment.

Grandmothers undertake the task of teaching younger women through the execution of specific movements which induce the receiver to develop an awareness of the forms different entities share. This is clear, for example, in the hitting of the soft clay, through which grandmothers initiate an analogy between human bodies and clay. In the reproduction of a single gesture, multiple connections are drawn at once. The young woman not only learns to see the connection between her own body and clay: she also 'appropriates' a particular salient 'form', that of tapping. This is the same 'form' grandmothers have acquired from the grandmother of clay, through her tapping in dream. There is a sense in which, thus, grandmothers are knowledgeable insofar as they are able to reproduce some visible ancestral movements. In reproducing such movements - or 'forms' - their knowledge becomes visible. Through such particular 'forms' - as tapping - bodies, clay, grandmothers and the owner of clay become temporarily aligned.

To conclude, grandmothers work towards the creation of a proper Runa woman by growing an awareness of the specificity of women's bodies and movements. In so doing, women begin to relate to clay 'as if' it were a body, in a manner which strikingly differs from men's engagement with objects.<sup>105</sup> Grandmothers' teaching not only fosters the acquisition of exceptional skills but also contributes to developing an attention to forms. First, as I have shown in Chapter 3, through the acquisition of *paju*, girls become aware of the importance of 'proper forms' - that is, the proper carrying out of movements. Secondly, they are invited to see connections between their own bodies and those of the things they create. When they make pottery, women are drawn into a world of beautiful connections to which they contribute. They contribute to this universe of resemblances and connections by engendering babies, pots and manioc beer. Not coincidentally all these three elements become condensed in the image of the *tinaja*, the jar for storing manioc beer. This 'pregnant-like' body and the process by which it is made form the subject matter of Chapter 4.

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<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, there is no comparable figure to the *apamama* in the realm of male object-manufacturing.

## Chapter 4. The body pot

In this chapter I examine the relation between the large jars made by Runa potters to store manioc beer and human (female) bodies. The relation is one drawn by the Runa themselves. We already had a glimpse of the relationship between the human body and clay in the previous section, where I showed how practices of learning pottery foster a connection between the body of young girls and soft clay. This chapter elaborates on this intuition by looking in greater depth at the elaboration of beer storage pots (*tinajas*).

In this chapter I suggest that we should not take the relationship between body and pots as metaphorical – in the sense of a human projection upon ‘raw’ matter. Drawing from the work of Ingold (Ingold 2007, 2012, 2013; Hallam & Ingold 2014) on ‘making’, I suggest that we should see the large storage jar – and all pottery for that matter – not as made, but rather as ‘grown’. Given the importance of non-human agency in the manufacturing of objects in Amazonia (Hugh-Jones 2009; Miller 2007; Santos-Granero 2009a; Velthem 2003, 2009, 2010), I argue that thinking of pottery as the result of an ex-Deus action upon crude matter would distort the meaning of the connections Runa people draw between their own bodies and pots.

In this chapter I will explore the techniques through which pottery is made, highlighting its slow process of becoming as well as the difficulties entailed in the making.<sup>106</sup> In my description of the process I was influenced by the work of Pierre Lemonnier (2012) and, in particular, by his deployment of the concept of chaîne opératoire first coined by Leroi-Gourhan (1964; see also Coupage 2015). Although I do not specifically elaborate a chaîne opératoire, this idea was inspirational in making me develop a ‘thick’ description of the process of making pots. This attention to the details of making, to its various phases and to the relationships with other realms has the important advantage of revealing dynamics which, as I

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<sup>106</sup> A large body of anthropological and archaeological literature has been devoted to the analysis of pottery-making in South America and beyond (Arnold 1978, 1985; Deboer & Lathrap 1979; Gosselain 2008; Malafouris 2008; Van der Leeuw 1991, 1994). A comparison of Runa pottery with other pottery traditions while beyond the scope of this chapter would be worth of further investigation.

argue below, are not readily perceptible in the finished object. Under this light, mine could be read as an attempt to let the thing 'speak' (Holbraad 2011, see also Introduction), in other words, an effort to allow the material characteristics of an object to speak about themselves. Simultaneously, however, I also try to pay attention at the constitution of the maker in the process since the two activities - self-making and object-making - are not, in my view, analytically separable (cf. Warnier 2001). I will thus show that a detailed analysis of the techniques of making reveals women's continuous references to the experience of maternity. If pots indeed 'grow', they do so out of their mothers' bodies.

While the first part of the chapter is devoted to showing the transformational nature of pottery making, the second part operates a reverse, but not contradictory, movement: here I emphasise the importance of the complete object for the Runa. I suggest that the importance of completeness becomes particularly salient in the case of the *tinaja* because only its final shape reveals a decisive connection with the maker's body: their human-like shape. Importantly, such connection is not due to some sort of shared 'subjectivity' like it is the case in other Amazonian contexts where 'things' become imbued with person-like agency (Bilhaut 2006; Miller 2007). Among the Runa pots are not usually thought to be human-like subjects possessing an autonomous agency. What links bodies and jars is ultimately a shared likeness of form: such likeness is present both in the 'form' of their 'growing' as well as in their 'complete' shape. This chapter aims at shedding light on these similarities through an ethnography of pottery making.

### **The emergence of forms**

- *I heard you can paint pottery*

- *Yes, I can, I have learnt.*

- *Can you also weave pottery?*

- *No, I can't.*

- *Oh, that is difficult, isn't it?*

From a conversation with a woman from Comuna San Jacinto

Whenever I met Runa women, in Puyo and elsewhere, they would often engage with me in conversations about my ability at doing pottery. Some people had heard that I was able to make pottery, whilst some others had seen me doing it: ultimately everyone was very interested in trying to establish exactly what degree of ability I had acquired. Thus, whenever they had the occasion, Runa women first inquired on my painting skills and then went on to ask about my weaving abilities. At the initial stage of my fieldwork, when the answer to the latter question was negative, my interlocutors often displayed an overt expression of empathy. ‘Yes, *that* is difficult’, some women would comment sighing.

Their statement is unsurprising. To make this kind of pottery *is* incredibly difficult.<sup>107</sup> It requires skill, patience and time as well as, obviously, aesthetic awareness. However, inherent in the comment was also the conviction that whilst ‘painting’ can be done by everyone (even if not, of course, to the same degree of beauty), ‘weaving’ imposes an *aut aut*: either you know how to do it or you don’t.<sup>108</sup>

I was first prompted to learn to paint pottery intrigued by women’s pottery designs and their supposedly ‘hidden’ meanings (see Chapter 5). I had thus begun to practice painting on some small drinking bowls and then progressed to inventing my own designs. Nevertheless, the more time I spent in my teachers’ houses (and the more I was asked about my pottery abilities), the more I came to think that my exclusive focus on design was not innocent: in feeding my own aesthetic enchantment with intricate lines and forms, was I not overlooking other important sequences involved in the pottery making process - of which painting is only one, sometimes minimal, part?<sup>109</sup> This question, along with my teachers’ concern that I should have been able to make my own pottery, prompted me to begin learning the ‘weaving’ process. As I began to practice it myself, I realized that, despite having observed the process over a repeated number of times, I had missed crucial details and important sequences. In what follows, I attempt to describe the process of

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<sup>107</sup> Runa pottery is hand-coiled and the firing is done in the fireplace.

<sup>108</sup> Technically speaking, someone who has poor weaving skills will never be able to fire anything. Obviously, that doesn’t mean that all potters make equally beautiful ceramics. Nor do I wish to underrate the importance of beautiful drawings for Runa potters. The bias was rather mine, as I explain in the following paragraph.

<sup>109</sup> The minimality of designs depend on both the type of object (e.g. cooking ware is painted in black only) and the ability of the woman potter (more on this point in Chapter 5).

pottery making, drawing from my own skilled knowledge. I do so unproblematically, I suggest, because my own gestures have become identical to the ones of my Runa teachers. The movement with which one smoothes a humid surface or the way a potter seats on the ground are highly formal patterns which I came to share with my Runa friends and whose similarity they explicitly recognised. As in the case of tapping, these shared movements enable the momentary alignment between different entities, including that between Runa and non-Runa people (see also Chapter 6).

A handful of scholars have emphasised the importance of paying attention to the process by which materials are transformed during the making of an object (Haudricourt 1987[1968]; Ingold 2012; Lemonnier 1992, 1993; Leroi-Gourhan 1945). According to Ingold (2000, 2012), this processual perspective, by shifting the attention from the finished artefact to the means by which this is constituted, allows us to conceive of an object not only as the result of a uniquely human compulsion to invent but as 'emerging' from the actions of multiple concurring non-human forces. Ingold's approach resonates with object-making accounts from Amazonia (Descola 2013; Santos-Granero 2009a; Velthem 2003) and with the argument that, in ontologies where nothing is simply created out of nowhere (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004), objects need to be understood as the results of previous transformations. However, where often the attention of Amazonian ethnographers has been directed towards the role played by objects within their cosmologies and myths, here I focus primarily on the different phases of the making process. A focus on the technical processes by which an object is made is a valuable tool if one is to discern the inherently transformational nature of pottery making among the Runa. From the perspective of the maker, this focus also sheds light on the process by which Runa women draw analogies and make comparisons between their own bodies and those of the pots they make. In the making of the pot, the maker herself becomes constituted as a proper Runa woman in multiple ways.

## **The process**

Before the proper process of making pottery (*abuana*, 'to weave') begins, Runa women cleanse the clay from any residue of dirt or rocks. They do this by hand,

graciously and patiently picking out any rubbish from the soft mass of clay. Only when this cleansing is accomplished, they mix it with other types of clay. Generally, potters state that clay with small stones is for weaving large storage jars (*tinajas*), smooth grey clay for drinking bowls (*mucabuas*) and special black clay for the creation of eating bowls (*callanas*). However, every woman decides, depending on her knowledge, skill and experience, which type of argil to use for specific artefacts. 'Good' clay – one that does not break at the moment of firing and that is 'smooth' – is a subject of much interest and women are often very keen on trying to experiment with different types of clay brought from distant places.



**Fig. 13. Grey clay.**

Once clay is of the right consistency (not too wet, not too dry), it is ready for moulding. Women potters begin by making many small coils (*cauchu*) of soft clay. These are made by rolling a piece of clay on a wooden board till it becomes uniform throughout all its length. All the coils must be of the same size and thickness: in other words, they must be perfect. During my first attempts at making *cauchus*, I was constantly reminded of the importance to make them all of the same size, smooth and symmetrical: only little girls make ill-shaped *cauchus*. The coils are then

positioned around a circular clay base (the bottom of the pot, *siqui*) one on top of the other. As more are added, the pot begins to acquire a cylindrical shape. Each *cauchu* is softly pressed onto the other so that they hold together (see Fig.14).



**Fig. 14. Positioning the cauchus**

The process by which the clay begins to take a shape - be the final object a *mucabua* (drinking bowl), a *tinaja* (large storage pot), *corneta* (horn), or small *tinaja*-shaped vessel (*purus*) - is slow. The soft surface of the pot is continuously smoothed by the expert use of *huihuishcu*, a polished piece of the *pilchi* fruit. On the outer surface of the pot, *huihuishcu* is used vertically, to scrape away the excess clay, whilst on the inside, it is moved circularly so as to create the characteristic 'belly' of *mucabuas*. An expert potter could be judged by the amount of different *huihuishcu* she owns (see Fig.15). Some shapes of bowls indeed depend upon the specific 'cut' of the *huihuishcu*. Thus, whenever I was about to use *huihuishcu*, Valeria would always tell me to wait, whilst she looked among the dozens of different shaped *huihuishcu* she kept in a bowl, until she found the most suitable one for the pot I was making.

*Huihuishcu* is often dipped into water, to maintain the proper consistency of clay. This latter, as all Runa potters know, can be capricious. On a sunny day it dries too fast and begins cracking. In this case, saliva or water needs to be promptly applied.

If, on the contrary, it rains too much, potters have to wait, sometimes even for a week, before being able to resume their work. Pottery making is a delicate, time consuming process and one which can too easily go astray.



**Fig. 15. Bowl full of different *huibuisbcu***

As the work proceeds, the walls and edges of the pot are continuously leveled using two fingers or by biting off the clay until the object has finally reached the desired shape. At that point, the maker cuts the edges and smoothes them with a wet maize leaf (*sara panga*). If it is a *mucabua*, the woman maker may hold the piece close to her mouth as if about to drink to check that the edges have been leveled properly. The piece is left to dry for a day or so, and then bathed (*armachina*) with a base dye, generally white/yellow or red (respectively *ruyaj allpa*, *quillu allpa/culur allpa* and *pucallpa*). With a special river stone, women smooth (*amulana*) the surface of the pot until it becomes shiny and perfect. The pot is now ready to be painted. The first and thickest line painted on the pot is called *mama churana* (mother line). This becomes the leading line, according to which all the other smaller lines follow. The patterns are painted on the polished surface of the ceramic by using a very thin brush made of human hair (*accha huactashca*). Given that Runa designs will be described more in details the in Chapter 5, it is sufficient to state here that the

typical design patterns of the Pastaza Runa consists of geometrical red/white/black lines.



**Fig. 16. An uncooked *mucabua***



**Fig. 17. Potter's tools**



**Fig. 18. *Mucabuas* left to dry in the sun**

Once the pot is decorated, it is left to dry in the sun for a few days and then the potters proceed to firing it. The firing is perhaps the most difficult phase of the process of pottery making. To fire a pot properly, one needs to know exactly the speed at which to heat the piece, the quantity of wood needed, and the time at which the pot needs to be promptly removed from the fire. Not all woods are good for firing either: only hard, dry ones which will not emit smoke would do the job. Were they to produce smoke, the decoration will turn black, a common occurrence during the rainy season. A large thick conical piece of pottery lacking the base is placed on the three logs of the fireplace.<sup>110</sup> The piece to be fired is put upside down inside the conical pot and covered with ashes (see Fig. 19). When the pot is ready it is promptly removed from the fire and cleaned from any residue of ashes. Holding a piece of natural varnish (*shilquillu*) between their teeth, Runa potters wait a little for the incandescent pot to cool down slightly and then apply the aromatic sap thoroughly on the surface. This phase requires particular skill and dexterity: one needs to know the exact moment at which to apply *shilquillu* and to do it quickly. Were the pot to be too cold or too hot, the results would be disastrous. Once varnished with *shilquillu*, the piece is left to cool down, shiny and fragrant, on some fresh leaves.

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<sup>110</sup> The one described above is the common method to fire a medium size *mucabua*. There are other ways of firing, depending on the object that is being fired. The technique described here is also used for *purus* and figurines. Due to its large size, the *tinaja* requires a different, more elaborated, firing process.



**Fig. 19. Firing a *mucabua* (picture by Melania Arias).**



**Fig. 20. Applying *shilquillu***

## Vital materials

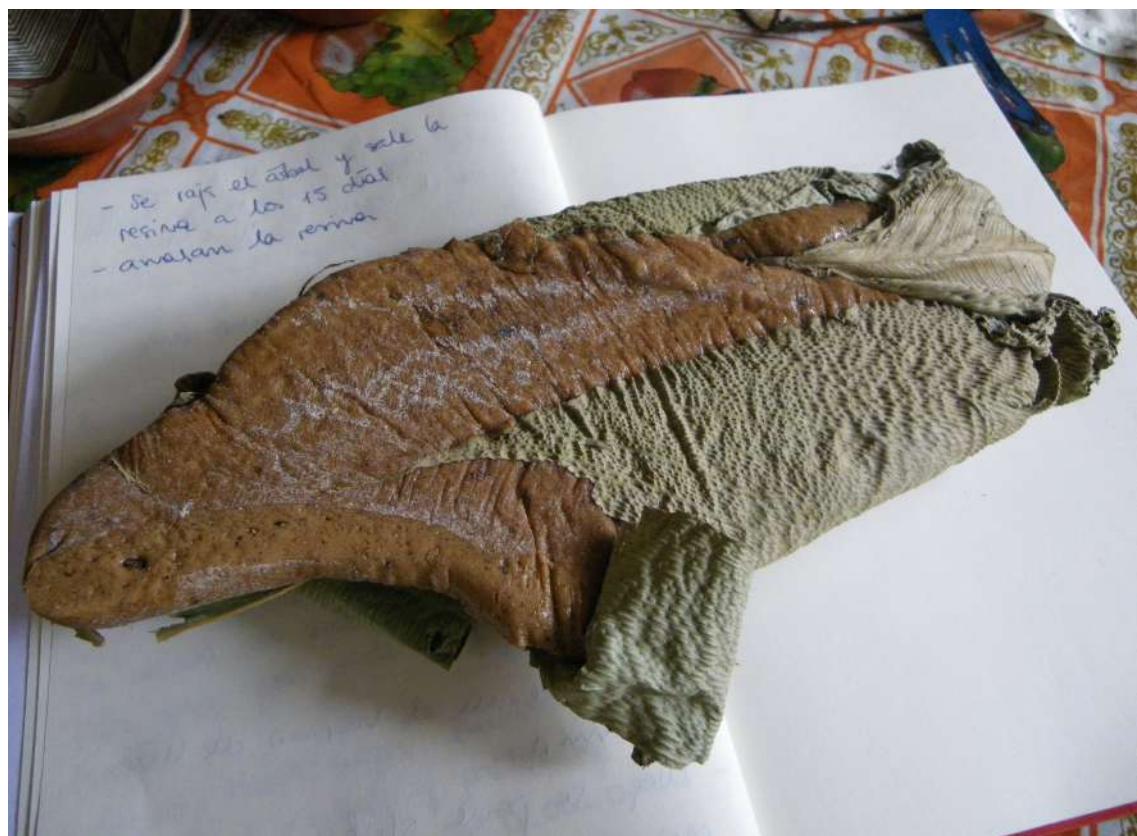
From soft matter to hard, shiny surfaces, the process of pottery making is, essentially, a transformation, to which many materials and agents concur. This transformation is the result of previous transformations for each of the components involved in the making is itself the product of an ancestral metamorphosis. Take clay for example. This is sometimes referred as *isma*, feces. In a well known myth, a man abandons his wife after she had not given him food. In a desperate attempt to follow her husband who has climbed to the moon, the woman falls from a vine, because she is too heavy loaded with all her pottery tools (*buibuishcu*, clay, maize leaves and earth dyes). In a version of this myth she transforms into *Jilucu* (the potoo bird) and her poo becomes clay.<sup>111</sup> It is for this reason, I was told, that sometimes clay has a foul smell.

Soft, dark clay is not the only material to have come from a transformation. *Shilquillu*, the natural golden-coloured sap used to varnish pots is taken from the *shilquillu* tree. Before extracting *shilquillu* from the tree, the trunk is repeatedly hit whilst the woman says: 'Large vagina, large vagina give birth!' (*jatun churu jatun churu buacharingui*).<sup>112</sup> The woman cuts the trunks with a machete and *shilquillu* comes out dripping. According to potters, *shilquillu* was born out of the body of an old woman called *Tijera Anga Mama* (Swallow tail kite mother) who, in the myth of the two sisters *Manduru* (*Bixa Orellana*) and *Huituj* (*Genipa Americana*) gets killed by her mischievous daughters-in-law who bathe her in warm water, oblivious of their husband's prohibition. Her body melts and transforms into the thick, sticky and rich smelling *shilquillu*.

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<sup>111</sup> For associations between clay and excrement among other Amazonian people see C. Hugh-Jones (1979) and Lévi-Strauss (1988). In another version of the same myth, at the time of impact with the soil, the woman's body becomes clay (*mangallpa*).

<sup>112</sup> *Huachana* is also the term used by the Pastaza Runa to denote the action of giving birth to babies.



**Fig. 21. *Shilquillu***

Alongside *shilquillu*, another resin (*pungara*) is used in the elaboration of *tinajas*. This is a black thick substance produced by a bee called *pungara putan*. It is dropped in great quantities inside a recently fired *tinaja* to make its inside impermeable. In ancient times, according to the Runa, the *pungara putan* used to be a man-jaguar. He used to kill many humans and nobody could get rid of him. So his own mother decided to kill him. The old woman used to paint her teeth black and shiny with *yana mucu* (a black dye of vegetable origin). Her son, on seeing her mother's beautiful black teeth, asked her to have his teeth painted with black too. The mother pointed to a pot of boiling water and told him to drink it. By doing so, she assured him, his teeth will turn beautifully black. As the man-jaguar drank the beverage, he died and his body turned black and sticky. So his mother decided to transform him into a *pungara putan*. The *pungara* is thus born out of a son-jaguar body just like the *shilquillu* is made out of a female *apamama* body.

The two resins give the *mucabua* and *tinaja* a special smell. They are applied to the object when this is very hot so that, at the contact with the surface, both resins melt and exude a powerful fragrance (*asna*). This scent is what renders drinking bowls so attractive to drink from. Runa people still prefer drinking manioc beer

when this is served in *mucahuas* or stored in *tinajas* rather than from plastic bowls or storage bins. They appreciate a good beer by saying: 'What a rich smelling manioc beer!' (*ima gusto asnaj asua*) and crying out a falsetto shout of satisfaction. Smell is not perceived as being simply a secondary quality of manioc beer, but rather, an essential part of it. For example, when spirits (*ayaguna*) have their own drinking parties, they are thought to 'drink the smell' (*asnata upina*) of the beer. Similarly, on the day of the dead, *mucahuas* full of manioc beer are left in the cemetery for the deceased to 'try' the smell. The two transformed saps engender a fundamental transformation: they make manioc beer 'proper' *asua*.

Pottery making involves thus multiple transformations. Soft clay needs to dry, then it becomes wet again, only to transform later into hard and resistant matter through the firing. The shape of the pot changes little by little, day after day, as the process of moulding progresses under the expert hands of the weaver. Until the very last moment of pottery making, transformation occurs, for the outcome of any pot is never certain until the varnishing of *shilquillu* is completed. In fact, if this natural sap is applied on the pot when this is still burning, it instantaneously melts and drips on the designs, altering indelibly its colours. On the other hand, if it is applied too late, it will not adhere to the surface and the whole pot will then be thrown away. The colours of the decorations are different in their uncooked and cooked appearance. They appear in their final form only after the application of natural sap and the cooling down of the pot. Pottery making thus entails vital and transformed materials as much as it enacts new transformations. The body of the potter too is transformed in the process of making (a point to which I will return later).

What does an ethnographic focus on the transformative character of technical processes add to an analysis of Runa pottery? In the first instance, I would suggest, it helps us to capture the process of 'becoming' intrinsic to the making of artefacts whilst avoiding the ontological assumptions entailed in the word 'production' (cf. Descola 2013). For instance, in the ethnography presented above, we have seen that, in so far as non-human entities participate to the process of fabrication, the completion of a pot could be said to exceed the strictly human realm of 'production'. Secondly, an emphasis on the processual nature of artefacts and materials helps us to situate them on the same ontological plane of living organisms. Both objects and living beings, according to Ingold (2013), are always engaged in a process of constant fabrication. He suggests that we refer to this common process

as one of growing, rather than of 'making'. For Ingold, what differs between the two activities is only the extent to which we recognise human involvement in the generation of form: however, he stresses, 'this variation is one of degree, not kind' (2013:22). For the purpose of this chapter I have found particularly useful to adopt Ingold's suggestion of thinking of objects as subject to growing, especially because his approach amply resonates with the Runa's own take on 'weaving' pottery. To the process of 'growing' pots I thus turn now.

### **Weaving bodies out of others**

During the period Leticia was 'weaving' a *tinaja*, one morning she announced excitedly to her cousin: 'A spider is making a house inside my *tinaja*' (*araña huasisha tinaja ucui*). She had indeed found a spider weaving its shiny web in the inside of her soon-to be finished *tinaja*. Unaware of the implications of such a seemingly unremarkable event, I asked her the reason of her excitement. She assumed an indulgent tone, like the one of a patient teacher forced to deal, for the umpteenth time, with a rather obtuse student. She said:

Like the spider is weaving its web, I will too soon finish my *tinaja*.

A spider weaving its web inside the jar is paralleled to the potter's own work of weaving the *tinaja*: just as the spider finished its wonderful web, so will the woman complete her jar. This was not the first time I had heard such parallels: when in the past I had dreamt of making a *tinaja*, my dream had terribly excited by my hosts: according to them, the image foretold of an imminent pregnancy. Just like a woman is 'making' a *tinaja*, her womb is 'making' a baby. What does this deliberate - and rather common - parallelism between the making of a *tinaja* and the making of a baby, tell us about both babies and pots?

First, I think it sheds light about the similarity of the process of 'making' bodies, be these human or not. 'Making bodies', as I have already stressed in Chapter 2 and in the Introduction of this thesis, is of crucial importance for the Runa. The verb to describe pottery making is *abuana* which can be literally translated as 'weaving' and which is only used to describe the activity of making pottery, beaded jewelry, clothes and baskets. Notably two of the items which can be 'weaved' are worn on

the body, whilst the other two are conceived as kinds of bodies.<sup>113</sup> The association is not fortuitous: ethnographers of the Amazon have long noticed that bodily transformations can be enacted through the simple wearing of bodily adornments (Gow 2001; Santos-Granero 2009b). The body itself in Amazonia has been described as a sort of ‘envelope’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998) or ‘skin’ (Turner 1980).<sup>114</sup>

I suggest that the term *abuana* - with its reference to clothing and the body - points to a process of fabrication - one which is shared by both human and non-human bodies. Archaeologist Benjamin Alberti (2014) working in Argentina makes a similar remark with regards to La Candelaria ceramic pots. He observes that La Candelaria pots - whose surfaces are cracked, the limbs emergent and the facial features only suggested - may look, if seen through a representationalist model, as the results of poor skilled potters. However, if the lack of limbs and crude execution of facial features are placed within the context of an ontology which emphasises perennial metamorphosis, as suggested by contemporary Amazonian ethnography, then the same characteristics could be understood as symptomatic of a lived worlds where bodies are inherently unstable (Gow 2001; Vilaça 2005). In this new perspective, the missing limbs thus become understood as an instance of the inherent inconstancy of body matter just like the rugged features and the carelessness of the execution hint, according to Alberti (2014), to the fact that these pots were in motion, rather than ‘finished’. In other words, transformation of human and non-human bodies takes place at an equivalent ontological plane. Bodies are pots - just like pots are bodies - insofar as they are both of an ‘unstable’ nature and need to be constantly moulded into the ‘right’ shape.

Alberti’s argument that the process of fabrication is equal both in human bodies and in body-pots echoes a point made by other Amazonian ethnographers in relation to artefacts. For example, the Cashinahua refer to the process of making babies and things in parallel terms (McCallum 2001) whilst, for the Wayana, the same term (*tihé*) indicates ‘production’ of both children and artefacts (Velthem 2009). I suggest that for the Runa too, bodies and pots are subject to the same

<sup>113</sup> Although space is insufficient here to appropriately delve on the issue, I would argue that the weaving of baskets (which are men-made) is in many ways similar to the weaving of storage jars. This similarity could be further explored in another publication.

<sup>114</sup> The relationship between bodies and clothing is beautifully captured by Viveiros de Castro when he writes: ‘it is not so much that the body is a clothing but rather that clothing is a body’ (2012[1998]:135).

process of careful fabrication. Pots are in effect the 'children' of a woman, as sometimes the Runa say, not because they are a symbolic product of the woman-maker, but rather because both children and pots undergo a parallel process of fabrication. But, I want to ask here, in what ways are these processes thought to be similar? I turn back to Runa ethnography to elucidate the shared form of this likeness.

During one of my stays in Puyo, I happened to stay at Ana's house. She was a very fine potter in her late forties who earned a little salary by selling her pots to shops in the region and beyond. I would often keep her company as she sat in her house, quietly weaving her pots. One afternoon, Zuly, her fourteen years daughter, came to join us in the room where we worked. The young girl had never showed any interest in pottery and, in fact, she hardly knew anything about the making process. We were both listening to Ana's stories when Zuly glanced at the plant standing next to her mother's innumerable drinking bowls (*mucabua*). Indeed the plant had already received my attention for it was an epiphyte, one of those plants from whose leaves grows another plant. At one point, Zuly pointed at it and asked: 'Mum, what is that plant for?' Ana looked at her, then at the plant, and then she resumed painting, concentrated on the design she was making. She distractedly mumbled:

This is called *paqui panga* ... it is like a symbol (*un simbolo*) ... I placed it there so that it can grow. Like it grows, so my *mucabua* grows.

In Ana's words, what the plant and her bowls share is the process of growth, the slow emerging of forms. What is emphasised is a parallel movement of blossoming. However, I would like to suggest that it is not by coincidence that Ana chose exactly this plant to make the parallel. The *paqui panga* sitting near her pots is a plant which grows out of itself. Kohn (2002:84) reports that epiphytes like the *paqui panga* are called by the Ávila Runa *buiñarina panga* (leaf which grows) for their anomalous capacity of growing new plants out of their leaves. Ana's 'symbol', as she put it to me and her daughter, consisted in seeing a resemblance not in the simple process of growing but rather in the process of growing out of another body. In one case, the plant grows out of its own leaf, while, in the other, the pot grows out of the potter's own body. Ana's symbol also calls to the mind the spider-web episode with which I opened this section. The relationship between the spider and its web does not constitute *any* making process: the web comes directly from the spider's

body. The web is not a product, not something which is grown apart from the grower: it comes out of one's body.

By using this 'symbol', Ana brings to our attention the fact that pots are thought to be consubstantial with the potter. Indeed, as the reader may recall from above, clay itself is a transformed female body. This also resonates with the teachings of grandmothers and the mythical Owner of Clay which, through specific gestures, draw parallels between soft clay and young women's bodies. But, I would suggest, it is not only that clay and women's body are conceived as substantial: it is also the *form* of growing artefacts and children which bears striking resemblance. Pots, like human bodies, emerge from women's generative ability for making things appear out of their bodies. Little matter if what appears is different - in one case pots, in the other, children: what the Runa ultimately emphasise is that both 'bodies' are fruits of a conscientious and long practice and both are worked upon so that they will eventually acquire a 'proper' shape.

In eliciting these connections to other beings and things, women potters, in the process of making, establish a special relationship with pots, one which is suffused by a maternal idiom which we have already encountered with the *apamama* example. What pots, children and anomalous plants share is the process of fabrication out of others' bodies. Nevertheless, the maternal 'bent' of pottery making is not exhausted by relationship between the maker-mother and the pot-child. For the large jar for storing manioc beer, the *tinaja*, is not only considered to be 'child-like' but also 'mother-like'. By sharing a pregnant form with female bodies, the *tinaja* is simultaneously child and mother. I turn now to explore ethnographically the alignment between the two maternal bodies.

### **Of human and non-human wombs**

In my host house in Wantuk Rumi, two large decorated *tinajas* always stood in the kitchen. They were filled and emptied, as people came to the house, as parties were thrown and as thirst came and was satiated. Whenever my host decided to make manioc beer, I would accompany her to the swidden garden downriver. We would fill one or two baskets of manioc and then, carrying them on our foreheads and shoulders, we returned home. In the house, we began the long task of peeling and

chopping the manioc to then cook it in large aluminum pots. Once ready, we would pour the content into a large *batan*, a wooden tool made by my host's husband in the shape of a water turtle or a dugout canoe. As we smashed it, we began to take a handful to our mouths and slowly chew it. When the smash became watery enough with our saliva, we spat it into the *batan*. Sometimes a neighbor would come around, with her children and she would immediately join us, by taking a piece of purée to her mouth. Chatting with large quantities of manioc in the mouth never seemed to be an obstacle to conversation for Runa women; indeed, it was on these occasions of communal beer making that I would hear the latest gossip or news. Often I would receive joking remarks about my becoming a proper *asua mama* (mother of manioc beer) or advice on how to make the beer stronger and sweeter.

The process of cooking, chewing, smashing and spitting usually lasts several hours. When the chewed pulp turns sweet, the purée is ready for storage in the *tinaja*. A *tinaja* is a large belly-shaped storage pot, painted in red and white. When women prepare manioc beer for a festival, they place the chewed purée (*pica*) on a sitting structure made of plantain leaves. These latter are cut in the middle so to allow the dripping of *pica* juice in the space underneath. The *tinaja* is then carefully sealed with some smoked plantain leaves and left to rest for 5 days or so. 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 add more water successively. The next day manioc beer will be 'matured' (*pucushca*) and emanating a good smell. At the time of the serving, the *asua mama*, the 'mother of beer', makes a tiny hole through the plantain leaves to gather the water in section below. This rich smelling juice is called *ucu yacu* (inside water) and it is mixed with some purée for serving. The resulting drink is a rich, strong sweet beverage which, bowl after bowl, makes men and women drunk in a few hours.

The woman maker (*asua mama*) is in an intimate relationship with the drink. First, it comes from the plants she herself grows. It becomes beer through the incorporation of her own bodily substance, saliva, to the mass of manioc.<sup>115</sup> Each woman considers the beer she makes as 'hers' insofar as it has been made with her manioc and chewed and given flavour by her mouth. Two different beers, made by

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<sup>115</sup> See also Whitten (1976) and Uzendoski (2004) for further reflections on this maternal relationship. For other Amazonian examples see C.Hugh-Jones (1979) for the Tukanoans.

two women, will never be mixed together: were this to occur, the resulting mixture will go bad (Guzmán 1997).

The *tinaja* is where the fermentation of manioc beer takes place. In its interior – a black, aromatic and humid cavity – manioc beer ‘matures’. The ‘maternal’ character of the *tinaja* is self-evident to the Runa. In a very well known story (see Appendix 2), when the pregnant sister of the Moon (*Quilla*) reaches the jaguars house, the jaguars’ grandmother, after trying to persuade her to leave, hides her into a large *tinaja* on the top of a wooden bench. She warns her not to spit out of the *tinaja* for otherwise her sons would realise she is there and would kill her. Every day the grandmother feeds the woman with beer and food inside the *tinaja*. One day, the foolish woman spits outside the *tinaja* and the jaguars, upon returning home, smell her. They open the *tinaja* and kill her. The jaguars’ grandmother nevertheless manages to rescue the two baby twins hidden in the intestines. She hides them into another pot, full of cotton, where they grow into young adults. The *tinaja* functions here as the protective container of yet another container (the pregnant woman’s belly). It contains, conceals and nurtures. Explicitly described as being ‘pregnant-like’ (*buicsayasha*), *tinajas* appear here as powerful images of generation and re-generation.<sup>116</sup>

Many archaeologists and ethnographers, basing their analyses upon the perceived physical similarity between pots and pregnant bellies, have referred to pots as ‘metaphoric wombs’ or ‘containers’ – artistic projections of a human shape onto clay matter. According to this common interpretation, pots are understood as symbolic extensions of the human body or as symbolic containers. In both cases, pots figure as material things ‘good to think with’.

To view artefacts as the projections of their maker’s intentions or thoughts is indeed a common interpretative approach in anthropology, one which Ingold (2013) has termed ‘hylomorphic’. In this model, the human agent foresees the ultimate form of the object and projects his idea onto the inert ‘substance’. ‘Forms’, in the Platonic sense, come to impinge upon brute, shapeless ‘matter’ and the results are ‘things’ which cannot be other than representations. This mode has been criticised

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<sup>116</sup> According to many elders, in ancient times, *tinajas* were used in funerary practices: the corpse was buried inside a *tinaja*. In this case, it was thought that the body of the deceased would never rot.

for its perpetuation of Cartesian dualisms both in anthropology and beyond (Alberti, Fowles, Holbraad, Marshall & Witmore 2011; Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Holbraad 2009; Sillar 2009). In anthropology Ingold has perhaps been its most vocal critic (2000, 2013). This latter argues that subsuming the hylomorphic mode is a conception of matter as brute substance upon which an external agent (always human and individual) acts. In his view, this interpretation is fallacious because it is informed by an (erroneous) ontological distinction between subject and object (and nature and culture) which is characteristic of Western ontology (Bird-David 1999; Descola 2013; Ingold 2000; Latour 1993; Viveiros de Castro 1998). In this view, 'culture' is projected upon 'nature' and thus artefacts turn out to be mere material instantiations of its makers' ideas.

It is not my aim here to engage into the kind of critique of representationalism propelled by Ingold in the realm of artefacts, not least because in some instances objects may well be, for the ethnographic subjects concerned, 'representations'.<sup>117</sup> I rather prefer to attend to the specificity of the Runa case whilst drawing upon some suggestions in Ingold's work which can shed light on my Runa materials. For example, if the interpretation that presents *tinajas* as symbolic wombs may sound straightforward, I suggest that this does not accurately account for the subtleties and the nuances of the relation the Runa draw between the two entities, not lastly because 'metaphors', as suggested by Ingold (2000) and others (Viveiros de Castro 2012[1998]) misleadingly suggest that *tinajas* are not *real* wombs.

On the other hand, however, I suggest that adopting *in toto* Ingold's solution to the problem - shifting our attention from the 'complete' object to its *process of becoming* - neglects the importance that Runa people attribute to the finished object. The Runa, as I will show below, put great efforts into 'completing' their pots. I suggest that potters' eagerness for making beautiful and complete objects forces us to redirect our attention to the importance of a 'congealed' form, exactly the kind of 'symptom' of hylomorphism criticised by Ingold. The idea of a 'fixed' form can be easily dismissed if one focuses only on the processual becoming of artefacts. The issue of a 'fixed' form is closely related to the question of why, amongst all other objects, it is only the *tinaja* which is said to be 'like a human body'. I will argue that

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<sup>117</sup> The issue of 'taking seriously' so called 'naturalist' ontologies, and thus its relative dichotomies and concepts (including 'representations') is a topic of ongoing debate (Candea 2011; Candea & Alcayna-Stevens 2012; Heywood 2012; Viveiros de Castro 2011).

to satisfactorily answer this question, we need to redirect our focus on the complete pot and the form it shares with female (pregnant) bodies. What does it mean to say that pregnant women and *tinajas* are alike? Where does this likeness lies? To answer these questions I turn again to the technicalities of pottery making.

### **On Completeness**

During his travels in the region, ethnographer Rafael Karsten noticed that Runa pottery had reached 'a remarkable degree of perfection' (1935:99-100). I wrote down a similar observation in my notebook after few weeks I began living in the house of a Runa potter. Like the Finnish ethnographer, I was too often struck by the delicate structure of the finely decorated drinking bowls and by the perfect symmetry of the body of large pots. I was further surprised - and ineluctably seduced - by the continuous and laborious efforts Runa potters put into their work. Women would relentlessly work over and over a single pot, giving it its right shape, removing excess clay till the walls were thin enough, in what seemed to be a never ending process. Any minimal asymmetry in shape, any anomaly of the surface - a more than common occurrence in hand coiled pottery - would be spotted and corrected immediately. The work of pottery making, be it the process of polishing with a special stone, cutting its edges with a nail or smoothing them with a maize leaf, is carried out with impressive care and patience.

As such, Runa pottery may look to an observer as an eternal work in progress, very much in tune with Ingold's (2012) suggestion that, in order to grasp what 'really' goes on in artefacts, we should attend to processes of making rather than focusing on the 'completed' thing. However, if this perspective is instrumental in establishing the coterminousness of processes of making and growing, on the other hand, an exclusive focus on the processual transformation of pots would obscure the attentiveness Runa potters devote to the finished object. Indeed, there is nothing more horrifying to a Runa potter than the idea of an unfinished piece, one which is left to rest uselessly in a corner of a house. In every day life, it never occurs for a pot to be left unfinished. Even if the potter leaves hastily to travel somewhere else, as can happen sometimes, she either asks her female kin to finish the uncompleted pottery on her behalf or she covers them with some fabric to keep them humid until her return. The urgency of finishing up is not only due to a dislike

of wasting clay: completing one's pot is a matter of compulsion. On a countless number of occasions, I witnessed the irresistible urge of women who, visiting someone's else house in the absence of the female owner, 'finished' (*tucuchina*) the pots which were left half completed by the original maker. Upon arrival to a neighbour's house, women often gather around unfired pots to look, criticise or, more often, give them a little 'fix' (*allichina*).

Minor imprecisions are readily pointed out, as women scrutinously examine the work of others and their own. Whenever we went to look at tourist shops in town, my friends would readily pick the *mucabuas* on sale, commenting on the thickness of their borders, the evenness of their 'mouths' and the transparency and shininess of the *shilquillu*. Sometimes we would comment on the success of the firing process by bringing the pots close to the ear: a well fired piece is recognized by the sharp and clear sound it emits when one gently taps its outer 'mouth' with a nail.

What is ultimately sought for, in the completed pot, is a beautiful 'proper' shape. For Runa potters there are only few possible pot shapes, unlike the composition of designs which seems to be infinitely diverse (see Chapter 5).<sup>118</sup> In the field, I became aware of the conservative character of Runa pot shapes at my own expense. As soon as I became skilled at weaving, my imagination ran wild and I began to improvise new shapes or alter already existing ones. My spurts of creativity, however, were met with scarce enthusiasm. What to me looked like a *virtuoso* accomplishment, to my Runa teachers represented the laughable sample of someone who obviously did not know how to make pottery well enough. Interestingly, this example vividly contrasted with peoples' reaction to my painting which was, on the contrary, much admired for its originality and avidly copied (see Chapter 5).

If I were allowed to experiment, albeit slightly, with *mucabuas* and blackware, it was made clear to me that, for the large storage jar (*tinaja*), there is only one 'proper' shape (see Fig. 22). With its long neck and large rounded belly, the *tinaja* seems to be 'congealed' in its shape. Every time I suggested innovations, people made me observe that, were the modifications to be introduced, the resulting object would not be a *tinaja*, but rather a different thing. This was fine, concluded one of my teachers, however, if I wanted to become a knowledgeable potter, I needed to learn

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<sup>118</sup> An obvious exception are the figurines which portray different forest animals, objects and spirit beings (*supai*).

to weave the *tinaja* 'as it is'. When I began the oeuvre, my results never seemed to satisfy my punctilious teachers: the neck was too long, the belly wasn't a belly, the curve above the belly needed to follow another inclination, etc. '*Tinajas* do not have this shape!', exclaimed an exasperated friend of mine, looking with despair at my attempts. In sum, I never seemed to get it quite right.

If, in my execution, I could only come close to the *tinaja*'s proper form, on the other hand, I could distinctly *see* it. When one day some Runa friends and I went to a museum in Quito and we paused in front of a pre-Incan funerary urn, everyone - including myself - recognised it as a *tinaja* of the 'old ones'. It had the shape of it. However, commenting on the exhibited urn, a friend of mine later exclaimed:

You could tell, Francesca, that it was not a proper *tinaja*. They [the makers] obviously did not know that *tinajas* are painted white and red!

His statement that a 'proper' *tinaja* should be red and white indicates another 'fixed' visual characteristic of the jar - one which sets it in contrast to the rest of Runa pottery which is variably decorated.<sup>119</sup> The *tinaja*'s lower body, formed by a bottom (*siqui*) and a belly (*buicsa*) is invariably painted with red dye, whilst its upper body, comprised of a neck (*cunga*) and a mouth (*shimi*) is painted in white.

When I asked why these colours are used for the painting of the *tinaja*, my teachers placidly answered that *tinajas* have their bottom painted with red because this is the colour of childbirth blood, whereas their top is white because of the postpartum cleansing (*ucatzata anchuchina*).

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<sup>119</sup> Drinking bowls and figurines are polychrome and adorned with complex designs. Cooking and eating pots are usually black but they should be painted with red in occasion of the Runa festival (*jista*).



**Fig. 22. Recently fired *tinaja*.**

When a man comes back home without any prey or fish, he is said to be *ucatza*. *Ucatza* is generated by women (through menstrual blood and vaginal fluids) and it affects primarily men. At birth, because of the contact with blood, the child, the mother and their close kin are in a state of *ucatza*. *Ucatza* can be translated as 'bad luck'. The baby's body, covered with slime (*llausa*) and blood (*yabuar*) is cleansed with a bath of *tsicta*, a plant whose juice is dark and bitter. His parents too bathe with this plant and drink its infusion. *Tsicta*, as a purification tool, is associated with the colour white: hence the white top part of the *tinaja*.

From my discussion above it becomes clear that *tinajas* are 'like' pregnant female bodies not only because they are fabricated (like human bodies are) but also because *tinajas* share *formal* qualities with pregnant bodies. These include their shape - a curved belly, the neck and even the upright position - and their colours - the red and white of childbirth. As a friend succinctly put it: 'When a woman sees a *tinaja*, she thinks of childbirth'. These characteristics - and the thought they provoke in Runa onlookers - become evident only in the 'completed' object.

As mentioned above, analytically speaking, the status of the 'finished' object is ambiguous. The anthropological literature in Amazonia emphasises the process of perennial transformation, constitution and destitution of bodies, placing artefacts as a further example of bodies in constant flux. The antipathy for the 'completed'

object - as an assumption of hylomorphism - is evident both in the Amazonian literature on artefacts (Fortis 2014; Santos-Granero 2009a) and in Ingold's work (Ingold 2013; Hallam & Ingold 2014). If such preoccupations are understandable, nevertheless reducing my analysis only to fluid processes of metamorphosis would run the risk of ignoring the relevance of form and similarity for Runa potters. But it is only a matter of omitting what Runa people think of as essential: as analysts, in the eagerness to criticise 'hylomorphism' and its assumptions, we might dismiss the potency of form, reducing it - mistakenly - to *just* a representation or the projection of human thought upon matter. In going against the grain of representationalist modes, it may escape us that 'completeness' as well as 'likeness' - and perhaps 'representation' itself - may mean very different things for the people we work with.

A question thus remains open: can we, as analysts, conceive of an object which is made upon human resemblance but which is not a representation - at least not exactly as we know it, i.e. the imposition of an individual human 'design' upon inert matter? Whilst I offer no easy solution to this problem, in this chapter I have tried to begin disentangling some of the complexities of the relationship between human potters and their human-like pots.

## **Weaving the potter**

As I highlighted in the section above, my ethnographic material suggests that the finished object - with its proper shape - is lavished by Runa potters exactly for its being 'complete'. Indeed, this concern for 'completeness' is entirely compatible with the stress many indigenous people in Amazonia place on fixity - or at least, on the tentatives to attain it (Ewart 2012; Lagrou 2007b; Vilaça 2005). The moment of completing, of 'freezing' is the other, necessary side of metamorphosis. Just like in the realm of pottery making, completeness is also essential for human bodies. As I showed in Chapter 2, Runa people make an effort at 'closing' the body - at finding a stable shape. For Runa people the gradual closing of the body is expressed through the idiom of hardening and drying. Pots undergo a similar process: from malleable and soft, porous and elastic, they turn hard and impermeable after firing. Just like in humans, the 'proper' shape is sought after. Like powerful elders, pots contain within themselves multiple transformations which are finally frozen into their 'hard' bodies.

In the preceding discussion, I placed much emphasis on the ‘form’ of the *tinaja* whilst I have attended only in passing to its human counterpart, the female pregnant body. As explained in Chapter 3, for the Runa pregnancy should ideally signal the time in which woman reaches maturity and has already mastered all the necessary feminine abilities. Thus, the shape of a pregnant woman signifies, as such, a state of temporary ‘completeness’. However, there is a fundamental difference between the human pregnant body and the *tinaja*: whilst the first’s state represents only a fugacious moment, for the ceramic pot this shape is a perpetually ‘congealed’ condition. Pots succeed in this freezing of time where humans eventually fail.

There is also another kind ‘completeness’ entailed in the pottery making process – one which I only briefly mentioned in passing earlier on. The making of pots also entails the making of one’s self as a particular gendered person. Writing about the Tukano, Stephen Hugh-Jones suggests that: ‘making things is self making and the mastery of technique is a mastery of the self’ (2009:49). This statement, I suggest, applies well to the Runa too. So, I believe it is not a coincidence that, in my experience, the moment of becoming autonomous – or rather ‘complete’ as a potter and woman – coincided with the making of a *tinaja*. This moment marked a significant shift in the ways Runa women and men came to see me. Amusement, wonder, envy, admiration – all of these diverse reactions emerged more starkly once it became clear that I was able to make my own pottery from the scratch to the end, thus approximating (perhaps too closely) the ideal of Runa womanhood.

The transformation which happens during pottery making takes place in two different, albeit related ways. First, a woman begins to appropriate certain visible movements. For example, after firing a pot, in order to apply the natural sap homogeneously, one is forced to hold the incandescent piece by hand. At the beginning of my apprenticeship, I naively thought that I could avoid this last painful step by wearing special gloves, so I bought two pairs, one for my female host and one for myself. While I was proud of my gift, I noticed that my host, nevertheless, preferred to use the gloves in the garden rather than during the process of firing. When I asked her why she didn’t use them as I suggested, she candidly replied to me that her hands had already become ‘strong’: she could not feel the burning sensation which left me in pain. Slowly, I also began to get my hands used to handle the burning pottery and my teachers positively commented on my hands becoming just like theirs – knowledgeable and hard. The ‘hardening’ of

my hands became an index of my ability to incorporate certain movements. My imitation of specific patterned movements - the tapping, the meticulous scraping and the rolling of clay - struck the attention of Runa onlookers. Such movements did not pass unnoticed: the way I sat, the manner in which I held pots, were accompanied by continuous comments and remarks. These movements were also proudly brought up by my teachers as a proof of the success of their pedagogic efforts. My own body had slowly been shaped towards an ideal gendered form.

Simultaneously to this work of adjusting one's body, another process takes place during the learning of pottery. In the making of pottery, women are gently introduced to a world of multiple connections: they learn to see similarities between one's body and that of a pot, between one's tapping and that of the mythical *mangallpa apamama*, between her manioc beer and a child, and so on. These connections are reiterated through the replication of specific actions and movements, such as tapping, smoothing etc. Occasionally, however, such connections are also translated into words. For example, on a tranquil sunny afternoon, as I was sitting in the veranda of an elderly woman from Canelos, I asked her to teach me something about pottery which she thought I was unaware of.<sup>120</sup> She answered that I had been long enough there and that I already knew everything about pottery making. She claimed she had nothing else to add. After few minutes of silence, in which we kept rolling long coils of clay on our wooden boards, she quietly asked me if I knew that, at the end of the world, *tinajas* (large storage jars) will come to devour us. I answered that no, I did not know about that, so she eagerly began to narrate:

You make a *tinaja*, you take some clay, you remove the small stones, then you weave it, giving it shape. Then you cook it on fire and it burns. This is why the *tinajas* are angry at women. When the end of the world comes, the *tinajas* will begin to move, they become alive. They want to kill the women because they burnt them. They walk, just like us! They eat the bodies of women. Imagine, sometimes in a house there are up to

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<sup>120</sup> Admittedly a rather strange question. However I was led to formulate it in such a way because during fieldwork, once I had become able to make my own pottery, women often answered my questions as did the elderly woman in my example. 'You already know everything. Why do you ask?' people would tell me. It was an answer delivered in completely good faith and of benevolent nature, as if to try to reassure me that despite how I might have felt, I did, in fact, already know everything.

twenty *tinajas*! The only way for women to escape from death is to have many *batan*.<sup>121</sup> The *batan* is like the child of women, because they feed him manioc every time they make beer. This is why he wants to protect his mother. The *batan* too will begin to walk and will break the *tinajas*. All Runa women know this is what is going to happen when the world ends.

I came to think of the narration of this story, which coincided with my last period of fieldwork, as a parcel of the process by which my teachers were trying to teach me to be a Runa woman: in this episode, the humanness of the *tinaja* needed to be teased out for me to understand its proper nature. In other words, I was gently taught to sharpen my sight, to really see what the *tinaja*'s real form should come close to: that of a human body.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I suggested that we approach Runa pottery-making as a process of growing, analogous to that of a human body. The two, pot and body, are understood by the Runa as subject to the same process of care and nurture. Nevertheless, I also argued that this 'artefactual' approach alone cannot explain the exceptional connection Runa people draw between pregnant bodies and the *tinaja*. To attend faithfully to Runa potters, one needs to look at the formal qualities the two bodies share.

In the first part of the chapter I argue that pots are like the 'children' of the woman potter; in the second, I suggest that *tinajas* are more like their pot-doubles. This is not a contradiction: given the multiplicity of forms, its whimsical properties, a single thing can become enmeshed in many others. An object is never just one thing: it contains multiple possibilities. Thus in one instance a woman may relate to the *tinaja* as a child, whilst in another as a parallel womb. In this chapter I have sought to enlighten how women come to feel this through the techniques of making.

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<sup>121</sup> Large wooden recipient where manioc is smashed during the process of making beer.

The approach adopted here questions ‘the radical difference between the ontological status of the creator and that of whatever he produces’ (Descola 2012:459) without eclipsing the difference between the two entities. *Tinajas* as I have shown, are not human-like by virtue of some shared subjectivity; with women they share the form of a pregnant body. In this chapter I have sought to offer an analysis of Runa pottery which goes beyond current approaches to objects in Amazonia which tend to stress the animate or subjectified character of material things.

My approach should not be taken as implying that a sharedness of form is the only mode through which the Runa relate to objects. The story which I reported in my last section about the walking *tinajas* indeed suggests that artefacts might, sometimes, become ‘subjectified’. Thus, I would suggest, a *tinaja* can be ‘animate’ for different reasons: because of the forms it shares with the human body *and* for its capacity of rising to eat the bodies of its maker. The two possibilities are implicated in each other.

Lastly, both the ‘fixity’ of the *tinaja*’s form and the maternal idiom which characterises pottery making point to a further issue, one which I will explore more fully in the next chapter, namely the concept of creativity/creation. As we have seen, there is a certain degree of ‘fixity’ in the shape of the *tinajas* (and pots more generally). Each existing *tinaja* could be thus read at an attempt to mimic the first one, made by the ‘old ones’. Under this light, the ‘congealment’ of the *tinaja*’s forms would seem to support the argument that notions of creation, as well as creativity, are virtually non-existent in the Amazonian region (Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2012[1998]).

Nevertheless, whilst the form of the *tinaja* is somewhat ‘fixed’, each woman, in the making of a *tinaja*, is deeply involved in a process profoundly marked, as we have seen, by the wonder and beauty of making things out of one’s body. The appearance of something new – a *tinaja*, a pot, or for that matter, a child – which comes from one’s body points to a quality which the Runa think to be inherently feminine, namely, women’s capacity for generation. This is why pottery is an exclusive female realm: when men touch clay it is said that their penises will turn soft and ‘useless’. The making of pottery then might not consist into an *ex-nihilo* act of creation but it nevertheless involves the appearance of something which, not being entirely new

(at least in its form), did not exist before. Through the bodies of women, this ‘novel’ thing makes its appearance somewhat extraordinarily. In the next chapter, which deals with the designs Runa women paint on their pots, I seek to disentangle the nexus between creativity, beauty and the specific nature of women’s work which I have begun to outline here.

## Chapter 5. On Runa designs

Draw a thicker line here. Just like that ... This is *mama churana*. You have to think how you want your painting to be. I always have it in my head beforehand. Then, from the *mama churana* you draw the smaller lines here, like that and that. They should be all spaced equally, you see, so that it looks beautiful.

On a sunny afternoon in Puyo, Ana was trying to teach me the basics skills of Runa pottery painting, by showing me, with slow movements, the 'positioning' (*churana*) of the first thicker line (*mama*), the one which pre-establishes the overall design. Sitting close to her, I was attentively looking, whilst attempting to maintain my hand firm as I traced the *mama churana* on my pot. It would take many more of such afternoons before I could finally draw with a steady hand, in one fluid, rapid movement. Only after such long training could I ever hope to draw like her, 'holding the design in one's head'.

Whilst not possessing the linguistic self denomination of 'people with design' (Lagrou 2012), I believe that the Canelos Runa would, on a conceptual level, happily embrace the definition. Their ability at painting is a criterion they often deploy to distinguish themselves from their indigenous neighbours whose artistic skills are perceived as poor, if not derisory. Indeed, Canelos Runa pottery and facial painting is a sophisticated and flourishing art tradition (Rostain, Saulieu, Betancourt & Duche-Hidalgo 2014; Whitten & Whitten 2008). One can have an easy proof of its vitality by walking the streets of the provincial capital of Pastaza, Puyo, where the sight of Runa people (and foreign tourists) with their faces painted with the intricate designs of *huituj* (genipapo) is a common daily appearance.

Making designs - as all pottery business - is a female prerogative. While in rural communities design-making is just one activity among many others, in the urban areas, where Runa women work 'full-time' as potters, painting becomes an incessant task. From the first light of dawn until the sun sets behind the mountains, Runa women in Ņukanchi Allpa sit in their houses, working intently on their pots. Their

long day is interrupted only by the sudden visits of other Runa women who, amidst one gossip or another, often end up grabbing a pot and remain there sitting and painting it for the entire day. The works of these Runa potters sometimes reach the shelves of famous galleries in Quito; sometimes they adorn the tourist *cabañas* in the nearby province of Napo. Every now and then, some potters are forced to sell their work to *mestizo*-owned shops along the banks of the Puyo river. This happens rarely, and only to the neediest potters: the majority of women usually avoids selling pots to *mestizos*, whom they consider abusive and incapable of appreciating beauty.

I was first prompted to study designs because I wanted to understand the ‘meaning’ of it. In his work on Piro designs, Gow (1999) describes a set of questions routinely deployed by ethnographers, despite their already acknowledged uselessness, to investigate design-making: ‘Who made it? What is it called? What does it look like? What does it mean?’ (1999:230). Indeed, this inquisitive interview resembles very much my first approach to Runa designs. Just like Gow, I asked all the questions, and again, just like him, I made very little progress at understanding anything more about designs. My quest for meaning, first as an observer and then, as a potter myself, utterly bored my research assistants who always diverted my questions to other, more compelling issues. The Runa dislike for ‘meaning’ echoes the rejection of any association between meaning and painting which Anthony Forge (1970) describes for the Abelam of Papua New Guinea. He suggests that for the Abelam designs do not refer to any ‘outside’ reality: they have no meaning outside themselves. In a successive work, trying to answer the question of why questions of ‘meaning’ do not make sense for the Abelam, Diane Losche reflects:

Asking the Abelam what this particular design means is akin to asking “What does your refrigerator mean?”, or to reverse the issue “What does your painting do?” For the Abelam this separation between meaning and function is an inappropriate basis on which to ask a question (Losche 1995: 59).

Following this insight, in this chapter I will not attempt to unravel the hidden meaning *inside* designs. Rather, I will focus more closely on the ‘agentive’ force of designs, beginning from what my Runa teachers and others found interesting and powerful about them.

A central claim of this chapter is that designs are meaningful because, through their beauty, they ‘act upon’ those who view them. My exploration begins by looking at the specific ‘history’ of Runa designs, as people narrated it to me. The aesthetics of designs, I will argue, can only be understood within the context of historical encounters with other people (indigenous and non-indigenous). Foreigners - and more specifically, ‘whites’ - become fundamental interlocutors of Runa potters for the creation and sustenance of contemporary Runa aesthetics.

I will then draw a comparison between potters’ designs and shamanic visions, exposing their similar interest for ‘alterity’ whilst paying attention to the different effects such practices generate. In particular, taking up again the suggestions I made in Chapter 3, I show how women’s work is geared towards the reproduction of *visible* beautiful forms, of which designs - and pottery in general - are a primary example.

Finally, I will consider how designs elicit happiness and desire in those who view them. In so doing, designs effectively engender movements: they facilitate the circulation of manioc beer, they attract foreigners, they seduce potential spouses. Feelings of desire (*munai*) and happiness (*cushi*) are fundamental for understanding the ‘meaning’ and saliency of Runa designs.

### **The matter of designs**

Designs are traced upon the pot when this is still raw, using small hairbrushes made of young boys’s hair (*accha buactashca*). The ‘mother’ line (*mama churana*) is the one which marks the basic structure of the design (see Fig.23).<sup>122</sup> The *mama churana*, painted in red on a white surface, is followed by other parallel thinner black lines. Albeit the *mama churana* gives the general structure to the design, it does not predetermine it completely for it allows a great degree of freedom in ‘filling’ the spaces enclosed by the *churana* using thinner lines. All the patterns are generally enclosed by a thicker line which gives a clear contour to the figure. This closure

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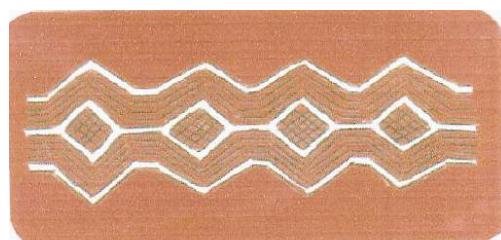
<sup>122</sup> Whitten (1976:90) translates *mama churana* also as ‘mother’s body’ or ‘dress’. See my discussion at the end of the chapter.

results in well defined patterns, from which one can discern some basic recurrent designs (see Fig. 24, 25, 26).

Whenever I asked my teachers how they invented their designs, the answer would be univocal: we hold them in our heads. The statement refers to a degree of mastery which only very knowledgeable potters can obtain. To 'have a design in one's head' means, firstly, that before the *mama churana* is placed, one needs to know precisely how the finer lines will follow it on the pot. This is rendered all the more difficult by the practical impossibility of erasing a badly done line without altering the base dye. Thus, creating a complex design requires one to 'hold it in one's head' before starting. However, this 'holding in the head' refers less to having a mental map of the final completed design, than to having enough knowledge for improvising within the possibilities set by the mother line. This makes possible for potters to draw the same *churana* and end with two completely different overall designs. Indeed, often potters express their surprise and admiration for their recently completed pots; as much as one could possibly imagine what the design would finally look like, potters often end up with designs which they hardly thought of before.



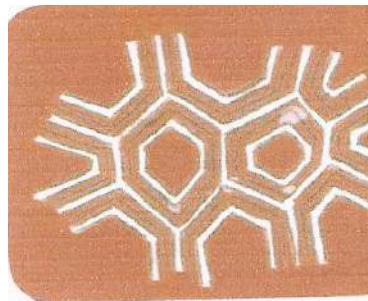
**Fig. 23.** Following the 'mother line' (in red). Photo by Martin Vitiello.



**Fig. 24.** *Amarun washa* (Anaconda pattern, from López n.d.:59)



**Fig. 25.** *Tsawata washa* (Turtle pattern, from López n.d.:59)



**Fig. 26. *Tijeranga* (Eagle pattern, from López n.d.:59)**

Most of the potters I worked with learnt designs by watching other women's work.<sup>123</sup> When potters see a particular design they like, they try to replicate it on their own pottery. The 'copy' is however never a faithful one: the imitation is based on memory and impressions, not on a precise replication of patterns. Women also talked often about 'inventing' and 'thinking' new designs. Indeed, women's originality was judged upon their ability of creating new arrangements out of a set of widely used patterns (like the ones shown above). For Runa potters, some of the important criteria for judging one's work are the fineness of the lines and the complexity of the patterns' arrangement. The parallel lines need to be drawn one close to the other: they need to be traced quickly, with one's hand firm and in one movement. Doing otherwise would result in ugly tremulous patterns. Potters also emphasised the need to cover with designs as much surface as possible to obtain a fully painted (*murushina pintashca*) pot (see Fig. 27). This 'covering' work results in designs of high complexity, in which one pattern may contain multiple others (Fig. 28).

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<sup>123</sup> Unlike Whitten's (1976) potters, who claimed they learnt designs from their mothers, most of mine didn't. The majority of them learnt it from older unrelated women and their female in-laws.



**Fig. 27. *Murushina pintashca mucabua*. Fully painted drinking bowl.**

**Photo by Meg McPherson.**



**Fig. 28. Detail of *mucabua* ('mother line' in red).**

In my first attempts to elicit the ‘meaning’ of single design ‘patterns’ (such as those of Fig. 24, 25, 26), Runa potters often answered my questions with names of animals and plants. For example, some of the ‘basic’ designs above are called with the name of a particular animal. This is not surprising: ‘natural’ patterns provide an importance source of inspiration for potters. The patterns on the skin of the anaconda, the shape of the tail of an eagle, the shell of the water turtle or the leaves of palm trees can all be reproduced on ceramic by women potters. For example, when, on one occasion, we happened to kill a snake, observing its patterned skin, my friend Valeria told me to look at the design and fix it in my memory, so that we could paint it later at home.

Whilst a specific design might be inspired by the sight of a snake, the pattern is not the representation of the animal-snake. The design only takes the animal’s name in virtue of its patterns. What is of interest to the Runa potter is the pattern itself, not the body it covers. The snake pattern does not aim to represent the animal ‘snake’. As Gow remarked for the Piro in a similar context, ‘designs only look like each other, not like anything else’ (1999:236). If designs are not there to communicate something about an outside reality, one may legitimately ask, what are then designs for? I will now attempt to answer this question by telling the story my informants used to give me whenever I investigated about the ‘true’ meaning of designs.

### **The birth of modern designs**

Whenever I enquired about the ‘meaning’ of designs, my Runa teachers would easily lose temper. Valeria, a forty year old woman from Montalvo and one of my first teachers, was the most vociferous critic of the idea of ‘meaning’. Her words echoed those of many other potters.

Meaning! (*Significado!*) There is no meaning to design! All these people [other Runa potters] saying: ‘This means that and this means that’ Bullshit! Our grandmothers (*apamamas*) never talked about meaning! They painted for the sake of it (*yanga pintanaura*).<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Whilst Valeria accused other potters of making up stories about ‘meaning’, in fact I have never heard any potter talking about meaning amongst themselves, unless they were directly asked about it (usually by a non-Runa visitor or buyer).

After her peroration, Valeria turned to explaining that the old way of painting was completely different - more rudimentary and simpler than the present one. She was not the only woman to draw a connection between the idea of 'meaning' and the 'ancient' designs of *apamamas* (grandmothers). Most potters with whom I talked similarly shifted the conversation from 'meaning' to a discussion about the difference in the quality of their design versus those of their grandmothers. They were eager to tell another story: the story of the emergence of their beautiful designs.

Initially I was rather surprised by the total lack of meaning modern Runa potters seemed to ascribe to their grandmothers. Given the importance of elders for the transmission of knowledge (see Chapter 4) and the feeling of 'degeneration' felt by many Runa (Chapter 1), I expected that people would claim that grandmothers - unlike them - had drawn meaningful designs in the past. This turned out not to be the story I would hear. If there is one thing my friends in Puyo are convinced of is that their ceramics have reached a degree of perfection which is infinitely superior to the work of their earlier generation. This beauty mainly resides in the sophistication of their designs which are now finer, more symmetrical and more exquisitely intricate than before. The progression, to Runa eyes, is indubitable.

To make the difference clear to me, one day Valeria decided to bring me to the house of a neighbour in Ņukanchi Allpa, an old lady who had turned blind and sometimes asked us to paint her pottery. 'So you can ask yourself about old design', she told me, just before entering the *apamama*'s house. The story of Rosa indeed confirmed a version which was, by then, well known to me. According to her and many other Runa friends, in ancient times *apamamas* would use their fingers to paint, leaving simple and thick patterns on the drinking bowls (*mucabuas*). They sometimes took leaves, bathed them in colour and then applied them to the surface of the pot so that they would leave their shape. In the past, Runa potters are also said not to have been able to use the many colours modern potters do. The dyes were so rare that *apamamas* didn't want to waste time looking for them: they painted *mucabuas* only with annatto juice. To give me an example of 'old' design, people would often point to the pots I was given by an elderly Runa lady (see Fig. 29). Indeed when my friend Teresa saw the small drinking bowls (*mucabuas*) I had

brought home, she took them, looked at them carefully and then exclaimed: 'This is how they must have painted before!'



**Fig. 29. 'Old style' design.**

It should be stressed that there was no hint of contempt in my friends' assertions. They did not see *apamamas* as belonging to a 'savage' past from which they had progressed through the adoption of finer techniques. All the contrary: my informants were adamant in stating that elders knew much more than they do with regards, for example, to the various *paju* (powers) of pottery. Thus, when women talk about their grandmothers as doing ceramics 'for the sake of it' (*yanga*), they do not aim to denigrate the previous generation of potters. I suggest instead that this *yanga* refers to a real change in Runa pottery making - something which *apamamas* did not know - namely, a *different aesthetics*. Thus, when my friends say that their elders painted for the sake of it, they are stating that *apamamas* were not animated by the same idea of beauty which characterises their work today. To my questions about 'meaning', my Runa teachers replied with a story about beauty (*sumaj*) and the changes this 'beauty' underwent throughout time. Furthermore, my Runa friends were able to pinpoint this historical shift with unexpected accuracy.

According to the Whittens (1988) Runa pottery is probably of Tupian origin and ethnohistorical works testify to the presence of Tupian people in what is today the

Runa territory in Pastaza (Reeve 1998a). It was indeed an elderly woman originally from Rumi Choca who now lives in Puyo who first told me the story of the origins of Runa designs.

A man had gone to Peru to buy things and, when he returned, he brought some pottery. It was finely made and painted in a manner which we Runa people had never seen. Then his wife decided to try to copy the designs on the pots. She tried them on a *mucabua* and other people saw them and thought they looked so beautiful that they decided to paint like this too. From then on, we always painted like that.

In the elder's story the design style came from Peruvian indigenous people. Before, she assured me, nothing like contemporary Runa design existed. Her story echoes those of many other people who equally claim that designs came from Peru during a time of intense fluvial exchange. This first shift stretches back far in time, during the early 1900s, or earlier, if we consider that the elder who told the story was eighty-five year old in 2013 and that she claims to have it heard from her mother.<sup>125</sup> The second change however was much more recent, taking place approximately around the 1950s. This coincided, according to my older consultants, with the opening of the road to Puyo and the encroaching colonization from the highlands. This time was also marked by the arrival of the first white people who showed a genuine interest in Runa ways of living. Amongst them, Runa people made a special reference to anthropologist Norman Whitten, probably the most loved of all.

Dr. Norman, according to some of the older potters, recognized the beauty of Runa pottery, thereby encouraging women potters to create increasingly beautiful pieces. Along with his wife, the late Sibby Whitten, he created a foundation, *Sacha Runa*, which bought pottery pieces and sold them in the States to finance a health program for Runa families located in the nearby town of Shell.<sup>126</sup> He is well known for appreciating 'very fine' designs. Whilst Dr. Norman was constantly invoked in narratives due to his ongoing engagement with Runa lives, he was not the only

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<sup>125</sup> It should be clear that I am not interested here in tracing a historically accurate account of the birth of 'contemporary' Runa designs. Instead, I am concerned with bringing forth the perspectives of Runa people on this shift.

<sup>126</sup> See Whitten & Whitten 1985 for a detailed account of the Sacha Runa project.

foreigner to appear as a key agent in the development of a ‘new’ Runa design. Indeed, narratives about contemporary Runa pottery are punctuated by the appearance of some unidentified white people. Some Runa friends from Curaray, for example, were fond of telling me the story of a white man who used to reach the community by airplane when they were little children. There were not many flights at the time so, whenever one was about to land on the grassy airstrip, they assumed it would be this white man’s plane. The stranger would walk around the community, visiting peoples’ houses and collecting all sorts of pottery. He liked Runa pottery so much that he would even pay for broken pieces. As soon as he stepped out of the plane, women began to get their pottery out for him to see.

Leticia, a woman in her forties who was born in Charapacocha, remembers well that, when she and her sisters were little, a white man used to come to the community, landing with a large airplane. He would then visit each house to ask for pottery. In exchange, he would give people biscuits, rubber boots and machetes. Leticia still remembers the excitement of such visits: she and her older brothers would gather any broken piece of pottery they could find in the house to give it to the white man. He repaid them with biscuits which she and her brothers avidly ate, hidden from the sight of their ill tempered mother.

In Runa narratives, the birth of ‘modern’ design is related to two historical events: the arrival of indigenous people from downriver and the landing of airplanes with white people on board. That the most distinctive of Runa arts, pottery, would be related to strangers is hardly surprising for an Amazonian ethnographer. The ‘foreign’ origin of artefacts and things is a recurrent theme throughout the Amazonian region. The Cashinahua of Brazil, for example, associate their traditional beads with foreigners. The term for glassbeads (*mane*) also serves to indicate the ‘immaterial goods coming from strangers’ (Lagrou 2007b:78). Similarly, the Kulina of Western Brazil stressed to the anthropologist that virtually everything of their culture had come from other groups, be these indigenous, Peruvian or Brazilian (Pollock 2009:500). Lagrou (2007b) suggests that this eagerness of appropriating ‘the enemy’s’ things might be considered as a result of the dialectic between Other/Self which occupies much indigenous imagination. Writing about the Suyá, Marcela Coelho de Souza (2012) writes:

The model of this indigenous perception of culture as ‘acculturation’ it is found in its mythology - a story of how, through the adoption of means and techniques of other people and beings “the Suyá transform themselves into true human beings. Nothing was pre-established by a cultural hero; everything was adopted because it was ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’” (Seeger 1980 in Souza 2012:214).

What is striking about the Runa case, as it is amongst the aforementioned Kulina, is the way people consciously trace the birth of their ‘traditional’ designs to the moment of encounter with strangers. If the birth of truly beautiful design coincided with the coming of strangers, as the Runa so emphatically state, how exactly do foreigners contribute to the creation of a ‘new’ beauty? In what practical ways, I wondered, women took inspiration from ‘foreign’ sources to create new designs?

As I began enquiring on the topic, it became evident that for Runa potters, these ‘white’ figures do not appear simply as passive buyers but, importantly, as zealous teachers who willfully orientated Runa potters towards a particular aesthetics.<sup>127</sup> Most potters described at great length the moment in which a white person (or more) gave them technical guidance on design matters. Foreigners, in my friend’s stories, appeared in the guise of advisors, suggesting them how they should make the designs or giving them technical tips on how to execute more beautiful patterns. Ana, for example, who had recently learnt to make pottery, told me with enthusiasm about such an encounter. She had brought her *mucabuas* to a tourist resort in Tena where many foreign tourists spent their holidays. There she met an old white woman. The woman looked at her pottery carefully and then she took one *mucabua* and with her finger she followed the leading line. ‘This’, she said to Ana; ‘should have been the same on the four sides, can you see that?’ Line after line, the white woman gave Ana a gentle lesson on the ‘symmetry’ of design. The old woman suggested that she practiced the harmony of her designs. From then on, claimed Ana, showing me one of her impeccably neat designs, she never made that

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<sup>127</sup> Again, it is not my scope to establish whether these mysterious ‘whites’ have consciously and actively worked toward the creation of a new aesthetics. It could be interesting to compare my ethnography with an example from the Yanesha of the Peruvian Amazon who, encouraged by a potter and an anthropologist to introduce patterns on their *cushmas* (tunics), enthusiastically adopted the new - and by now ‘traditional’ - style (Santos-Granero 2009b:489).

mistake again. Indeed, whenever I brought to her house some other potters' work, she would closely examine it, only to find symmetrical faults and lacunae. These systematic errors, she would comment, giving me a reproachable look, would surely deter 'anyone who really knows' from buying this pottery. Similarly Gloria, a woman from Teresa mama, explained to me that when she had gone to a tourist resort in Tena to sell her pottery, the owner, a North American, had showed her another pot - decidedly 'not Runa' - covered with very thin lines. The design had a mesmerizing beauty. 'This is how you could paint', he suggested her; 'so fine that when you look at it you feel dizzy (*uma muyhuan*)'. Gloria told me that, following that episode, she became known for the vertiginous beauty of her design.<sup>128</sup>



**Fig. 30. Example of 'symmetrical' design. Photo by Melania Arias.**

My own designs were avidly copied too. It was not long after I had began to paint that I grew tired of drawing lines. To entertain myself, I decided to change 'style' and I drew some figures - a woman and a tree - in a *mucabua*. My host at the time,

<sup>128</sup> White people do not, however, always figure as the benevolent dispensers of a new aesthetics. In describing her early visits to a gallery in Quito, around thirty years ago, a friend of mine recalled how the foreign owner used to terrify her by screaming 'Ugly, ugly, ugly!' when she and others brought their pieces. Other potters equally claimed that a well known foreign buyer who lived in Tena could make explode the firing pottery only by looking at it, if he thought it was not beautiful enough.

Maria, looked at it in amazement: how did it come to my mind to draw *pasu supai huarmi*?<sup>129</sup> She thought it was beautiful, and begged me to teach her how to do it. Under her careful look, I began to make a new drawing. After copying mine on a pot, she began to make a new figure, which represented a forest spirit, *sacha runa*, with a blowpipe and a spear. For a while she abandoned her usual designs, dedicating all her time to figurative designs. Other potters who came to her house had a look at my figures and positively commented upon them. Every time a woman came, she sat with us looking at the different drawings we were making. Very soon, the tourist venues near the Puyo river where some Runa potters go to sell their *mucahuas* became filled with figures of monkeys, fish, *supai runa* and *supai huarmi*. Whilst this ‘new’ style stayed in vogue for a while, it slowly declined after few months. Potters resumed their line-based design and only occasionally inserted a figure in it.

If the idea of white people as teachers of Runa designs seemed to me bizarre, less so was the idea that the ultimate buyer was always imagined as a white person. Whilst it is often with *mestizo* (*jabuallacta*) or other indigenous intermediaries that Runa women have to deal with, most buyers are indeed tourists from North America and Europe. However, only sporadically these latter become direct clients of the Runa potters I worked with. Despite the little physical contact Runa potters held with foreign tourists, they attributed to these imagined whites an eye for detail, an appreciation of complex designs and a taste for fine and symmetrical patterns. I could see that Runa potters constantly strove to imagine what might leave a white onlooker in astonishment. ‘What do you think a *gringo* would say seeing this design Francesca?’, was a common question I would be asked by my teachers. Importantly, this question was made when the potter herself already knew the answer. ‘Beautiful’, they would mutter to themselves with a grin.

In light of the importance many Amazonian people attribute to foreign knowledge it is perhaps not so perplexing that, for the Runa, *gringos* should figure as teachers. As Norman and Sibby Whitten (1987, 1988) have emphasised, elements from ‘other’ worlds, such as the world of the forest or of white people, constituted a major inspirational resource for women potters. The element of ‘foreignness’ so

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<sup>129</sup> A kind of forest being in the guise of a woman-palm tree.

assiduously present in pottery making has led Norman Whitten (1976) to draw a connection between shamanic and pottery knowledge. Noticing, at the time of his first fieldwork, that every shaman's sister or wife was a knowledgeable potter, he suggested that women's designs - which are a primary means for incorporating novelty - closely parallel the 'hybrid' visions of the shaman (*yachaj*).<sup>130</sup> This latter figures among the Runa as the intermediary between 'our knowledge' (*ñucanchi yachai*) and others' knowledge (*shuj shimita yachai*). Through his peregrinations to the land of other people, the *yachaj* learns songs and visions from others and incorporates them in his repertoire. Perhaps the most visible characteristic shared by potters and shamans is their heightened mobility. Like the *yachaj*, Runa potters travel extensively to other places in and outside Ecuador. Most potters I worked with enjoy exceptional freedom of movement and financial independence. Elderly master potters are often bilingual or even trilingual and many have lived in and travelled to different places within Ecuador.<sup>131</sup> A few potters I know have travelled extensively outside the country, attending exhibitions and giving classes to students. One could perhaps argue that, while the *yachaj* travels to acquire new knowledge, potters do so to sell their work. However, this difference becomes attenuated if we consider, as I showed above, that many potters consider their travels and encounters with others to be a fundamental source of new knowledge.<sup>132</sup> In the next section, I turn to look more closely at the connection between shaman's visions and potter's designs, judging to what extent we can draw a parallel.

### **The shaman's vision and the potter's design**

The shaman (*yachaj*) for the Runa is, literally, 'the one who knows'. This knowledge is accomplished through various means, the most powerful of which is the healing and investigation done through the drinking of the hallucinogenic vine known as

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<sup>130</sup> This is still the case today to a certain extent, albeit the number of powerful *yachaj* has steadily declined.

<sup>131</sup> Achuar is often the third language, after Quichua and Spanish. However a few younger potters who have travelled to Europe also spoke English and other languages.

<sup>132</sup> Perhaps one could say that potters's movements today resemble those of male indigenous leaders - who are likewise involved in intense travelling. Indeed the parallelism between shamanic visions and designs could also be easily translated into a comparison between indigenous leaders' actions and master potters, with particular reference to 'visions' and travels. Due to space constraints, I limit myself to the discussion of the first parallelism here; I hope however to develop the latter in future work.

*ayahuasca*. In a shamanic seance, just before ingesting *ayahuasca*, the *yachaj* sniffs tobacco water which will help him to make his visions clearer (Whitten & Whitten 1988:36-7). Shortly after the ingestion, *ayahuasca* visions begin to appear, taking the shape of circular, kaleidoscopic patterns which are often paralleled by my Runa informants to the flashy lights of a television screen. Colourful, intricate designs found on textiles, pots, or clothes are similarly compared to *ayahuasca* visions. Soon the patterns begin to assume the contours of animals, people and *supai* (forest spirits). All images run in front of the drinker, as in a torrential flow. Only the *yachaj* knows how to control the flow of these images. He can transform a terrifying image into a meaningful one, or alternatively, he can focus on seeing certain things rather than others: as such, he can quietly undergo the travel without losing his mind. Today, when a person drinks *ayahuasca* on his own, without the help of a *yachaj*, this profusion of images can terrify the inexpert drinker. If he were to scream - people say - this would signal his imminent death.

The relationship between seeing and knowledge in indigenous Amazonia is one which has received extensive analysis and reflection.<sup>133</sup> Within the Amazonian landscape, the shaman is a fundamental 'seer': he is the one who articulates the relationships between human and animals, between prey and predator, between indigenous and white people. Vision, along with hearing, is for the Runa a fundamental mode for knowing about other worlds.<sup>134</sup> Recently, a number of works has highlighted the association between shamanic visions and women's designs (Fortis 2010; Gow 1999; Lagrou 2007b). Gow (1999) for instance, sees both Piro women's designs and the patterns which appear during visions as products of 'knowledge'. He contrasts these 'designs' to those found on the skin of natural species. He argues that whilst the latter are intrinsic to the animal itself, the former belong to the realm of 'knowledge'. The body forms which appear to the shaman are 'illusory', contingent upon the inherent capacity of spirits to change their appearance. The form of the spirit - who can potentially take up all shapes - corresponds to the spirit's 'culture' (or knowledge). Thus, Gow suggests, the form of the spirit (its 'designs' so to speak) is not intrinsic to its being, but it is rather the

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<sup>133</sup> For works which deal with the importance of vision amongst neighbouring Amazonian people see Kohn (2002); Rubenstein (2012); Taylor (1996).

<sup>134</sup> For the importance of 'hearing' amongst the Runa see Nuckolls (1996), Kohn (2002); Gutierrez-Choquevilca (2012).

result of a specific metamorphic knowledge. In a similar way, the designs Piro women make on the surface of pots or on textile are the materialisation of the knowledge she acquired during her life, not an intrinsic quality of the ceramic surface itself.

In the case of the Runa, the parallel between shamanic visions and women's designs has been emphasised by Whitten & Whitten (1988) who suggest that, in both instances, the flow of 'images' is controlled and managed. The appellative *sinzhi muscuj buarmi* (strong visionary woman) used to describe master potters, speaks about their capacity of seeing designs in dreams and then, of reproducing them on the surface of pots.<sup>135</sup> Like shamans, potters are powerful intermediaries between different realities. In particular, Whitten & Whitten emphasised women's capacity of balancing 'traditional knowledge with modern experience' (1988:24), operating thus as syncretic agents within an increasingly changing world.<sup>136</sup>

If the parallels drawn until this point are decidedly poignant, it is important to notice however that shamanic visions and pottery designs differ in one important way. Whitten & Whitten give us a glimpse of this difference in the following paragraph:

By portraying such imagery in ceramics, women give palpable form to shamanic imagery, just as the shamans, in seance, bring from within their wills imagery that the women not only 'see' but also 'clarify' (1988:24).

The different choice of verbs to describe the activities is salient: the potters' job is not only to 'see' but also to bring to light, to make clear. Unlike *ayahuasca* patterns which can be seen only with the aid of the potent hallucinogen and, most

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<sup>135</sup> Whilst the Whittens' research participants declared to see the designs they painted in dream, I have not heard such remark among the Runa potters I worked with.

<sup>136</sup> It is important to notice that among the examples he gives us of this 'syncretic ability', a few concern figures, rather than designs: Whitten's potters make figures in the shape of a Godzilla, an oil worker, etc. Whilst my focus in this chapter is solely on designs, the principle at work is similar. In my case, I argue that a work of translation can be found also where 'the foreign' might not be readily visible, such as in the aesthetics of designs itself. Just like shamans through their visions produce images which are decidedly 'foreign' (see Chapter 3), belonging to the spirit, non-indigenous and animal world, designs can condense aesthetic forms from elsewhere.

importantly, from the solitary perspective of the *yachaj*, the designs women make are visible to everyone. More importantly, *they are there only for the purpose of being seen*. Like the *yachaj*, the potter may ‘see’ designs; however this is not enough. She needs to take a step further, she needs to make them visible *for others*. This seems to me a crucial difference. The *yachaj* sees the true forms of the world through *ayahuasca*-induced visions but can not render them manifest for everyone. Indeed, the role of a shaman can be the opposite, being cryptic and esoteric knowledge the realm of his expertise. The job of these master potters, on the contrary, is to bring to light, to make forms visible.

The saliency of the interior/exterior dichotomy for an analysis of designs has been highlighted by Fortis (2010) in his work on Kuna designs. He suggests that amniotic designs – that is the patterns formed by placental fluids on the head of a newborn – ‘turn outward’ the person’s inner potentialities. According to the Kuna, the children whose designs cannot be seen at birth, may never be able to externalise their inner capacities (intelligence, wit, etc.). In this perspective, designs function as signals for making interior capacities ‘work’. Gow’s (1999) analysis of Piro designs similarly emphasises the importance of women’s exteriorization of knowledge through designs. In occasion of the Piro female initiation ritual, the grandmother comes to paint the body of the initiate. Gow suggests that when the girl comes out of seclusion and appears beautifully painted, what other people are really seeing is the ‘knowledge’ of the girl’s grandmother, externalised on the young body in the form of designs. Designs thus ‘bring out’ the capacity of the old woman, her status as an accomplished mother and wife.

It is indeed on this exteriorizing knowledge, on this movement ‘outwards’ which seems to be fairly typical of Amazonian designs, that I want to focus now. However, I would like to clarify here the meaning of this ‘exterior’. From the comparison with the Kuna and Piro ethnographic cases, one might be inclined to think of Runa designs as the tangible ‘external’ manifestation of an ‘internal’ knowledge which exists somewhat independently in one’s head. However, I believe that to do so would be misinterpreting the Runa materials. As I began to suggest in Chapter 3, the Runa do not think of knowledge as a set of thoughts hidden in one’s inner self. As explained above, even ‘holding the designs in one’s head’ is not conceptualised as holding a pre-existing mental schema, but rather to a set of capacities enacted at

the moment of execution (e.g. well trained eyes and hands). Thus, it would be distorting to imagine that Runa women ‘bring out’ of their minds the designs and ‘attach’ them onto the surface of pots. To do so would correspond to imagining a human intentionality detached from action in the world (cf. Ingold 2000) or worse, to say it in Runa terms, to imagining a knowledge detached from its visible expression (a point to which I will return in Chapter 6).

Thus, the difference I draw between shamanic visions and potters’ designs is not so much that one is ‘internal’ knowledge whilst the other is ‘external’, but rather that the first is not readily manifest - being only visible from a lone perspective - whilst the latter are purposefully brought to light for others to see.<sup>137</sup> I thus turn now to consider the potency of designs by looking at the effects of this *seeing*. To do so, I suggest that we need to consider designs in conjunction with the object upon which they are often drawn, the *mucabua*, the drinking bowl for serving manioc beer.

### ***Sumaclla ricuri: beauty, desire and abundance***

It was a hot afternoon in Puyo and I was sitting next to Esthela, looking at her recent creations, a set of *mucabuas* made upon request for a shop in Quito. One struck my attention for it possessed a small jaguar’s head sticking out of the bowl. I asked her about this *mucabua* and the small jaguar’s head. She smiled proudly and took the *mucabua* with both her hands. Lifting it up close to her mouth, she mimicked the act of drinking from it. Then she said to me: ‘When a man is drinking manioc beer, as he drinks he will suddenly see the jaguar appear and he will be pleased. He will be looking at the *mucabua* and feel happy’.

*Cushi*, being happy, is, for the Runa, a logical consequence of witnessing beauty. The two concepts are inextricably intertwined. Happiness is thus not understood as separate from beauty: it rather emerges from an attention to beauty. Beauty here does not refer to the intrinsic quality of an external reality, but rather to an appreciation of things which are ‘properly made’. I never heard anyone admiring

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<sup>137</sup> I acknowledge the pitfalls of using expressions such as ‘exterior’ or ‘bring to light’ without implying a somewhat ‘inner’ reality. I have no solution to these difficulties, if not that of recognising them openly; the limits of my own language are indeed ‘the limits of my world’ as Wittgenstein (1961 [1921]) cogently put it.

the beauty of birds or other animals: yet, when their skins and feathers are arranged in headdresses or other ornaments, they endow with beauty previously uninteresting objects. Similarly, a human body is not thought to be 'beautiful' for its physical characteristics but rather for the work done upon it (through make-up, clothing, facial painting, or ingestion of food). Thus, for example, a 'beautiful' woman is one which is solidly built and plump (indications of her kin's feeding work). Her face is finely painted with genipapo juice, her hair neatly combed and her dress clean and colourful. Given this comprehensive concept of beauty, even mundane tasks such as skinning an animal or preparing a fish soup can be considered 'beautiful' activities if properly carried out. The concept of 'artful everyday' with which Overing (2003:295) described Piaroa living could be comfortably applied to the Runa. As part of knowledge, beauty thus emerges from a relation, that between the seer and the maker. If the first needs to know how to make beauty, the latter needs to be able to see it. This idea of beauty closely resembles the description given by Lagrou (2007b) for the Cashinahua. For these latter:

Beauty is not considered as something external, existing in a world of objects independent from those who perceive them, but like something which pertains to the relation between the world and a capacity to see, based upon acquired knowledge (2007b:88, my translation).

Those who see 'beauty' are inevitably affected by it. In what ways do designs 'affect' those people who recognise their potency? I suggest that they do so by virtue of their capacity for eliciting happiness (*cushi*) and desire (*munai*). This became increasingly clear to me due to the conventionality of the images evoked by my friends to stress the beauty of their own designs. One day, for example, as we were contemplating her *mucabuas*, Ana laughed and remembered that, on occasion of a working party she held at her house, everyone got drunk.

My pottery was so beautiful that people kept drinking! 'You paint so well!', the men would tell me, looking at my *mucabua*! And then again, they would keep drinking! They would tell me: 'Tricky Ana who makes us drunk with these beautiful *mucabuas*!' The women would also say: 'What a wonderfully painted bowl (*ima munai pintashca mucabua*)!' At the end of

the day, everyone was drunk (*machashca*). This is what happens when [bowls] are beautifully painted. People look at them and just keep drinking!

Ana's story was far from unusual. During drinking parties, as people sit, holding the *mucahuas* in their hands, they often remark upon the designs that slowly emerge from the manioc beer. During advanced states of inebriety, people teasingly complain to the female owner of the house that she has purposefully made them drunk. One of the means for achieving the desirable state of drunkenness during social events is to draw beautiful designs on the drinking bowls.

The saliency of beautiful designs becomes all the more evident in occasion of Runa ceremonial festivals. During this special event, which takes place only once a year in most villages, women spend about two weeks producing various *mucahuas* and animal-shaped vessels (Fig. 31 & 32). During *jista* time it is compulsory for women who serve as helpers in the ceremonial house to make a wide assortment of different drinking bowls and figurines.

With these, women serve first the men of their own ceremonial house and then the male visitors from other houses.<sup>138</sup> Other vessels such as *purus* (small jar-shaped bowls) and animal-shaped figurines are also used: these often possess multiple holes so that when women force the guests to drink, they simultaneously shower him with beer through the other hole. These figurine-shaped vessels are produced exclusively during festival time and women refer to this pouring through different holes as *cuinana* (to vomit) — an act of fertility as *asua* too is produced by a regurgitation. During these time, 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 — ‘make him drink forcefully, until he vomits’ (*sinzhi upichingui pai cuinangabua*) — as I was told during one such occasion. The dousing and pouring will ensure the ripening of fruits and thus the fattening of game. Within this vital flow, beautiful designs help to make beer circulate by seducing the drinker into ingesting more beer, till their bellies are full and cannot take more.

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<sup>138</sup> Men use their wives or sisters' bowls to get female guests drunk.



**Fig. 31. *Mucabuas* for a festival. Photo by Flavio Mayancha.**

Few days after such a festival had taken place in Nukanchi Allpa, I went to visit the ceremonial owners. Upon entrance into their house, I noticed a large, about one metre tall ceramic figurine standing on a wardrobe. It was a vessel in the shape of a two-faced woman. Her whole body - face, hair, limbs - was beautifully painted and, on the top of her head, the potter had made a hole through which one could drink manioc beer. I could not help but staring intermittently at the towering figure until, finally, I had the occasion to ask who had made it. My host's wife proudly claimed it as her own creation, she took it and handed it to me. The mesmerizing appearance was further enhanced by the fine lines with which her body was covered. Then, as I was holding it in my hands, my host explained:

I filled it with manioc beer and I went around with it, to make people drink. You should have seen how people liked drinking from it! They would stare at it and tell me it looked very beautiful. They kept drinking from it! A man even wanted me to give it to him. He begged me and begged me so I said: 'I will give it to you if you can finish all the manioc beer (*illanma upingui*)!' Obviously he couldn't! In the end, he got drunk!



**Fig. 32. *Urcu supai* (forest spirit) vessel.**

In this example it is the combination of a stunning figure and the designs which covered its body which won over the man's resistance and finally got him drunk. That designs should affect a drinker and induce him into a state of pleasant inebriety is quite logical from the point of view of my Runa friends. This happens mostly, as Esthela put it in the opening paragraph, as one drinks and sees the patterns slowly emerging from the beer. The visualisation of designs *as one drinks* is

important for this process of seduction.<sup>139</sup> I realised this only when, as mentioned above, I decided to introduce figurative drawing on some of my *mucahuas* (Fig. 33).



**Fig. 33. Figurative designs (with the head of a *sacba runa*)**

When my teachers began to adopt this figurative style themselves, an immediate concern emerged: what was the 'right' direction of the figure? The problem was new, for the classical design of pottery is circular and, consequently, it doesn't have a 'right' or 'wrong' direction. From anywhere you look at it, it is the same. With the

<sup>139</sup> Whilst this is often the case, one needs not to drink to feel the visual impact of fine designs. This was the case of a well known potter in Puyo, whose workshop was filled with *mucahuas* of the most intricate designs. All were positioned on various shelves. The Runa people who visited her house always commented about her pottery with admiration. *Altarshina* ('like an altar', from the Christian 'altar'), people would say, to describe the abundance of pottery on the various shelves: *altarshina* was also the term people used to evoke the many beautiful pottery of *mangallpa apamama* (see Chapter 4). Such beauty leaves the white or Runa visitor *traumado* (fuzzy) which is also, significantly, the word to indicate the phase of post drunkenness.

introduction of a figure, this basic premise was altered. If one wanted to drink from the *mucabua*, the figure needed to be upright, facing the person: it didn't make sense if the bottom of the figure emerged first from the beer. As a friend succinctly put it: 'How can I drink with the anaconda's head upside down?'

The problem of 'direction' points to the effectiveness of designs to induce a state of seduction in the drinker. Under this light, the intricacies of master potters designs become more comprehensible. By virtue of their mesmerizing beauty, designs draw people and things.<sup>140</sup> In the case of work parties or ceremonial festivals, designs induce guests to consume more through the feeling of happiness (*cushi*) and desire (*munai*) their sight generates. This is why the making of pottery for a ceremonial festival is absolutely mandatory: no other vessel would have the same effects.

My depiction of the 'power' of designs echoes the description made by Paul Roscoe (1995) of the Yangoro Boiken spirit houses (*ka nimbia*). Rather than interpreting decorations as messages carrying semantic meanings, Roscoe suggests that the decorations of the *ka nimbia* facade are meaningful because they *affect* aesthetically and emotionally the viewers. Their potency and agency lies in their capacity for affecting people. In a similar fashion, I have deployed the term 'affected' to describe the ways pots impinge upon people's life (see also Strathern 2013). Alfred Gell (1998) also uses the term when discussing the agency an object exerts upon a subject. In Gell's view, an object, like a Kula canoe, can 'enchant' the viewer by virtue of its technical virtuosity, namely, the artistic ability of the maker. By virtue of this cognitive enchantment, in Gell's theory, objects can indeed exert an 'agency' upon human subjects.

Runa designs, I argue, are not only tangible proofs of female 'knowledge' ('indexes' in Gell's language) but also, in circulating, they acquire a power of their own - the capacity of eliciting beauty and desire. They are effective in themselves. And they

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<sup>140</sup> Elsje Lagrou suggests that the labyrinthian character of Cashinahua designs fosters an 'active engagement of the spectator in the kinetic space created for the relationship between the lines' (2012:105). According to Lagrou, the interplay between visible designs and those which can only be imagined, points to a fundamental tension in Cashinahua cosmology. Whilst a detailed formal analysis of designs is beyond the scope of this chapter, I think that Lagrou's point well illustrates the kind of 'engagement' described by the Runa in terms of 'seduction'.

are so powerful because they are beautifully fabricated. Gell's attention to the virtuosity of technological processes echoes the fascination the Runa hold for things which are 'beautifully made'. Runa designs possess a power of seduction *because* they are beautifully made (even if not uniquely by an individual mind as suggested in Chapter 4). The concomitance of these states of being (both women's knowledge and autonomous force) is what renders it difficult to talk about these objects in any definitive way.

Returning to the problem of 'direction' mentioned above, I wish to point to a further issue, namely, the apparent lack of concern people showed about 'who' the ultimate user of their pots would be. To put it more clearly: in the case of Runa potters who implemented the figurative style, the *mucahuas* were not made for house consumption but for sale to tourist avenues. Why should then one care about 'direction', I questioned my teachers, if ultimately the *mucahua* was not made for drinking manioc beer? What seemed to me like a very logical observation, went unheard. As stated earlier, after the excitement of the first few months, everyone resumed the old style. A major reason for this abandonment, I suggest, was the resistance of potters at imagining the receiver of their art as *other than a Runa person*.

This statement may seem in contradiction to what I argued before, namely that potters always imagine their final buyers as white people. The opening vignette with Esthela gives us a glimpse of the solution to this apparent conundrum. When she held the *mucahua* and mimicked the act of drinking from it, Esthela was aware that her pot was probably going to end in the hands of a foreign white tourist. However, like my Runa teachers who felt uneasy by the directionality of the designs, she too always imagined the white buyer *as a Runa person*. Runa potters attribute to the whites the same degree of aesthetic sophistication they ascribe to themselves. Even if for Runa people beauty is self evident, they also recognise that not everyone is capable of seeing such beauty. In my informants' view, most Runa and white people are. *Mestizos*, however, are excluded from this shared capacity for witnessing beauty. As a logical consequence, white buyers, just like the Runa themselves, are susceptible to the beauty of pottery. This is why, according to the Runa, the pottery market is flourishing today: the exchange is possible only because the Runa and white foreigners are reputed to share the same attention to beauty and thus, the same susceptibility to it. This perspective is explicitly stated by Runa potters

themselves and reinforced by the experience of commercial encounters. Take, for example, a common experience of trade between a Runa potter and a Napo Runa buyer in a tourist venue in Tena.

Every time we arrived to the tourist 'resorts' we would always follow the same procedure. One by one, we would take the pots out of the boxes, and display them in a line under the eyes of the Napo Runa buyers who made admiring remarks upon the sight of the various *mucabuas*.<sup>141</sup> People often took and held the pieces in their hands, praising the delicateness of the design and asking questions about its technicalities. Amazement, wonder and appreciation were common reactions on the side of the buyers who often congratulated the potter on her excellence at painting.

It might seem - or at least it seemed to me - that very little happens during these encounters. No mention of 'style' is made, no specific suggestions or instructions are given. Indeed, generally, these meetings only last for about 10-15 minutes. This time is mostly spent in arranging the pots on the floor and then waiting to see if some money can be found to pay the potter.<sup>142</sup> So, what do potters 'learn' from these trips? What impressions and thoughts gather in their heads? Even without the gift of mind-reading, I would confidently suggest that there is, at least, one thing potters surely learn during those trips. From their wanderings across Ecuador, Runa potters return home with a strengthened conviction: that their designs are immensely *desired*. Indeed, our trips back home were usually punctuated by extensive reflections on the meetings. This is a fairly common and apparently straightforward reflection I would hear during the bus trip home:

Every time I go people are very happy to see me. They like my designs, they like my pottery. They always say that I am a very good person: I make very beautiful pottery. Tourists go there, see my pottery and they like it very much. So they come back.

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<sup>141</sup> The resorts in question are not more than small traditional Runa houses administered by some Napo Runa women to welcome foreign tourists. These Napo Runa owners buy pottery from Pastaza Runa potters to re-sell them to tourists.

<sup>142</sup> Most of the time, potters sold their pots on credit, receiving the payment (if ever) only 2-3 months later.

In most of such monologues, the ‘coming back’ of white people was always caused by the beauty generated by Runa designs.<sup>143</sup> As another friend put it, if tourism ‘works’ in Pastaza, this is mainly due to the magnificent work of Runa potters.

The ‘need’ for Runa potters was evident in other common statements I would hear in occasion of our trips to the Napo region. On our return home, potters would often make sympathetic if not condescending statements about Napo Runa people’s pitiful pottery skills. As one put it:

They need me to help them with the pottery. They can weave more or less well but you should see their designs. It won’t work! This is why they need to buy *mucahuas* from me. For this I can’t charge them too much, what would they do without me otherwise?

If designs equally draw drinkers and tourists into ‘consumption’, they do so in different ways. In the first case - the drinking of manioc beer - this consumption takes place with the explicit purpose of socializing, within an enclosed space, the community. In the latter, consumption takes place within a commercial context with people who can be strangers. Runa people might not be oblivious to this difference but they certainly downplay it, by constituting both events as instances in which abundance and beauty flourish. This leads me to an important question, namely, what kind of abundance is imagined and constituted in the commercial encounter between Runa potters and buyers? Is this the same as that imagined taking place in a drinking party?

Importantly, I would argue, this abundance does not consist solely in monetary remuneration. Whilst Runa potters in fact enjoy fantasizing on the sums *gringo* tourists would pay for their pots, when they are presented with the occasion of asking for a fair price, they hardly do so. I do not refer here to *mestizo* buyers - who are often arrogant and reluctant to pay much - but rather to occasions in which benevolent buyers (e.g. NGOs) are willing to pay whatever is deemed ‘fair’ for

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<sup>143</sup> I say ‘monologue’ rather than dialogue because often, in these reminiscences of the day, my friends did not really expect me to do anything, except for sitting there and listening to their self-appreciative soliloquy.

them. When I travelled with some Runa friends to Quito, we entered in a well known tourist shop where they had sold their pottery some time before. Walking between the various shelves, I noticed with outrage that the cost of an item was about ten times more than the original price and I exposed the injustice to my friends. I expected them to share at least some of my indignation: however, they listened distractedly to my remarks whilst looking at their own work exposed under the shop's lights. Then one said thoughtfully:

People like my designs so much they would pay anything for it! Look at these, aren't they beautiful? Of course these people from all over the world want them!

When I suggested that selling their work at low prices was a devaluation of one's work, a friend of mine shrugged her shoulders, simply stating: 'People will always come to buy my pots'. This last assertion echoes the nonchalance Runa potters often display when it comes to the payment of their work. These statements do not amount to a claim that Runa potters are not interested in remuneration for their work. They undoubtedly are, given that, for many women, pottery making represents the only hope of an income. However, I suggest that this regime of abundance is only partly constituted by a remuneration: commercial exchange cannot exhaust its complexity.

Finally, designs may ultimately engender another movement, one which, in Runa perspectives, is essentially the same, be the receiver a tourist or another Runa: the movement of women out their kin group. Designs, as painted mainly on drinking bowls, partake to the circulation of gendered objects. Both in the domestic economy as in the ritual sphere, *mucabuas*, along with manioc, are 'female' things, made by wives for husbands. Today *mucabuas* are still the first objects that a recently wed woman in a rural community needs to learn how to make, if she hasn't already done so at a younger age. The ability of making *mucabuas* corresponds to the ability of answering to one's husband's desire.

When a friend of mine from Pacayaku got married to a *mestizo* girl from Puyo, he was constantly teased about his wife's competencies. One day, during a *minga*, a neighbour mercilessly laughed at him, saying: 'You don't want to drink from a

*mucabua*, you don't want to marry my daughter (*canga mana mucabuan upinata munanghichu, ñuca ushita mana apinata munanghichu*)! My young friend was so embarrassed that he quickly went away. As the neighbor concisely phrased it, the desire for a wife and for drinking beer from *mucabuas* often coincide: ultimately a wife is someone who can provide manioc beer not in any container but in the recipient which enhances the desirability of *asua*. As a Runa man put it, 'if your wife makes beautiful pottery and lots of beer, then you will live a happy life'.

It is interesting to notice, at this regard, that, for the Runa, it is not surprising that foreigners should fall in love with those who are masterful potters.<sup>144</sup> I recall that, following the encounter with a tourist from Canada, my *comadre* came to me and told me with fright:

He saw my designs and he liked them so much that he asked me: 'Do you want to come with me to my country?' He said I could work there and that he would take care of me. I said that I didn't know if this was possible and he laughed and said: 'I shall talk to your husband'.

When my *comadre* told her husband, he had no doubts about the desire of the foreigner. 'He has seen that her *mucabuas* were so finely painted, and he fell in love!', he told me nonchalantly, as if this were completely understandable, whilst he kept weaving his basket. My *comadre*, albeit frightened by the offer, caressed the idea in her mind. 'Where would I be now if I said yes?', she asked me few months after the Canadian man had departed. 'Perhaps worse, perhaps better', she concluded pensively.

### **Conclusion: on women's work**

In this chapter I argued that abundance is created through the display of beauty. The 'meaning' which I was looking for in designs, consists, for the Runa, in the creation and sustenance of a beautiful world. This is mainly women's work. The gendered nature of this process is evident in its maternal connotations. The word *churana* used to define the 'mother line' of designs literally means 'to place'. In

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<sup>144</sup> Indeed many marriages between European and North American men with Runa potters seem to confirm this intuition.

everyday speech, the verb is used to indicate sexual intercourse, or better, the placing of a baby. Whitten (1976: 90-1) reports that his research participants called the smaller black lines which follow the *mama churana* respectively *cari pintashca* (male/husband painting) and *buahua churana* (child's body or dress). He observes that the Runa he worked with referred to these smaller lines only in relation to the *mama churana*. The 'husband's line' was called 'her painting' (*pai pintashca*): it existed as a line only in relation to the 'mother' one. In light of this, Whitten (1976:90-1) suggests that the *mama churana* is an image of the ways continuity, for the Runa, is asserted through the female body. Encompassing men's and children's bodies, the mother's body gives 'meaning' to the wider design.

Whitten's argument is suggestive and points to a fundamental issue here, that of creation and cultural continuity. If the first concept has been (justly) attacked for bearing Eurocentric connotations (Descola 2013; Ingold 2000; Viveiros de Castro 1998), one cannot however talk about designs without conceding some space to notions of creativity. In this chapter, I have sought to complicate any straightforward notion of 'creativity' by, for instance, showing the relationship between Runa potters and white 'teachers'. I also mentioned that designs draw from a repertoire of lines which remains more or less stable. Nevertheless, women's ability is judged upon their capacity of arranging those patterns in the most exquisite manners. Indeed, it does not take a long time for an external viewer to begin distinguishing the 'style' of one potter from another. Technical ability, as I mentioned earlier, is greatly emphasised by Runa potters and serves as a discriminant to talk about 'beauty'. When potters emphasise the beauty of 'their' designs, they are explicitly remarking upon their own creativity *vis-à-vis* that of other potters. In this very recognition and comparison lies the idea of 'beauty'. An analysis of Runa designs thus begs for a vocabulary and a theory enabling to talk about 'creativity' in ways which exceed models of ex-Deus creation.

Whitten's remarks on the 'mother line' as well as my own ethnography on the process by which Runa women make knowledge visible for others, bring me to a another, related point, that of cultural continuity. In a paper on gender hierarchy among Jivaroan groups, Charlotte Seymour-Smith (1991) argued that, among the Shiwiar, women are attributed the work of preserving the group's cultural unity, whilst men are involved in the political process of representation *vis-à-vis* the

nation state and other ‘external’ agents. This results in Jivaroan women being cast as those who should ensure the continuity of traditional culture, whilst men are in charge of representing it at a political level, through encounters with powerful outsiders. Harry Walker (2013) makes a similar point about Urarina women who are encouraged to wear traditional clothing as well as speaking native language unlike their male counterparts who, conversely, seek to obtain a ‘modern’ identity through the possession and display of ‘foreign’ trade goods.

At a first glance, Runa women would seem to be caught in a parallel process. The ‘cultural’ stuff Runa women are supposed to preserve include: speaking one’s language, wearing traditional garments, painting facial designs with genipapo juice, making pottery and manioc beer. Those who do not ‘show’ such characteristics are often criticised for being lazy or not being ‘proper’ Runa women (see Chapter 3 & 6).

However, in stark contrast to Shiwiar and Urarina women, Runa women - and in particular, potters - enjoy a great freedom of movement.<sup>145</sup> To attend events or markets, they often travel alone for days, weeks, or even, in exceptional cases, for months. Whilst the Jivaroan women described by Seymour-Smith seem to be precluded from entering ‘outside’ realms, through pottery making Runa potters become influential figures within their communities. Through pottery, women marry, learn and teach strangers. In festivals and working parties, it is through pots and manioc beer that relationships are forged and sustained.

Thus, if on the one hand we have the high mobility and independence of Runa women, on the other, we have a marked inclination for women to bear the tangible signs of ‘culture’. Whilst this might look like a paradox, I argue, it is not. For all the activities in which Runa women (like their Urarina and Shiwiar counterparts) engage are processes of ‘exteriorizing’ knowledge or, perhaps using a more appropriate phrase, of making knowledge visible. Given the ethnography presented in this and previous chapters, I suggest that, if on the one hand, women’s

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<sup>145</sup> Perhaps the distinction between potters and women is spurious: as far as one is a Runa woman, she *should be* a potter. This is certainly the case for virtually all my adult informants (aged between 25–70) whilst the situation is somewhat different for the younger generation of Runa women, especially those living in the city (see next chapter).

propensity to ‘externalise’ knowledge enables them to move freely between different realms and places, on the other, it creates the appearance of a marked gendered conservatism as cultural forms need to be constantly made visible. To a greater degree than their male counterparts, Runa women are involved in making such knowledge visible for others.

In effectively ‘embodiment’ knowledge, Runa women work to maintain the internal unity of the group whilst successfully representing ‘culture’ to outsiders. Indeed many Runa potters immensely enjoy the role of teachers they are able to take up in workshops, exhibitions or school events, representing their culture to non-Runa. This double condition - of both embodying and representing culture to others - is however far from idyllic: it creates certain ambiguities and disjunctions, which become exacerbated for those Runa women who live in the city. The difficulties of being a ‘proper’ Runa in the city - in charge of upholding Runa knowledge in an ever changing environment - form the subject matter of the next chapter.

## Chapter 6. On knowing and not-knowing

This thesis has sought to answer the very complex question of what ‘knowledge’ is for the Runa. Throughout the previous chapters, I have argued that knowledge is conceptualised as the proper reproduction of forms. Importantly, I also suggested that Runa women are more intensely involved in this work of reproducing ‘visible’ forms.

In this chapter I wish to explore, once again, the question of what knowledge is for the Runa by taking a somewhat longer path. To investigate what ‘knowing’ is, I start from analysing what ‘not knowing’ means for contemporary Runa people. I think this is an urgent and important task, given the collective cultural amnesia Runa people often lament. Drawing upon a story of self-proclaimed ignorance, I thus proceed in delineating what ‘knowledge’ is for the Runa. Reiterating themes already explored in the previous chapters, I will argue that knowledge is conceptualised by most Runa as the reproduction of visible ‘movements’, as one friend bluntly put it. Knowledge is what you do, beautifully and visibly. If this conception of knowledge makes the task of ‘turning’ into a Runa a relatively easy and reversible process, on the other hand the process of this becoming may be replete with existential doubts. Through the narrative of Teresa, a woman who underwent a long apprenticeship to become a proper Runa, I will show how the process might generate reflections on the status of ‘knowledge’ itself, leading to what Runa people might perceive as drastic changes within their lives.

I met Teresa - the protagonist of this chapter - little after my arrival to Pastaza. She immediately struck me as a sagacious, irreverent and very perceptive woman. I was irresistibly drawn to her by her capacity for self-reflection, which she invariably fashioned with canny humour. In desperate need of a friend, I quickly began to visit her assiduously. She let me become a constant presence in her house because she was curious of my ‘foreignness’ and she too often felt very lonely. The complexity of Teresa’s character was immediately evident to me, just like it was her acute self-awareness of the problems she faced in life. Being an indigenous woman living in the city, Teresa is profoundly conscious of the dilemmas and hardships entailed in

this condition. She analysed herself and the world around her in such a crystalline manner to leave me, on occasions, at loss for words.

To the eyes of many (and to her own sometimes), Teresa undoubtedly belongs to the category of 'acculturated' Indians. She lives in the city, living a life which bears little resemblance to the one carried out by her rural counterparts. She does not grow manioc, she doesn't go to gather clay. At the same time, however, Teresa is one of the many Runa women I met who consider themselves to have undergone a 'reverse' acculturation. Having left her native community when she was only a child, Teresa underwent the process of 'becoming Runa' only after she got married to an indigenous man. Like many of her age mates who too have experienced moving in and out of their communities, she 'became' a proper Runa woman only in her late twenties. Despite her claims to knowledge, however, as I mentioned above, Teresa constantly seemed 'uncertain' about what (or how much) she knows.

In a paper on the implications of considering 'not-knowing' as an ethnographic object, Liana Chua (2009) discusses the figure of the 'knowledgeable' informant, with reference to Muchona the Hornet, exegete of Ndembu rituals in the work of Victor Turner (1967). Reflecting on the pervasiveness of the Muchona-style informant in the anthropological imagination, Chua observes that during her fieldwork 'more prominent were many *non*-Muchonas who could or would not expound on the things I asked about' (2009:332). Pondering on her words - and on my own expectations about informants - I wondered whether Teresa too, in this chapter, could embody a *non*-Muchona of a valuable kind. Indeed, like the case of the Bidayuh youths, her 'not knowing' entailed much more than a simple assertion of ignorance.

As mentioned above, in the first period of my fieldwork, Teresa often answered my questions with a mortified admission of ignorance. Not all my questions, however, were met with ominous silence. It was only the ones which she thought I asked to elicit something about 'Runa culture' that put her into visible discomfort. How did the Runa begin to make pottery? How do you make *vinillu*? What kinds of spirits inhabit the forest? I would ask her. Multiple things were happening at once in our encounter - many of which I was not entirely aware of. On the one hand, I was trying to understand some facts about 'Runa culture' whilst simultaneously testing

her for her ability to conform to that idea. On the other hand, Teresa tried to grasp what I meant with ‘culture’ (thus imagining ‘one’ herself). Sensing that my idea of ‘culture’ pertained more to the realm of competence of her grandmother’s generation than hers, she expressed feelings of inadequacy. In her admission of ignorance, she had perfectly understood the anthropologist’s aims.

However, I do not want to suggest here that Teresa expressed ‘ignorance’ because I was asking the wrong questions. Nor, for that matter, I think that Teresa came to imagine a ‘culture’ only in response to my presence as foreign ethnographer. Unlike Chua’s informants, Teresa was not happy with this state of ‘ignorance’. When she claimed she didn’t know, she did so with shame and eagerness to learn more. It was not only me thus who invented and wanted to know more about ‘culture’: Teresa was involved in a parallel process but, importantly, for different reasons and with different results. Thus, in this chapter I want to explore how Teresa herself has come to invent a Runa ‘culture’. I use here the terms ‘imagination’ and ‘invention’ following Wagner’s (1981) suggestion. Only after exploring this process, I ask the question of what ‘not-knowing’ might mean for Teresa and people like her, taking up the challenge of considering loss of knowledge ‘as part of the data, not as loss of data’ (Strathern 2004 [1991]:95).

In analysing Teresa’s narrative, I am particularly interested in the feelings of shame, embarrassment and laughter which accompanied her apprenticeship of certain Runa ‘forms’. I take these moments to be revealing of a process of questioning certain basic assumptions about what knowledge and ‘Runaness’ are. I suggest that, through the process of reverse acculturation, Teresa came to doubt certain fundamental assumptions which underscore Runa knowledge practices. In so doing, the present chapter also hopes to contribute to the study of ontological assumptions (Scott 2007) by looking at an interstitial space: the space of doubt. Acknowledging spaces of doubt means, in the words of Mathijs Pelkmans, ‘that ‘mapping the world’ is insufficient in explaining why people think and act the way they do’ (2013:32). I suggest that looking at feelings of doubts and uncertainty might shed light on the processes of change and transformation which have been characterised as central to Amazonian indigenous worlds.

Influenced by the oeuvre of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1993), ethnographers such as Gow (2001, 2007), Vilaça (2000, 2007) and others (cf. Santos-Granero 2009b), have seen ‘change’ as part of a fundamentally indigenous logic. Accordingly, body paint, feathered headdresses as well as the adoption of Western clothing can no longer be viewed merely as ‘reactions’ to white society or as ways of strategically deploying a rhetorics of ‘authenticity’ for one’s own ends. Their work convincingly demonstrated that, given the body’s inherent mutability (see Chapter 2), ‘change’ in habits can be effectively reconceptualised as a kind of ‘transformation’, akin to those that shamans undertook to engage with the world of animals and spirits. This conceptual move required an analytical and ethnographic shift for, ‘in order to study the invention of a tradition, one has to first study the “indigenous tradition of invention”’ (Fausto 2009:497). Put it differently, Amazonian people change within their own mechanisms of ‘change’: there is nothing dramatically new in transformation.

If this emphasis in many ways helped to rethink and value a different kind of ‘agency’ whilst dismissing any simplistic accounts of ‘acculturation’, on the other hand, it left open many important analytical questions. One of the most urgent issues here regards the capacity of this system of perpetually digesting change (Fausto & Heckenberger 2007:10). Little work has been yet undertaken in this direction, towards exploring the mechanisms through which this system of eternal transformation can, at times, ‘fail’. Within this logic, indigenous people appear to partake to this continuous process of transformation without ever showing to be destabilised or uncertain about its outcomes. This ‘certainty’ contradicts, as recently noted by Magnus Course (2013), our informants often vocal diagnoses of loss and failure.

Such pessimistic diagnoses are common today in Pastaza, where Runa people of all ages feel that they are ‘degenerating’. They often complain that they are weaker, lazier and morally laxer than in the old times. Not drinking manioc beer and not speaking Quichua are perhaps the most visible aspects of this degeneration process which, however, according to the Runa, is subtler and encompasses much more than what is immediately evident to the eyes.

In exploring Teresa's story, I thus seek to recognise the doubts which accompany the process of becoming and (un)becoming a Runa and unpack their relationship to change. While I do not aim to provide any conclusive answer to these rather difficult questions, my effort should be understood as directed towards questioning the 'certainty' which often characterises accounts of indigenous ontologies.

In the second section of this chapter I will also address the relationship between 'knowledge' - as movements - and *la cultura* - 'culture', a word which has become a steady presence in Runa world. I suggest that the two concepts are thought to be coterminous by the Runa. Finally, by drawing on novel ethnography and the one explored in previous chapters, I argue that both ideas - knowledge and 'culture' - rely upon a particular construction of gender. If all Runa share unanimous views on what 'knowledge' and 'culture' consist of, it is mainly women who are in charge of reproducing it. The gendered asymmetry which characterises Runa knowledge regimes has important consequences for an analysis of 'acculturation' and change.

Teresa's story is the thread which links my various analytical observations. A caveat however might be necessary. If Teresa's turbulent life story might sound like an exceptional case, I wish to stress that this is not so. Most Runa women I met between twenty to forty year old have strikingly similar life histories and parallel patterns of learning. Similarly, as already mentioned above, Teresa was not by any means the only Runa person I met who ashamedly confessed to be in a state of 'crisis'. In Teresa's story, many Runa women could read their own.

### **'Between two worlds' : The story of a childhood**

Teresa was born in Canelos in 1984. Even though she has very few connections with the people there, she likes stating she is a *Canelosmanta buarmi* (woman from Canelos). She doesn't go there very often, only when she wants to 'have a break from the city, bathe into the river and eat some fruit'. Her siblings - five brothers and two sisters - live now in Puyo. Her mother owns two plots in Canelos, both in the *Comunidad Indígena* and in the colonial land. She still lives there with her two children, born from a successive marriage.

Her mother is *mestizo*, daughter of a *mestizo* man and Runa woman. Teresa often underlines this fact when talking about her childhood. She makes a causal link between her mother's origin and the fact that 'she knows so little'. When she was a child, her mother worked as a cook for the nuns in the Canelos Mission so she didn't have the time to work in the *chagra* (garden) nor to do pottery. Her father is an ephemeral figure in her early memories, coming and going from the house. With the money she earned with her job, Teresa's mother bought all things they needed, including soap, clothes, books and most of the food they ate. Their situation contrasted markedly with those of most families living in Canelos at the time who lived off the products of their gardens (*chagras*) and from hunting in the forest. When she was a child - Teresa recalls with pride - she never lacked eggs, rice and pasta, foods typically associated with 'urban' people.<sup>146</sup> Her mother did not have time to work in the garden so she would buy manioc and plantains from neighbours or kin. Childhood was never a time of hunger in Teresa's memories. However, not all her memories are so rosy. When talking about food, she can never avoid recalling the harsh discipline her mother subjected her to.

We [she and her siblings] always had to wash our hands before eating. We weren't allowed to eat wherever and whatever we liked, we had to behave ourselves at dinner. Otherwise she would hit us hard. Our mum didn't want us to grow up like savages.

Her mother's authoritarian education made their lives different from those of other children, at least in Teresa's opinion. Children living in villages along the Bobonaza, like among many other Amazonian people, live in a relatively constraint free environment, with parents exerting very little control or coercion. Concerning food, if a child eats or doesn't, is a matter of the child's personal choice: little concern is shown by the parents if a child rejects food. I never witnessed any parent worrying about table manners or standard hygienic procedures (e.g. washing hands) which Teresa's mother seems to have been so eager to enforce. For Teresa there was little choice but to learn to behave like an 'educated' girl. This caused her some problems with her age mates. One day, discussing about one of her schoolmates,

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<sup>146</sup> Despite her of foods, there was never mention in Teresa's account of any transformation due to the ingestion of specific foods.

who was also an acquaintance of mine, she recalled how this woman used to envy her when they were children.

My mum liked us to wear clean, fine clothes to go to school. She brushed our hair every morning. We would always wear shoes whilst other children came to school barefoot. So she [the woman] and other girls used to push me and pull my clothes till they ripped them apart. They were envious that I was well dressed whilst they had nothing. Every time I came home with my clothes ripped, my mum would get angry and hit me but I never told her the truth.

The fine clothes Teresa was able to wear provoked the envious reactions of other children, thus increasing her sense of being different from others. But perhaps, of all things, 'work' was what most set her apart from other children. While the majority of her schoolmates returned home and were expected to help their parents in the garden or in any other activities, Teresa spent most of her time playing. With her mother at work and her father who was often absent, she and her siblings spent most of their afternoons playing around in the Mission's square. 'This was another reason why I didn't learn to do things', she pensively reflected. However the situation changed dramatically when her mother abandoned them to move to a town in the nearby province and Teresa went to live with her maternal grandmother.

My grandmother was very evil to me. She always complained I was good for nothing. I didn't know how to make manioc beer, I wasn't used to go to the *chagra*. She would bring me along to the garden and I hated it. She would spend the whole day there. I got tired and bored and I wanted to go home. She would hit me hard, 'lazy' she would say, reminding me that I no longer lived with my mother now.

The 'neatness' of Teresa's early life - and her mother's attempts at having well groomed 'educated' children - contrasts with the hard work she was forced to perform as she moved in with her grandmother. Unhappy about her granddaughter, the old woman began to instruct her on her duties as a woman, gave her a machete and forced her to go together to work. Teresa remembers that her grandmother

wanted her to marry soon and was thus trying to make her a 'proper' Runa woman. She would cry at night but to no avail, for her *apamama* remained firm in her intents. Teresa's grandmother's complaints - as well as Teresa's despair - reverberate the concerns and the protests of many Runa women today.

In Ņukanchi Allpa, for example, Runa mothers often worry about the lack of interest shown by their young daughters in pottery making. Working with clay involves an intimate, direct engagement with the argil, the colours and saps. 'Weaving' necessarily leaves one's hands and one's clothes with traces of argil and dust; painting stains fingers and garments and, in the process of applying sap, one often gets his nails sticky with the natural varnish. Getting dirty is an inevitable consequence of work, or at least, of work as Runa women know it. Runa women in Ņukanchi often attribute their daughters and granddaughters' unwillingness to learn pottery and gardening to their distaste for getting dirty. This is a quality which they, as Teresa did, link to being *mestizo* or *blanco* (white).

On the other hand, young Runa girls, like Teresa with her grandmother, complain about the pressure they feel to become 'Runa' women. This is coupled by the failure of their mothers to understand that, in one girl's words, 'now life is different'. In Ņukanchi Allpa, whenever I visited a woman's house, it was a typical leitmotif to hear the complaint that young girls today only like 'lying on bed'. The critique is evident: she must be lying on bed - a condition which is proper only of the sick or of the *mestizos* - thus, she is doing nothing. Listening to music, chatting at the phone or going for a stroll in the centre - important moments for socialization in the city - amount to 'lying on bed' for concerned Runa mothers and grandmothers. 'Leisure time' for a specific generation of Runa has little meaning - it is only related to *minga* parties or ceremonial festivals. Even when this is so, 'work' is always present in the objects of manioc beer and meat which circulate.

One of her grandmother's concern was indeed Teresa's ignorance of the process for making manioc beer. As explained elsewhere in this thesis, manioc beer is the quintessential feminine food. In the house and during festivals alike, manioc beer is the materialisation of womens' work. Manioc beer ensures healthy bodies and its circulation strengthens and creates social relationships. Manioc beer needs to be made by the female owner of a house on occasion of important social events or

working parties. Thus, it is easy to see how, from Teresa's grandmother's point of view, she was worried and rightly so: to marry, Teresa needed to acquire the knowledge of making manioc beer. In a similar manner, mothers living in Ņukanchi Allpa worry about the future of their daughters and do not want them to 'forget' about manioc beer. So, they take advantage of any occasion to train them in the art of beer-making.

One such occasion is the ceremonial *jista* (festival) which in Ņukanchi Allpa takes place around Christmas. A large amount of manioc needs to be boiled, smashed and chewed in a process which may take up to four days of incessant work. The resulting purée is then stored in some containers (preferably *tinajas*) and allowed to ferment for a week. It is also one of the rare occasions where many unrelated women meet and sit together to work for few days, chatting about all sorts of issues, from the serious to the exhilarating. During the three days preparations of the Ņukanchi Allpa *jista* of 2013, the conversation revolved around one particular issue: the relationship between beer making and being a Runa woman.

The discussion began on the first day, as a dozen of women reached the ceremonial house and began to peel and chop the manioc. They worked under the supervision of the ceremonial owner of the house, Marcela, who provided them with sacks of manioc, bundles of firing wood and large cooking pots. Then Marcela hurried to town and left her twenty-three year old daughter to assist the women. As the manioc cooked and we began chewing, it became evident that Marcela's substitute did not seem willing to partake in the communal work. Whilst a dozen of women were patiently chewing and spitting, Marcela's daughter simply sat on a chair and talked. After observing her for a while, one of the elderly helpers, Filomena, asked her why she, the daughter of the ceremonial owner, did not help us to make beer. 'Don't you want to help your mother?', she inquired. The girl looked at her and with a nervous laugh she answered that she did not like chewing and spitting and that, in any case, she liked canned beer more than manioc beer (*asua*). The assertion left all the women silent. But, as soon as the girl left, the episode was brought up as an undoubtable sign that somethings was going terribly wrong with this young generation of Runa women.

'My daughter too is like that', a woman observed; 'She asked me: Mum, why do you have to spit out like that? I tried so many times to persuade her to make it with me but she always refuses'. Her narrative generated a concerted sigh, followed by more examples of the behavior of these 'lost' daughters and granddaughters. 'They don't like chewing', exclaimed Tania, one of the most vociferous speakers in the room; 'they think they look ugly with their mouths full of manioc!' 'No', shouted Charo, one of the elderly women; 'they don't like getting dirty. They like too much going around and they don't want to get dirty here'. As often happened in Runa conversations, the tone went from the dramatically indignant to the humorous. 'They are scared that at the end of the day, their jaws will hurt so much they won't be able to speak!', concluded Ana, amidst great laughter.

It was late in the afternoon that the conversation returned again to the topic of chewing and spitting manioc. A few more women from outside Ñukanchi Allpa had joined the group and, amazed at the sight of a *gringa* making manioc beer, I went under the spotlight. In particular, one of these newly arrived women wanted to take a picture of me *as I spat the purée* into the wooden recipient. The reason was simple: she wanted to show her daughter that even *gringas* like chewing manioc. She said that this might encourage her daughter to do it too. I shyly shrugged my shoulders but my friends exhorted me to do it, eager to expose my virtues to the unknown visitors. The greatest issue for me was technical: she had to take a picture fast enough to capture the image of spitting and I wasn't particularly keen on repeating this over and over again under the eyes of a dozen of women. Indeed, after repeated attempts, I tried to convince her to simply take a picture of me chewing. No, she firmly said (echoed by most of the women): the part in which I was spitting was the one she wanted.

When I told this episode to Teresa, she thought it was 'normal' that the woman wanted me to 'spit' rather than simply chew. She said that when she first made manioc beer with other women, she was taken aback by the 'exaggerated' spitting. This did not amount to say that she felt disgusted by it in the sense in which many

*mestizo* and white outsiders do.<sup>147</sup> What impressed Teresa was the formal qualities of spitting: the filling up of mouth and the power with which one spits out the liquid so that it is spread all over the manioc mass. This is impressive because difficult to reproduce and, undoubtedly, for those who do not spit like that, it represents a remarkable visual experience.<sup>148</sup> In its outstanding expression, this represented true knowledge. The specific photographic request was thus not a matter of authenticity - a proof I was 'really' making manioc beer and not just pretending (as I had thought) - but rather one of visual potency. To Teresa who has never been taught to make beer when she was little, chewing and spitting in a specific way *are* knowledge, knowledge which she attempted to reproduce as she grew older and her life circumstances dramatically changed.

### **Marrying a wild man**

At the end, Teresa's grandmother never succeeded in having her married in Canelos. Teresa escaped to Quito few months after her mother's departure and only returned to her natal village many years later, after she had already married.<sup>149</sup> The first time I was properly introduced to Teresa, she was accompanied by her husband with whom I became successively a good friend. Eloquent and always solemn, Richard, an Achuar from the hamlet of Kintiup, contrasted vividly with Teresa's uproarious personality. As my friendship with Teresa developed, her marriage became one of our favorite topics for conversation.

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<sup>147</sup> Manioc beer, as I explain elsewhere (Chapter 4), is made through a long, time consuming process which involves the gathering, cooking, smashing and chewing of manioc which is then stored for fermentation and later consumption. In town, manioc beer is ever present in the Sunday market which becomes filled with people, indigenous or not, who spend part of the day sitting on the benches and sipping beer. The chewing and spitting involved in manioc beer making is the object of much curiosity and repulsion - admittedly less now than in the past - amongst *mestizo* people. The issue of whether manioc beer is - or is not - a healthy, 'clean' beverage was one which recurrently came out in conversation with Puyo *mestizo* residents in relation to the selling of beer at the Sunday market.

<sup>148</sup> It was thus not a case that all my research assistants who lived in Puyo but were originally from the Napo province (where beer is made by less 'intense' chewing) always found the spitting of Pastaza Runa women quite distinctive.

<sup>149</sup> She only spent two months in Quito as a domestic worker. She 'escaped' from there and returned to Puyo where she lived in her aunt's house and worked in various occupations till she turned eighteen year old.

Teresa had met her husband in Puyo when she was 18 and quickly married him after a few months. Shortly after then, she travelled to his community, a two day journey by foot and canoe from Puyo. She stayed there for three years until her first son was born. The time spent in her husband's community was always remembered as a period fraught with innumerable difficulties. First, she did not speak nor understand Achuar and, although her husband's relatives were trilingual (Achuar, Quichua and Spanish), in the community they mainly spoke their idiom. Second, she was catapulted back into her early days at her grandmother's house: she was again a woman who 'did not know anything'. As such, she was subjected to a similar process of apprenticeship. She confessed me that she had to ask her husband how to plant *papa china* (a very common staple food in the area) because she had never done it before. He showed her but not without complaining. He grew more frustrated when she proved incapable of maneuvering a canoe, commenting that she must have been a *serrana* (indigenous from the Highlands) rather than Runa not to possess this basic skill.

Richard himself was partly Runa - on the maternal side - although he identified himself entirely as an Achuar. He had also spent part of his youth in Canelos where he attended secondary school and had thus a vast experience of living with Runa people. In recriminating Teresa's lack of skills, he was drawing comparisons with the Runa examples he had witnessed throughout his life - including those from his own Runa kin. He did not try to hide his contempt for this wife who, to his eyes, didn't even seem to be a Runa.

To make the matters worse, his family too was scornful about Teresa. Her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law would often make critical remarks about her incapability of doing even the simplest of tasks. They even physically abused her with the excuse that she was 'lazy' (*quilla*). They did not hesitate to attribute her inertia to the fact that she was Runa.

They sometimes said: 'Ah! Runa women are like that! Lazy!' This enraged me. I worked harder. I wanted to show them that Runa women are as good as their women!

Abused by her husband's kin and receiving little support from him, Teresa made an effort to (re)learn what she was supposed to have already known as a Runa woman. She would accompany her mother-in-law to the garden from early in the morning to late afternoon. She was always amazed at how the elderly woman never grew tired of cutting weeds with the machete, whilst her hands would quickly hurt and become full of painful blisters. Nevertheless, she would work quietly the whole day, silently craving in her mind for returning home and stay alone for a while.

In this process of apprenticeship, she began to notice subtle differences between the ways her husband's kin lived and the ways she had lived and seen people living in Canelos. In particular, in her narratives, she identifies the experience of Kintiup as the moment in which she learnt what Achuar culture was like. She gradually began to 'invent' (*sensu* Wagner 1981) Achuar culture.

To do so she could draw not only from her own experience but also from an ample repertoire of narratives shared equally by all Runa people along the Bobonaza. In fact, the Achuar, close neighbours of the Runa, occupy a special place in people's imagination. In places like Canelos and Pacayaku most inhabitants are the heirs of generations of intermarriage between Zaparoans and Achuar (see Chapter 1). One doesn't even need to stretch back so far in time: even today many Runa have kin ties with the Achuar of Capahuari and Pastaza.

The relationship between the Runa and the Achuar has sometimes been framed in the anthropological literature in terms of the dichotomy *manso/bravo*, where the first figured as 'tamed' and the latter as 'wild' (cf. Chapter 3). As I showed earlier in the thesis most people along the Bobonaza would not straightforwardly subscribe to this distinction, yet they draw on certain cultural tropes to distinguish themselves from their Achuar neighbours.

In a work on the ethnohistory of the region, Taylor (1999:195) points to the abandonment of cross-cousin marriage as a criterion to discriminate between the 'wild' Jivaroans (to which the Achuar belong) and their *manso* neighbours. This characteristic is one often evoked by the Runa to underline the difference between themselves and the Achuar. Just like Gow (1991) argues with regards to the Piro, for whom kinship began with civilization, for the people I worked with, an important

part of being Runa, as opposed to other indigenous groups, coincided with exogamous marriage. Marriage between Runa (*runapura*) is thought to be 'easier' than those with non-Runa but people generally agreed that the two individuals should never be too closely related. When for example two people with the same last name get married (a quite common event), these are always assumed to be cousins (*primos* from the Spanish) and their union gives rise to all sorts of speculations. The incestuous (in Runa's view) character of any cousin marriage is always described as 'lack of respect' (*mana respeto tianchu*) and the couple are defined as *huagliishca* (rotten). The lack of respect concerns the couple's behaviour towards each other, towards their family and the community as a whole. To marry between cousins is a habit which the Runa attribute to the Achuar. The incestuous aura surrounding these latter is magnified by their practice of polygamous marriage, albeit the Runa readily admit that this is a relatively infrequent occurrence today. As might be evident from these examples, from the perspective of Runa onlookers, the worse characteristics of Achuar people primarily concern gender relationships.

It was not fortuitous then that Teresa, when trying to explain to me how the Achuar differ from Runa people, turned to the subject of gender relationships. She did so most clearly in occasion of her husband's cousin's visit to the house. He and his wife had come to stay for a few days in Teresa's house so I had the occasion of chatting with them. I was immediately struck by the young woman's shyness: she hardly spoke a word with us. I compared it with the outspokenness of most Runa women I knew and confided my shock in Teresa. She wasn't surprised by that. 'Achuar women don't speak when their husbands are talking', she told me swiftly. Then she elaborated on her own 'discovery' about the proper line of conduct of Achuar women.

When I lived in Kintiup, one of the hardest things for me do was to serve manioc beer to Achuar men. When I served beer [*she stood up and mimicked the act of serving beer with her head down*] I could not look at the male visitor but I had to lower the head, staring at the floor. Imagine Francesca, I could not even look at him! Even after serving, I could not sit down nor could I participate in the talking. We [women] had to stand together, next to the beer, waiting for the men to finish their manioc beer to bring some more. You know how our *mingas* (working parties)

are: we [women] talk and laugh loudly. We drink and get drunk, just like men. I didn't like when there were *mingas* there.

Indeed, in Runa drinking parties women are by far the loudest participants. When a Runa woman serves her manioc beer not only she looks at the male visitor but she may also embarrass him with some piquant remark. The wit of both Runa women and men is at its best during drinking sessions and both strive to create a relaxed, cheerful atmosphere.

Conversely, in her husband's village, Teresa agreed to the tacit etiquette of self-restraint. She heard people being critical of Runa women's pungent talk which they linked to an overt sexual promiscuity (cf. Descola 1996). 'Achuar women don't talk because their husbands might get angry and hit them', Teresa commented to me. This is why she felt sad looking at her husband's cousin's wife: in Teresa's view, she was kept completely domesticated by her husband. She was not the only who expressed this perspective to me, for many other Runa women remarked with commiseration on the total submission of Achuar women to their husbands. 'If a husband hits her', once told me a neighbour in Canelos; 'a Runa woman strikes back. Achuar women don't. This is why for us it is very hard to marry an Achuar man'.

The time spent in Kintiup is described by Teresa as a period of painful endurance and, simultaneously, of great experiential value. By the time she left, she had become 'another' Teresa, one who was made 'harder' by experience and, especially, not 'naive' like she used to be. She explicitly associated her transformation with the 'discovery' of Achuar culture. She had learnt the 'Achuar' way of doing things whilst at the same time she could compare it with her own memories of how 'her' people lived. Strikingly, Teresa often jokingly said that she had been an 'anthropologist' herself, just like me. The parallelism is not fortuitous, as Wagner suggests:

Invention, then, *is* culture, and it might be helpful to think of all human beings, wherever they may be, as "fieldworkers" of a sort, controlling the culture shock of daily experience through all kinds of imagined or constructed "rules", traditions, and facts. The anthropologist makes his experiences understandable (to himself as well as to others in his society)

by perceiving them and understanding them in terms of his own familiar way of life, his Culture. He invents them as “culture” (1981:36).

This ‘invention’, as Wagner underlines, is powerfully creative. Today Teresa continuously exploits memories from that period to draw comparisons between life in the city and life in the village, between Achuar and Runa, between the ‘old’ Teresa and the ‘new’ one. By clashing with difference - the unfamiliar village - not only Teresa ‘invented’ a culture - the Achuar - but also she ‘discovered’ (invented) her own and fashioned herself in relation to it. It is to the discovery of this Runaness I turn now.

### **Going native**

One day we were laying on Teresa’s bed, talking about my new landlady when her young niece (her sister’s daughter) came to me and asked: ‘Is your landlady *india*? I asked her what she meant with the word *india*. She gave a quick glance to her aunt and then she corrected herself: ‘*Indigena* I meant to say’.<sup>150</sup> The episode would have passed relatively unnoticed - after all, I had already become accustomed to Ñukanchi Allpa children’s use of racial epithets - were it not for the fact that, after few minutes, Teresa returned to the term ‘*indio*’.

You see Francesca, I am very different from my brothers and sisters. I don’t look like them, do I? My older brother is very white, he doesn’t look indigenous. I am different. My brothers like to have many things. I don’t. I don’t need too much. They say: ‘*Indio*, dirty *indio*, ugly *indio*’. When I hear them saying this I feel so bad, all my body feels so bad. ‘Ugly *indio*’, they say. So, what am I?

It was not the first time Teresa complained about her brothers and sisters. When she was in Achuar territory, full of sadness and longing to go back to Puyo, she received a letter from her older brother. It ended by saying: ‘Come here fast, otherwise you will end up walking around barefoot or with shoes painted of

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<sup>150</sup> *India* is a pejorative term whilst *Indígena* is the Spanish word for ‘indigenous’.

*buituj*'.<sup>151</sup> Alone and sorrowful, miles and miles from Puyo, she never forgot that phrase.

Most conflicts Teresa had with her siblings concerned her marriage. They had never liked Teresa's husband and never lost an occasion for reminding her. They thought he was an *indio pobre* (poor Indian) who couldn't look after their sister. While they had jobs in town, Richard worked, mostly gratis, for the radio of the Achuar federation in the rural centre of Taisha. As such, he was hardly ever at home and, even when he came, he often did so empty-handed. But the real problem for them was that he was an *indio* and, worse, one which was unapologetically so. With his long black hair and his beaded bracelets, Richard wanted to be visible as an *indio*.

Thus, on his absence, they often commented ironically on his political engagement with the indigenous movement. They would ask Teresa sarcastically when they would have the joy to see him on TV, marching with his fellow Achuar, his long hair and his face red with annatto. Teresa was deeply hurt by such comments, especially when her children were around and could hear them. 'Why am I so different from them?', she tiredly asked me one evening, after she had received such remarks from her brother. As mentioned above, she knew the answer. The years she spent in her husband's community represented a turning point in her life. Not surprisingly, her siblings thought the same: they associated Teresa's strange habits to the detrimental influence of her husband and her residence in the forest.

After Teresa came back from Kintiup, she felt she had undergone a profound change. She had learnt to recognise fruits and trees, her legs had become strong enough to bear long treks in the forest and she now knew how to make different kinds of manioc beer. However, she soon realised that in the city, with no land, she could hardly make use of her newly acquired knowledge. It was then that she decided to learn to make pottery.

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<sup>151</sup> *Huituj* is the fruit of *Genipa americana* whose dark juice is used by Runa people to decorate their faces and bodies on special occasions. The image of the feet painted with *buituj* in guise of shoes conveys a sarcastic depreciation of both the habit of walking around barefoot and that of painting one's body with the semi-permanent juice.

As a child, Teresa never learnt to make pottery. Her choice to learn pottery making was curious in many ways. Her decision could hardly be said to stem from a will to become economically independent. Pottery is sold at incredibly cheap prices in Puyo and indigenous makers are constantly exploited by the *mestizo* buyers who own most tourist venues. Furthermore, women potters can be relatively successful only if have a husband assisting them with the costs of materials or if they work in small groups, sharing the expenses. Teresa did not have either condition. Whenever I asked her why she began making pottery, knowing that it would be such a strenuous endeavour, she always answered that she found it beautiful.

Teresa had learnt it from her sister-in-law - an Achuar who, in turn, had learnt pottery from her Runa mother-in-law. Teresa went then to practice with her husband's aunt who lived close to Ñukanchi Allpa. She would patiently sit next to her and watch her movements to then try by herself at home. Despite the hardships - she often had nothing, no clay, no dyes and no money to buy them - she quickly began to make an impressive array of pottery. Lacking close female kin, she would ask me to come along to help her painting. Teresa was immensely proud of her achievements, of her capacity of making different figurines and of the vast range of designs she invented.

It was on one of these occasions that her older brother came to visit her. The man, who fathered seven children, asked her if she could take her of his newborn son for a few days. He and his wife had to go to work and they couldn't look after the baby. Taken aback by the request, Teresa feebly protested that she too had to work with pottery. With a laugh, her brother dismissively argued that she could do 'this' (referring to pottery) whilst keeping the baby. Winning over her reluctance, he left the baby with her for two weeks.

Teresa was profoundly aware he had come to her, rather than going to other siblings, because he did not think her work with pottery was 'real' work. Her sister Judy had already criticised her for not looking for a proper job, instead of 'wasting time playing with clay'. In the views of her siblings, Teresa's turning 'native' was despicable, if not utterly pointless. Her transformation led her siblings to partially withdraw their support from her. 'If her husband doesn't give her food, it is she who

chose to live with him. I will not help her. If she wants to be an *india*, I will let her be', one of them commented to me.

On the other hand, Richard valued Teresa's change, albeit for him, this has not been drastic enough (see below). He seemed to enthusiastically support Teresa's newly found occupation. One morning, upon my arrival to their house, Richard proudly showed me Teresa's pottery which were laid out on the kitchen table. He first admired his wife's painting skills and then, he began explaining to me how Teresa, before meeting him, did not even know what 'culture' was. Now, she had even began to make Runa pottery! 'Now she understands the importance of her own culture', Richard proclaimed solemnly. Whilst he was giving me this sermon, I caught glimpse of Teresa's eyes behind his shoulders: she covered her mouth to hide the laughter. I tried my best to listen to him without laughing as well. I believed him when he said it was thanks to him that Teresa discovered her own culture. In his view, he had 'domesticated' her well.<sup>152</sup>

What interests me here, however, is Teresa's irreverence at her husband's speech. This was far from unusual. If Richard spent entire afternoons talking about his political struggles and moral dilemmas with me, in these very moments, Teresa, from behind, would raise her eyebrows to the ceiling in an overtly dramatic way so as to elicit my laughter. Sometimes Richard would catch a glimpse of his wife giggling and would tell me dismissively that she 'never takes anything seriously'. Implicit in his comment was the criticism that Teresa never attempted to study, to 'progress' and to fight for indigenous rights. Although she had transformed into a Runa, she nevertheless lacked the consciousness of being one. Richard would often criticise her on the grounds that she was still too 'acculturated' to have an 'indigenous' consciousness. This was why she was not interested in indigenous struggles. Her transformation, for him, was only partial. However, in private, Teresa often reflected about these very struggles. It was her who sighed nostalgically when we watched the footage of 1991 indigenous march (see Chapter 1). Whilst taking seriously the fight for indigenous self-determination, she nevertheless was amused by the seriousness with her husband - like many other indigenous people in Pastaza

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<sup>152</sup> Perhaps, however, not well enough. In that instance, irritated by her husband's prolixity, she suddenly lost her patience. 'If you say you are so proud of me, why haven't you ever bought me clay and dyes? Why did you always waste money on beer?' she remarked sharply.

- talked about 'being Achuar' or 'being Runa'. Any time someone asserted proudly their indigeneity in our presence, she would look for my eyes and assume an ironic smile.

Her irony was not judgmental towards those who firmly felt Runa or Achuar etc. Her laughter would be immediately followed by other, more serious reflections, on what it meant to be 'Runa' *for her*. I would suggest that her irony stemmed from a critical reflection on the disjunctions she experienced throughout her life. On the one hand, she genuinely felt she had become knowledgeable in many 'cultural' realms - making pottery, making a *chagra* (garden), speaking Quichua - on the other, she constantly had to deal with the factual difficulties against which she clashed - having no clay, no land, having to deal with important people in what she felt was a 'poor' Spanish. In sum, she lived the difficulties and the contradictions of knowing certain things and not knowing what to do with this knowledge. Her irony - and that of many other Runa who similarly never take 'Runaness' too seriously - stems exactly from a perceptive awareness of this delicate disjunction. There is more however: irony here also signaled the emergence of a profounder doubt, one which concerns the capacity for becoming 'proper' Runa or Achuar. I turn now to explore this uncertainty.

### **Teresa's awkwardness**

Teresa often talked explicitly about her acquired self-confidence. In her words, following her various life experiences, she now 'knew how to do things'. This know-how encompassed techniques for growing manioc, secret knowledge of plants, experiences of shamanic healing and much more. Throughout the three years of my fieldwork, I witnessed Teresa's confidence growing exponentially. During the last Canelos *jista* I attended, we visited the ceremonial house where the female helpers were making *vinillu*.<sup>153</sup> As soon as she saw the wooden bowl containing the manioc, she said: 'I have never made *vinillu*!' She then walked away from me, quickly moving towards the large *batan* (wooden recipient). She made space for herself amidst the

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<sup>153</sup> *Vinillu* is a special type of manioc beer made after manioc has been roasted and put to rest for a few days. After a while, a particular kind of mold begins to grow on the top of the burnt manioc. This mold is what which gives the drink its distinctive flavour.

crowd of unknown women, took a handful of moldy manioc mass and placed it into her mouth.

I could not help but comparing the assertiveness of this Teresa with the uneasiness she had shown only a year before, in occasion of the same ceremonial festival. I had proposed her to come with me to visit the ceremonial houses. I didn't know the ceremonial owners but, after having consulted with some Runa friends in Puyo and elsewhere, I had decided to go. My friends had assured me that anyone - *gringos* and Runa alike - is welcome to a Runa festival (which, as I were to find out later, is true). Excited by my proposal, Teresa immediately accepted and we left for Canelos early in the morning. However, once we reached the community and began to hear the distant drumming, Teresa began to look uneasy. 'I haven't been often to a festival' - she said - 'I feel so ashamed of entering the house. I don't even know what to do!' Of course, this worried me as well: I was reluctant to go somewhere without knowing anyone. However, my anxiety was dissipated by the encouragement of virtually every Runa person I had spoken to. There was no etiquette apart from simply entering the house and drinking beer. In the heat of the morning, Teresa was standing in the middle of the road, irremovable in her position: she felt too awkward, she did not know what to do in these circumstances. Indeed it was only the arrival of another friend from Puyo that solved what looked like an irresolvable situation. Our friend - a Montalvo woman in her forties - had come to Canelos with a cousin out of sheer curiosity. When she understood our indecision she laughed loudly. I then curiously watched her as she walked non-chalantly amidst the crowd of people, entered the house, sat down and took a sip of manioc beer. She behaved as if she had always lived there.

If, at times, Teresa's assertiveness was blatant, at other times, she was eager to let me and other people know that she did not 'really' know. She either would say this explicitly (as she did with my questions) or she would reflect on the strange habits of 'the Runa' which made her uncomfortable. Given Teresa's self-proclaimed confidence, what does her equally frequent admittance of ignorance mean? Is this in contradiction with the narration of her progressive transformation? How do we take this self-perceived 'ignorance' seriously?

I suggest that to understand the oscillation between states of knowing versus non-knowing we need to attend to Teresa's emphasis on 'awareness' or 'self-realization'. Moments of 'self-awareness' were present as linguistic markers which constellated her biographical narrations. Phrases such as '*me doy cuenta*' ('I came to realise'), *yuyarini* ('I then thought/felt') are *topoi* which Teresa often used to signal the process of gradual self-discovery throughout her life. Another common trope to describe this heightened sense of self-consciousness was the moment of sheer embarrassment (*pinganimi*), often followed by laughter (*asina*). Throughout her narrative, she describes moments in which she felt intense awkwardness as points of self-discovery and reflection. One such episode was the first time she had to serve manioc beer to male visitors in her husband's community. Interestingly, she recalled the episode in light on my own experience of serving manioc beer in the Ñukanchi Allpa ceremonial festival.

I always feel so ashamed (*pinganimi*) to serve manioc beer. It feels so weird. Don't you think? All these people sitting and then you serving beer! It makes me feel weird.

Teresa specified later to me that she has always found it awkward to stand serving manioc beer (*asua*) to visitors. This awkwardness is understandable only by elucidating what the moment of serving *asua* consists of. Manioc beer is served by the female host when a visitor comes to one's house or in occasion of a working party (*minga*). After filling the drinking bowl (*mucabua*) with beer, the woman keeps removing the bits of fiber inside the drink with her right hand, gently squeezing the juice out. Before holding the *mucabua* close to her host's mouth, she wipes the edges with her fingers. Offering the *mucabua* to the visitor, a woman forcefully encourages him to drink 'strongly'. The squeezing, the wiping and the invitations to drink are highly formalised gestures which are routinely done by Runa women since they are little girls. The proper execution of this set of gestures looks 'beautiful' (*sumaclla ricuri*). To master this sequence of beautiful acts is no easy task.

When a woman during the festival broke a large ceremonial *mucabua*, a friend of mine, an experienced potter, commented bluntly that the woman in question did not even know 'how to hold a *mucabua*'. By pointing to the holding of the *mucabua* - a very specific form - my friend was eliciting a powerful image. This image

condensed a wide circular female knowledge, which begins from gathering clay to handling the pot when it is heavy with *asua*: this knowledge is grounded in a deep dexterity and intimacy with the product itself, with its materiality, its lightness, its texture and its smell.

Teresa's awkwardness stemmed the self-realization of this embodied knowledge. In particular, Teresa felt most uneasy when she had to 'reproduce' specific Runa forms, those which hold a particular visual potency. The spitting of manioc beer, the typical ceremonial dance, the tapping of a nutshell on clay - these are the instances in which 'true' knowledge becomes visible. These were the very instances which provoked, depending on the context, Teresa's uneasiness or laughters. Conscious of these patterns of actions, she could not however bring herself to properly imitate them without feeling inadequate. She imitated them but she took a perspective from the outside. 'I must have looked awkward', was a recurrent comment she made not only in her narratives but also in daily life.

I would thus suggest that, when Teresa claims she 'doesn't know', she is making an exercise in comparison. She consciously draws a comparison between herself and others, whilst simultaneously making a comparison internal to herself. The comparison and the difference obviously depend upon previous 'inventions' and objectifications, such as the ones I have mentioned earlier. In the process of *imitation* or reproduction of forms - one which I have argued is central to Runa knowledge practices (Chapter 2, 3) - she came to see as an 'object' not only 'Runa' culture but also her own self. She was simultaneously able to see the 'proper' forms and her own ill-forms as objects. There, she felt a slippage, a space, a distance or a difference *within* herself.

The kind of 'double perspective' one holds during mimetic processes has been beautifully captured by Rane Willerslev (2007) in his analysis of Yukaghirs' elk hunting techniques. To hunt an elk, Yukaghirs' hunters seek to temporally act as if they were elks themselves. They do so by wearing elk skin covered skis, which imitate the sound of the moving animal. Most importantly, however, the hunter begins to move like the elk, swinging slowly from side to side. During this imitation process, Willerslev argues, the hunter comes to grasp two perspectives at the same time. If, on the one hand, he perceives himself as a subject who sees the animal as

an object, on the other, he is also aware of himself as an ‘object’ in the eyes of the subject-elk. The encounter allows the hunter to see himself both object and subject simultaneously. This ‘double’ perspective, in turn, enables the hunter to successfully predate the animal, without succumbing to the other’s perspective.

Irreversible transformation for the hunters coincides with assuming the other’s perspective (the elk’s). As such, the risk is always latent. Yukaghirs hunters know that the success of their hunt can only come forth by a purposefully ‘imperfect’ mimesis. In Willerslev’s words:

The Yukaghirs attempt to assume an animal’s point of view by intentionally acting as an imperfect copy. All performances in alien kinds of bodies, therefore, share a kind of double negation: the person is not the species he is imitating, but he is also not *not* that species (2007:95).

I think the idea of ‘imperfect copy’ sheds light upon the process by which Teresa comes to perceive herself as ‘failing’ to be, at all times, a proper Runa. By reflecting on her own imperfect mimesis, on the mismatch between her own forms and those she was imitating, she was able to exert an ‘objectifying’ look upon herself. Both ‘proper’ and her own forms became object of observation. Not Runa but *not* not Runa, the mimetic practice placed her into a state of ‘strange’ betweenness. But there is more, I suggest, for Teresa, in the awkward mismatch, found a space to doubt the effectiveness of *mimesis* as a knowledge practice. Let me explain this.

Teresa often wondered about her ability of being a proper Runa. But not only: in her case, the feeling of being not good enough at reproducing proper forms engendered also the doubt of whether imitation is ‘true’ knowledge. Put it differently, Teresa expressed a profound doubt: by reproducing specific forms, will I become knowledgeable? Is imitation the same as knowledge? The doubt is radical, for it questions a basic ontological assumption: the identity between knowledge and the reproduction of others’ forms. In asking the question, Teresa is already introducing a difference between knowledge and mimesis, a difference which I argued to be non-existent in many Runa knowledge practices (see my description of *paju* in Chapter 3).

Teresa's moment of skepticism could be compared to the practice of *epoché*, or 'suspension of belief'. The term, first used by Pyrrho's skeptical philosophers and subsequently deployed by Husserl's (1949) in his phenomenology, has been recently reintroduced in anthropology by Matei Candea (2013) in a paper which analyses Western scientists' interactions with the animals they study. In this ethnographic piece, *epoché* refers to scientists' willful, yet uneasy, suspension of belief regarding animals ability for thought. This *epoché* is fruit of an ethical self-fashioning: in other words, the fine process of filtering out unprovable assumptions - such as that animals 'think' - is a necessary step for being (and feeling) a true 'scientist'.

In my ethnographic case, I do not suggest that Teresa's skepticism stems from a willful cultivation of the self nor from a commitment to issues of knowledge. In her case, I believe that 'doubt' is not voluntary, but rather stems from the comparison between the self-objectifying gazes I described above. Nevertheless, Candea's use of *epoché* gives here an important suggestion, namely that people, through processes of self-reflection, whether actively sought after or not, can come to 'bracket' their own fundamental assumptions (a point made also by Descola 2013). Teresa grew increasingly uncertain about whether knowledge - in the shape of mimicking forms - was enough for becoming other. To elucidate this last point another example might be needed.

### **Our shared assumptions**

Late in my fieldwork, I travelled with a friend and her niece to spend two months in the village of their kin, located at about ten hours canoe downriver from Canelos. As we were preparing to leave, my friend confided in me that she had purposefully decided to bring along her niece, Lila. The sixteen year old girl was orphan and had been raised in the city by some relatives. As such, she had never been to the forest before. The girl had recently moved into my friend's house and she was often described as lazy and indolent. They didn't know how to make her change. Thus my friend had thought that perhaps her own mother (the girl's grandmother) would be able to straighten her up (*allichina*). Lila had no choice but to reluctantly accept to spend her school holidays with us in her grandmother's house. Throughout the 'holiday' she was subjected to a hard and tenacious process of apprenticeship: she was hit with nettles, she was painted with *buituj*, she was made carry heavy bundles

of manioc sticks, she was taught to make a chagra and so on. Her grandmother was hopeful that in this way she could become a proper Runa woman. Day after day, however, Lila grew increasingly skeptical of her kin efforts. 'I've always lived in the city, what do they want from me?', she would tiredly lament, late in the evenings, in the privacy of our room. Unfortunately, I had no easy answer to give her.

Feeling awkward in many circumstances, Lila often asked for explicit explanation from her cousins who were of the same age and were obviously experts in what she called 'forest matters'. One day, during a meal, she began inquiring them about *ayahuasca*, the hallucinogenic drink prepared by Runa shamans. The two young men had tried it on a number of times before and were describing the effects to her. One of them said that with *ayahuasca*:

You see what trees really look like, you see their veins and blood. You see all the animals and all the plants of the forest, the capuchin monkey, the jaguar, the tapir.

The other cousin too gave a similar depiction of the world as seen through *ayahuasca* visions. I listened carefully to their description with the intent of successively writing it down in my notebook. The young girl, however, looked at them skeptically. She waited for her cousin to finish and then incisively asked:

What will I see if I have lived in the city my whole life? How will I see animals and plants? Won't I rather see cars and buses?

The cousin looked perplexed, then shook his head convincingly and replied that she will see the same - forest forms - like them. Although Lila did not seem persuaded, he assured that all people who have taken *ayahuasca* see the same things. The conversation strikingly reminded me of my own experience with *ayahuasca*. After having hesitated a long time before drinking it, I too had assumed that I would have not experienced 'forest' visions, but rather 'urban' ones, more in tune with my experiential world. When this turned out not to be the case, I could not hide my astonishment to the man who had prepared the drink. With a grin on his face, he told me:

This is why I wanted you to try it. You never believed me when I told you that trees are alive and that spirits exist! I made you drink so that you could see for yourself that I never told you lies.

The man's response and my own assumptions about what I would be able to see, like the exchange between my friend and her cousin, are enlightening in multiple ways. On the one hand, Lila and I assumed that what we are able to see is contingent upon our own phenomenological experience. Our assumptions reflected Merleau-Ponty's famous dictum that the world itself is 'the homeland of thoughts' (1962, in Ingold 2000:186). All we think, feel and do is contingent upon our being in the world. Another way to put it could be that, implicit in our premises is the idea that 'culture' inevitably sets us apart from others. 'Culture' figures here as a primary impediment to fully become others. This is the very precondition of anthropology as 'invention' in Roy Wagner's sense (1981) and of much anthropological discourse thereafter: the idea that we only can know the other through our own culture (Wagner 1981; Strathern 2004 [1991]; Viveiros de Castro 2004).

Lila and I were unexpectedly on similar ground. My young friend was skeptical that she could become a Runa woman in two months time and that, having brought up in the city, she could hear a jaguar's roar during *ayahuasca* visions. I was too. We shared, to a greater or lesser degree, the same assumption of being set apart by 'culture' - I was irrevocably separated from my informants, as she was from her own kin, by our 'cultures'.

However, our Runa interlocutors held an entirely different view on the matter. According to them, the reason for which we, 'urban' girls, could see the same as they did was that *ayahuasca* forms are shared by everyone, no matter whether one has or not the same past experiences. The girl's cousins and the elderly man showed a complete faith in our shared similarities which, as I have suggested elsewhere in this thesis, reside in the forms we could take/see. Thus I would listen stupefied to people's stories about foreigners coming to live in the forest and becoming skilled Runa after little time. My perplexity lay in the consciousness of the presence of 'culture' - a major impediment to transformation. Conversely, my interlocutors firmly sustained the view that all beings share, at least potentially, the capability of

being and ‘seeing’ like a ‘Runa’, a true person. This capability does not emerge from a life long process of apprenticeship but it rather can be accessed more immediately, through for example, ayahuasca or imitation techniques such as *paju*.

How do such competing ontological claims relate to Teresa’s skepticism? I suggest that Teresa’s profoundest doubts regarded the potentiality for her - as everyone else - to ‘become’ a Runa through such ‘immediate’ means. She often expressed her wonder about foreign people who got married to Runa and then suddenly ‘turned’ into Runa. In these cases, Teresa always assumed a skeptical stance, asking me whether I thought that, by learning alone, one could really become a Runa. To be clear, her concern was not with ‘authenticity’. She did not speculate on whether the white person was pretending rather than ‘really’ being Runa. Her questions always tried to grasp the state of mind of the people we were talking about. Does this foreigner think of himself as a Runa by now? Doesn’t he feel strange sometimes? Do you think he believes in shamans?

Teresa was interested in the possibility that, through learning, a white person could indeed *feel* she had become a Runa. Caught in the complexity of such debates, sometimes she would become exasperate:

What does it mean to be a Runa? Is one born a Runa or an Achuar or a *mestizo*? Or can anyone become like that if she learns that way? I could not become an Achuar when I was in the forest. Sometimes I ask myself these questions.

Teresa’s position contrasted vividly with the perspective of most other Runa I met. To the majority of my informants, the transformation of ‘strangers’ into Runa was the logical, rather than an exceptional, consequence of learning. Teresa, I argue, oscillated between these two states: on the one hand, like her fellow Runa, she firmly believed (and felt) that one’s body becomes knowledgeable as it incorporates certain forms, whilst, on the other hand, she sometimes exerted an internal look upon herself, wondering whether these assumptions were ‘really’ working.

If Teresa was not concerned with ‘authenticity’ (as I could sometimes be), with the difference she posited between appearance and inner feelings, she is already

introducing a substantial change: she often supposed a difference between 'true' and putative knowledge. Hence her ironical and skeptical - but also admired - remarks about other people who proudly and manifestly enacted powerful 'forms' (beautiful facial painting, a vigorous dance, etc.).

A further point she pondered about, albeit not frequently, concerned the role played by blood in one's personality or 'culture'. For instance, in the aftermath of an angry altercation with her husband, she confided to me that she had warned him to remember that 'she had also *mestizo* blood' (from her mother). Her warning implied that she was not fully intelligible to him and that, as such, he should be wary. In other occasions, Teresa attributed her inability of feeling and behaving as a proper Runa to this 'different' blood.

I wonder whether it is my *mestizo* blood which makes me different. It is as if I have two thoughts.

Teresa's doubts have far-reaching consequences. They question basic assumptions on what is given and what is not, in life. Does Runaness reside in blood or in learning? Can one become other, despite their blood or upbringing? Teresa can't find an answer to these questions: nevertheless, she keeps asking them. Whilst she willfully engages with the process of fabrication of a 'proper' Runa, she also reflects upon this process itself. There is an important theoretical point to make here. The recognition that people may have different ontological pre-assumptions does not exclude that people may be reflexive - and doubtful - about these very assumptions. If we admit that Teresa, or anyone like her, can doubt her own ontological (Runa) assumptions, what are the implications of this admission? Does this make her a different kind of Runa person? Is Teresa a 'dividual' person, embodying different competing selves?

In an analysis of Yanomani's relationships with white outsiders, Jose Kelly (2011) argues that 'dividuality' is the default condition for the people he worked with. Drawing from Strathern's notion of the dividual, Kelly suggests that the Yanomami white and indigenous selves are internal to each indigenous person. However, each self is 'eclipsed' depending on the relationship within which they are embedded. In this dual personhood, one is white and indigenous simultaneously but separately:

whether a person is seen as white or Yanomami depends ultimately on the perspective of the other.

The “given” conventional (Indian) does not fuse indistinguishably with the “made” invention (White), these components co-exist but they do not mix. Its dynamic is expressed in “Yānomāmi” and “napē” performative action where internal dualities are obviated and externalised in a way that resounds with Melanesian dividuality (Strathern 1988). We are faced here not with mestizaje, that preaches the mixing of races, to which social qualities are attached, producing a new biological and social blend of people – café con leche to use the Venezuelan idiom on the subject ... Instead of fusion and new identity, addition and new alterity: new possibilities for relational and dialectical alteration between distinct bundles of attributes – to retain the metaphor, café y leche (Kelly 2011: 437).

Kelly’s insight definitely captures the complexity of being two things at the same time, without implying that a miscegenation should necessarily occur. However, in Kelly’s argument this is possible because ‘whiteness’ and ‘indigenousness’ are thought to exist within a relational framework: they are points of views which constitute the subject (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1998). In the case of Teresa, however, these points of view are internal, not external. She oscillates between two different modes of being, not only from the perspective of others, but from her own too. Her ‘feeling’ of not being adequately Runa stems from her capacity of having internalised these multiple viewpoints and being able to see herself through them. This allowed her to be able of imagining herself as a non-Runa, with all the anxiety which this entails.

With this discussion I don’t want to give the impression that Teresa is half way on her path towards becoming white. Nor it is not my intention to suggest that self-reflection is only a prerogative of contemporary Runa people due to their movements in and out different worlds. Runa people have always been on the move and Whittens’ extensive work has cogently demonstrated that interculturality is indeed a cultural paradigm the Runa have always been conscious of (Whitten & Whitten 2008). In addition, self-awareness – being simultaneously subject and

object of one's gaze - might be an inherent property of mimesis (Taussig 1993; Willerslev 2007).

It is not my aim thus to offer any definitive statement on the place of 'change' within indigenous worlds. However, I suggest that people's liminal experiences could be a fertile place where to look at for understanding how 'change' comes to effectively generate a 'change'. Here I have offered an analysis of a personal transformation. I located 'change' in the mismatch of forms, as this takes place through processes of mimesis. The experience of doubt could potentially have always been there for all Runa as a result of their mimetic encounters with alterity, but, I suggest, this might have taken different forms throughout time. The problem today for Teresa, as well as for a generation of young Runa women, concerns their ability of being simultaneously Runa and 'white' women in often hostile environments. Thus the self-reflection which stemmed from Teresa's processes of mimetic learning deals with a very specific idea of 'culture', born out of one's present experiences and inventions in contemporary Pastaza. In other words, the questions and doubts one might have asked in the past (or in another place) are likely to be different from the ones Teresa is pondering today. Thus, Teresa is undoubtedly Runa, but, as she herself jokingly says, she might be one of a different kind.

## Notes on “culture”, culture and Runaness

*All this talk about ‘culture’! I am tired of it! Being *sacha runa*! Being a hunter, a shaman, or any other thing you always talk about! I am nothing special. I am a human being, just like you, nothing different.*

A young Runa man to the ethnographer (myself) and other foreigners.

Throughout the chapter, I used nonchalantly the term *culture*, highlighting the ways this concept differed for me and my Runa friends. ‘Culture’ is a thorny word. As Marshall Sahlins (2000) has notably remarked, in the moment in which anthropologists have discarded its analytical value, the people we study seem to be enthusiastically embracing the term. The discourse of ‘culture’ is deployed to justify and support indigenous rights all over the world and the Runa, as shown in Chapter 1, are no exception to this large scale trend (cf. Brown 1998; Jackson 1995).

In the last decades Latin America has witnessed a resurgence of indigenous movements as well as governments which have supported indigenous projects of self-determination. Ecuador occupies a prominent position at this regards, with its current Constitution positing respect and value for indigenous culture as one of its foundational concerns. As shown in Chapter 1, however, the history of *la lucha indígena* (indigenous fight) had begun much earlier. In Pastaza, this had became a tangible reality with the formation of OPIP in 1971 (Organizacion Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza, see also Chapter 1). Along with indigenous fights also came the word ‘culture’ which has now entered the official governmental idiom: ‘culture’ equally adorns official governmental papers and the *estatutos* of remote indigenous communities. But, when Teresa and Richard, like so many other Runa people talk about “culture”, what do they mean by it? If they do not talk about the same thing I understand as ‘culture’ - as we have seen earlier - what is then ‘culture’ for them?

During my fieldwork, ‘culture’ was often a recurring topic of conversation. The Spanish term (*cultura*) was used interchangeably with the indigenous word for ‘knowledge’ (*yachai*) as people switched from one language to the other. One day I was complaining with my *compadre* about a discussion I previously had with some

other Runa people. These persons had claimed that whites, like me, have no culture. In vain I had tried to defend myself against the sarcastic accusation of having no culture, bringing my studies, the books I had read and so on as undoubtable proofs of my knowledge. I tried to persuade people that I really *did* have a culture, it was just different from theirs. My attempts were thwarted from the beginning as one of my interlocutors challenged me and said: 'Where is it, your culture? Because I can't see it'. I was baffled: people began laughing and I was unable to answer. I was thus complaining about this with my *compadre*, hoping that he, at least, could agree on the fact that I did have a bit of culture too. After having listened to my complaints, he looked at me seriously and said reassuringly:

Of course you have culture, you can make manioc beer, you know how to plant manioc, you won over all these women from here!

Startled by his response - definitely *not* what I had expected - I timidly suggested to him that even *before* I came to the Amazon I had a 'culture'. He paused for a while and then said, assuming a didactic tone:

You know, people here don't think that white people have a culture. This is why *gringos* come here to spend time in the communities. They want to see culture because they, after living in the city, have lost it.

The common refrain (see Chapter 1) did not take me by surprise. I was aware that people thought that city people could not possibly have 'culture'. I asked why this was the case. In a long answer, he said:

Because in the city you don't hunt, you don't grow manioc, you don't do things. You only buy them ... but then, if you go to live in the city and you grow manioc, then yes, you have culture again.

Inspired by this comment, I then engaged in a parallel conversation with many other friends. I asked them whether they considered the things one *does* as 'culture'. The answer was always positive. When I then asked whether the things one thinks or feels could be equally considered culture, many of my interlocutors seemed puzzled and answered negatively. As one answered decidedly:

No, culture is not thoughts. No, no, no, to have a culture you have to show it. People have to see your culture.

The visibility of culture came back numerous times as a central factor to discriminate between what counted as ‘culture’ and what it didn’t. In Runa discourses, there simply cannot be a ‘culture’ which is hidden away inside one’s self, invisible to other people’s eyes, although, as I mentioned in Chapter 3 and 5, this differs to an extent for men and women (see also my discussion below). This emphasis on ‘visibility’ interestingly brings back to the mind one particular case of *paju*, the *paju* of power/knowledge I discussed in Chapter 3. To recall it briefly, the example I had made concerned the ‘power of manioc’. The ‘power’ consists in imitating the movements of an elder woman. As you move with her, as you imitate her movements, you ‘hold’ knowledge. On the basis of this example and others, I argued that *paju* forces us to erase the difference between knowledge and mimesis: imitating the forms *is* knowledge. *Paju* - conceived as the replication of specific movements - does not teach you about something else; it is knowledge itself.

I also suggested that this conflation was underlain by a negligence towards one’s interiority. Runa people are not minimally worried by the idea that one might be *performing* rather than *doing* things. In the moment one shows that one is able to replicate and see certain forms, knowledge is invariably assumed. There is no question about ‘inner’ beliefs or authenticity - no question about the internalisation of knowledge. Knowledge is what you do, rather than what you ponder within yourself.<sup>154</sup> This is why ‘culture’ - which I take, with the Runa, to be synonymous with knowledge (*yachai*) - needs to be made visible. As a friend, after hours of discussing about ‘culture’, bluntly put it: ‘Culture is the movements you make’.

If visibility is so central to the idea of culture - as it seems to be for the Runa - then it may follow that what we see as the ‘objectification’ of culture is none other than the visible and inevitable consequence of such ‘culture’. Let me explain this point by contrasting it with the work on ‘culture’ by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (2009).

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<sup>154</sup> Indeed, as we have seen above, one of Teresa’s doubts which set her apart from other Runa people concerned exactly the relationship between what one does and what one ‘feels’.

In a notorious pamphlet, Carneiro da Cunha, following Sahlins (2000), distinguishes between the term “culture” (within inverted commas) as a Western concept which indigenous people strategically deploy and adapt - and culture - as the sets of shared habits and norms (the stuff we anthropologists normally study). Whilst allowing “culture” to be contaminated by culture insofar as the first is appropriated and given ‘local’ meanings, Carneiro da Cunha suggests we should be retaining the analytical difference between the two for, she argues, this is the only way to attend satisfactorily to the paradoxes which “culture” generates in indigenous worlds.<sup>155</sup>

In light of my discussion above, we can see however that, in the Runa case, such distinction is not straightforward. Runa people may not so easily distinguish between “culture” and culture. Of course, Runa people readily recognise that their deployment of the word *cultura* is strategic: it stems from an encounter with non-Runa people. As my young friend Vinicio put it:

Culture is something that we say to make foreigners understand. Amongst ourselves, with my father, with my grandmother, I never talk about culture. This is a word for you to understand. For us, it is just the things we do.

Such recognition - that the word ‘culture’ is only deployed to talk with non-Runa about Runa activities - does not however imply that there is no such a thing as ‘culture’ in people’s ideas. On the contrary, Runa statements about that are quite clear. ‘All the things we do, that is culture’, as a young Runa girl explained to her younger sister. There is an important point to be made here: the process of objectification of culture (“culture”) can be seen as an intrinsic effects of a culture (the Runa’s) which places a great emphasis on the visibility of knowledge. So, what we readily identify as objectification of culture might not be a novel ‘idea’ imposed

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<sup>155</sup> An example of such paradoxical practices would be the ‘copyrighting’ of culture (Carneiro da Cunha 2009; Coelho de Souza 2012).

by outsiders upon the Runa but rather the peculiar result of people's own processes of self-reflection.<sup>156</sup> "Culture" and culture may indeed happen to coincide.

Even if we wished to retain Carneiro da Cunha's distinction between "culture" and culture, we would still need to allow for a third 'culture' to join in. If culture (without inverted commas) amounts, in her view, to an unconscious set of 'thoughts and habits', this corresponds certainly to the anthropologist's idea of culture, but not, as I have amply shown above, to the Runa's who, conversely, define culture as the things one visibly does.

Observing that the objectification of culture follows a Runa logic does not amount to an exclusion, within this very process, of the possibility of change.<sup>157</sup> As I have shown with Teresa's story, what culture (and knowledge) *is* can be doubted exactly through processes of self-reflection and encounters with others. Furthermore, given that 'knowledge' is so intimately bound to the existence and reproduction of specific beautiful forms (making beer and pottery, hunting, singing), the alteration of these latter irremediably alters the former.

In this regard, Carneiro da Cunha, echoing the structuralist emphasis on continuity, remarks that, even if the content of culture changes, the *form* of it does not. In other words, even if things change, the way we think about things may not. Thus, novelty can always be incorporated into a pre-existing mental schema. Indeed, this can be often the case: the introduction of 'novel' elements into a practice does not necessarily lead to a drastic change in the meaning of the practice itself. What happens however in a context, such as the Runa's, in which movements themselves are knowledge, when these latter cease to exist? For example, when women no longer transmit the *paju* of manioc, it is not just a 'content' which disappears but also a *form* itself - the conflation between imitation and knowledge. In being

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<sup>156</sup> Scholars working in Melanesia have similarly argued that objectifications of 'culture' pre-existed the colonial encounter (Harrison 2000; Jolly 1992). In Western Amazonia, Stephen Hugh-Jones (2010) observes that the patrimonialisation of culture among the Tukano results from pre-existing indigenous concerns with powerful objects.

<sup>157</sup> Nor my identification of culture and "culture" wishes to deny the rhetoric of culture and multiculturalism and its powerful effects over indigenous people within neoliberal states (Bessire 2014; Hale 2002).

simultaneously content and form, the disappearance of *paju* can only lead, as one elderly grandmother put it, to do things meaninglessly (*yanga*).

As highlighted above, not everything that one does is automatically culture. Nothing that I did *before* I went to the Amazon counted as culture/knowledge. Thus, if culture is the movements, to paraphrase my friend, it is not *any* movement. This set of ‘movements’ rests upon a subsistence way of life in the forest, upon a daily and intimate engagement with things, animals, plants and forest spirits. This is why, despite a remarkably ‘flexible’ concept of culture and knowledge - which can be easily acquired and lost and gained again - the Runa are moved to point to degeneration and loss wherever they see a paved road.

## **Conclusion**

I began this thesis with a chapter (1) permeated by a sense of loss and change. I have returned to these issues here, in the last chapter. To do so was inevitable, as Runa people are extremely concerned about the changes that are occurring today. Recently, in a work on Mapuche clowns, Course (2013), has called for the moral imperative of acknowledging *theoretically* indigenous discourses on loss and failure. Following his suggestion, I have sought to explore the trajectory of such partial failure through the story of a single woman and her moments of ‘awkwardness’. These latter represented instances in which Teresa came to doubt, not only of her capacity of being a ‘proper’ Runa woman, but also of the idea that a transformation could occur through knowledge *as mimesis*. Intensely involved in a process of self-fabrication, Teresa is also highly reflexive about ‘fabrication’ itself and the assumptions which this entails.

Recognising ‘change’ as part of an indigenous logic, as suggested by contemporary Amazonianist literature, does not necessarily preclude us from considering that many contemporary Runa feel a serious disruption between past and present, between life in city and life in the village. For most, if not all Runa I know, this change is real and profound. There is an awareness - which stems from comparing between the now and then, between some people and others - that ‘forms’ are not exactly the same. In this very exercise of comparison lies knowledge, self doubt and loss.

## On gendering acculturation

*When they told us in history classes that the Spanish were taking the gold of Atahualpa ... What was this treasure of Atahualpa? Some say that they [the Spanish] had lost it into the sea, some others [say] that they buried in the mountains and until today nobody can find it. Then, once I was talking with my grandfather and he said: 'No, I think that the treasure of Atahualpa were the women. When they [the Spanish] came, everyone said: Take care of the women! Because our future is going to depend on them!'*

Young Runa singer in an interview with a national TV channel

The analysis I traced in this last chapter has been ‘internal’, that is, carried out through Teresa’ reflections upon herself. I elucidated the ways Teresa perceives herself to be undergoing different processes of learning, change and discovery. However, if one looks at this process from a different scale perspective – from further away or by looking at more people throughout time – one can see that this process of ‘reverse acculturation’ takes the shape of a highly gendered process. From childhood to marriage, Teresa is made a Runa with the explicit intent of preparing her to be a ‘proper’ wife. This is not an anomaly of Teresa’s case. All Runa women undergo a difficult preparation for the same goal. Indeed, stories of ‘reverse acculturation’ such as Teresa’s are widespread. Their subjects are not only girls who are born in the city and have successively re-learnt to be Runa, but also girls who had led ‘ideal’ Runa lives but, at the moment of marriage, were thought to not be ‘Runa enough’. Women, irrespective of their background, are not born proper Runa women but need to be made so through a scrupulous work.

In response to the growing phenomenon of indigenous cultural revivals. Carlos Fausto asks (2009:498):

Can we understand the reverse process of becoming an “authentic” Amerindian, normally interpreted as an expression of “postmodern

identity politics," in terms of Amerindian modes for producing transformation?

I suggest that we indeed we can. However, an analysis of 'reverse acculturation' can not be carried forward without a consideration of how gender shapes the process of transformation. In the Runa case, no comparable process of 'reverse' acculturation takes place for men. Whilst most Runa women I worked with told stories which in one way or another resembled Teresa's, hardly any men recounted of undergoing such specific transformation. Interestingly, the ones who did often described their entrance into politics as the starting point of their process of self-discovery and reverse transformation.

Men, as I argued elsewhere in the thesis (Chapter 3), are not involved in the externalisation of knowledge as much as women are. Such asymmetry becomes obvious in cases of mixed marriages. I was struck every time I observed that non-Runa men (white, *mestizo* or indigenous) married to Runa women could easily circumvent any norm of Runa sociality. These men were not asked to learn to hunt or to drink manioc beer if they didn't want to, etc. A non-Runa man who marries a Runa woman is not obliged to become like a Runa man (although he is certainly appreciated if he does so). On the other hand, virtually all non-Runa women who had married Runa men were encouraged to become, to a certain extent, 'Runa women'. In the few cases in which they didn't, those women were not spared from harsh criticisms which often led to bitter conflicts between the wife and her in-laws. I have never heard parallel criticisms - that of 'not being Runa' - being directed towards non-Runa men married to indigenous women.

This asymmetry, alongside the evidence provided in the chapters of this thesis, suggests not only that women and men are conceptualised as different kinds of persons but also that regimes of knowledge and, consequently, processes of 'acculturation' take very different shapes depending on whether one is a man or a woman. This, as I briefly suggested in Chapter 5, has interesting aesthetic and political consequences.

The most manifest of these is that Runa women seem 'naturally' predisposed to represent 'culture' to the eyes of others within a multicultural realm. They become,

like in many other contexts in Latin America and elsewhere, the harbinger of cultural conservatorism. Consequently, as in the case of Teresa, they are also the ones who most suffer of the ambiguities of living in the city as indigenous subjects. This is not a new observation, as anthropologists have often noticed the relegation of indigenous women to ‘cultural’ realms within the multicultural state (cf. de la Cadena 1995; Radcliffe 2013; Smith 1995). Nevertheless, I suggest that, in the Runa case, they become so not uniquely because of a dynamic internal to modernization (Knauft 1997), but also because of a priori conceptualisation of women as primarily engaged with processes of making knowledge visible. Paying attention to local constructions of the gendered self helps us to see the specificity of acculturation processes. To support this point, I wish to bring a further example from the Runa.

In an analysis of the use of sound symbolism amongst the Runa of Pastaza, Janis Nuckolls (1996:133) observes that this genre is associated with ‘women’s speech’ or with a ‘woman’s tone’ (*buarmi tono*). She further suggests that the use of sound symbolic adverbs is declining amongst university educated Runa. Its use in contemporary Pastaza signals an ‘insider status’ (Nuckolls 1996:134). Nuckolls attributes the gendered use of sound symbolism to a particular convergence of sociological factors (gender, education, demography) for which women, who go to university less than men, are more likely to become ‘cultural insiders’ in charge of the most ‘traditional’ forms of culture (e.g. sound symbolism).

I suggest that we add to this confluence of socio-economic factors the particular Runa construction of gender I outlined in Chapter 3, which sees women are more inclined towards the reproduction of visible or, in this case, audible forms. Under this light, the association of sound symbolism with women’s speech can’t be entirely attributed to social changes alone but also to a pre-existing and ‘naturalised’ idea for which women are more ‘apt’ at making forms of knowledge visible for others.<sup>158</sup> This suggestion is further confirmed by an unremarkable, yet cogent ethnographic fact: the existence, amongst the Runa living along the Bobonaza, of a specific ‘female’ laughter. This is not unconsciously reproduced but rather actively taught to women. ‘Teach *comadre* how to laugh’ (*asinata yachachingui comadreta*), my *comadre* instructed

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<sup>158</sup> I do not want to suggest that women have traditionally employed more sound symbols than men. I have no factual basis upon which to make such claim. Here I only wish to stress the propensity of women for engaging in certain types of ‘visible’ knowledge.

his wife one afternoon: to become a Runa woman, I needed to be able to reproduce the typical ‘female’ laughter (*ajajaiiiiiii*). Such laughter distinguishes the women from this particular area of the Bobonaza from others. Indeed, some friends of Puyo, upon my return from a prolonged stay in this community, teasingly welcomed me with a *ajajaiiiiiii* laughter as soon as I stepped into their house. The existence of such a ‘congealed’ laugh is remarkable if compared with the absence of any such thing for men. Even though these latter are encouraged to laugh loudly, for them there is no requirement of laughing in this frozen form.

The importance of gender for analyses of acculturation cannot be stressed enough. If the saliency of gender has been highlighted with reference to sociological change in the Amazon (Seymour-Smith 1991; Walker 2013), works discussing ontological ‘transformation’ in the literature are characterised by the absence of any reference to gender (see, for example, Santos-Granero 2009b and replies). In light of the ethnography presented in this thesis, I think that a consideration of local notions of the gendered person is key to understanding the processes of acculturation and change indigenous people all over the Amazon seem to be eagerly and anxiously engaging with.

## Epilogue

*I often get angry when my relatives bring you as an example of the way I should become. People always say how clever you are, how you have become a true Runa woman! You have learnt to do this and that, and you like doing all they do. What they don't realise is that for you - for all other people from outside - this is only for now, one day you will go back to your country, it is just for now that you are doing it. I will stay instead. I think this is very different.*

Runa girl to the ethnographer (myself)

*Critical anthropology encourages us to feel haunted at every moment of our lives by what we are/could be that we are not.*

(Hage 2012:290)

*Why doesn't this gringa go home?*

A Runa woman to another, talking about the ethnographer (myself)

Just a few months before my return to Europe, I was invited to participate in the a Runa festival as a ceremonial helper.<sup>159</sup> In the weeks preceding the festival, visitors would often come to visit both my house with an expression of both commiseration and surprise on their faces. ‘You are really brave!’, commented a friend of mine, resignedly shrugging her shoulders; ‘you know you are going to suffer, right?’ The festival, which lasted four days but was preceded by fifteen days of preparations, represented indeed the culmination of my apprenticeship as a ‘proper’ Runa woman.

It was exactly during these weeks of preparation that, as I was quietly sitting and weaving pottery in my host’s house, we heard some whistles, indicating the presence of people arriving to the house. Two young women had come to visit. They

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<sup>159</sup> See Appendix 1 for a description of the festival.

were helpers in my same ceremonial house but I had never talked to them before. Giggling shyly, they sat in the house with us and my host promptly served them some manioc beer, while I kept weaving my pots. Their visit was unexpected and somewhat strange: my host family had no strong connections to their family and I had never seen the two women visiting the house before. After some minutes of hesitation, the girls finally decided to tell us what they had come for. They explained that they had no time left to make more pots for the festival and they still needed some. They had come to ask me if I had any pottery to sell them.<sup>160</sup>

I remained silent. The situation suddenly acquired a surreal overtone. *They* had come to buy *my* pottery? They had come to buy the pottery for the most traditional (and conservative) Runa festival from me? From a white Italian anthropologist? I shyly shrugged my shoulders, embarrassed, and I declared that no, I was sorry but I didn't have any extra pots to sell. If the episode left my host and other Runa friends unperturbed, I found it awkward. Why did they come to ask me? Had I become so much 'like' a Runa to the extent of being asked to make ceremonial pottery? Or, alternatively, was it because I was still essentially 'different' from them that they had come to ask me?

These questions beg some reflection on the status of 'likeness' I discussed so far in the thesis. In this work, I have emphasised the 'likeness' Runa people draw between themselves and others, be these human or not. Through ethnographic examples, such as the case of *paju*, I showed how the Runa relate to others through a network of shared likeness which I called 'forms'. Because of the possibility for everyone to assume these 'forms', I suggested that the process by which a non-Runa can become 'like' a Runa is relatively easy. In highlighting the ways in which, through shared forms - patterns, movements and the like - Runa people relate to other non-Runa people as well as to non-human beings, I have emphasised the similarities we share. If I did so, it was because the Runa themselves placed a great stress upon our shared similarities. When difference emerged, it was never so unsurmountable, never so incommensurable as I myself sometimes felt it to be.

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<sup>160</sup> The practice of asking another woman for pots during the preparations for the Runa festival is not uncommon: pots may crack or turn black during the firing so, given the very limited time available for the making, women may ask other more knowledgeable potters to provide them with the necessary pieces.

But, we might ask in these concluding pages, how much is this likeness a revelation of difference itself? Can we understand this becoming 'like' others as a process of reinstating a difference, that between self and other which become temporarily aligned but nevertheless remain essentially two distinct entities? Aren't two entities similar only because they are distinct *a priori*? How much is 'similarity' necessarily built upon difference?

Whilst I cannot provide any conclusive answer to these questions, I came to reflect upon them especially following my last period of fieldwork. I lived my first half of fieldwork in a blissful state, enthusiastically assuming the role of the 'apprentice' my Runa friends had designed for me. In seeing me learning so fast, my friends often openly fantasised on a possible long term future for me there. Everywhere we went, people would introduce me in Quichua as their own kin (*ayllu*) and, also, as someone who is just 'like a Runa woman' (*Runa huarmi shina*).

This intense, emotionally rewarding period suddenly ceased after I got married to a Runa man. Immediately after our marriage, people became, suddenly, resentful (if not outwardly hostile in some cases). My old friends - those who nourished me, hosted me and patiently taught me all I needed to know - became distant. Despite my attempts at maintaining friendly relationships, I increasingly felt that people were purposefully cultivating a hostile barrier of distance. This was unbearably painful for me especially as I could not understand the reasons for such an abrupt change. One evening, Teresa, the only friend who hadn't rejected me, tried to console me:

Don't be so sad, this always happens. This is a great problem we indigenous people have. We are very envious. This is why we have many problems. But this happens to everyone! This has happened to me when I married Richard. You know how many problems people made! It always happens. This is why you should learn from me, don't bother about what people say, stay away from them, live your own life alone and in peace. That's all that matters.

I wrote down her words in my diary without thinking about it twice, overwhelmed by sadness and confusion. Reflecting upon her words now, I think that she had clearly seen what I was not able to grasp then. In her attempts to console me, Teresa was clearly drawing my attention towards the temporality of such hostile reactions. It was exactly in the moment of becoming truly 'close' that I had definitely become a 'stranger'. People had taken care of me, fed me and taught all with an explicit intent, one which I had not taken very seriously until the end of my stay. Their aim was that of making me stay there so that we could 'live together'. People's often genuine offers of giving me their son, brother or cousin to marry represented the easiest, and probably, the only way for making me stay for good.

When this happened however - somewhat differently from what everyone, including myself, had planned - I suddenly became 'other' to all the people with whom I had been living so far. I had become all of a sudden, a 'foreigner' again - or, perhaps, I had never ceased to be one. Nevertheless, when I became too much of an 'insider', I was no longer granted that kind of protective immunity from malicious gossip, threats and accusations, which had instead characterised my first part of fieldwork. I became suddenly trapped into the web of envy, gossip and violence which, until then, I had only slightly perceived from an external perspective. If on the one hand the last stage of fieldwork became a battleground, on the other, it was during this harsh time that I truly perceived another, unknown side of the people I had been living with for so long.

I wish to go back again to Teresa's remarks. Reminding me of her own story, I think Teresa also wanted to point at the specific gendered nature of my experience. The rejection and distance entailed in the process of becoming kin is primarily a female experience. As argued in this thesis, by relying heavily on the reproduction of movements, women's knowledge is intrinsically 'more shallow' or more 'variable' than men's. Thus, women's knowledge - their 'Runaness' - is never taken for granted but needs to be constantly visible. This places Runa women in the condition of being easily criticised or attacked for not being enough 'proper' women. Within the context of my traumatic end of fieldwork, I have come to think that it was not only my foreignness, but also my being a foreign woman which spurred such strong reactions in the people surrounding me.

For Runa people, as I have argued in this thesis, becoming knowledgeable is dependent upon acknowledging 'shared forms'; for Runa women this entails becoming temporarily 'like' others. However, as I just said, sharing 'forms' is only and necessarily temporary: the process of becoming 'alike' is never a process of complete transformation, two entities never become the same. This is true for everyone involved in the process of 'becoming alike': the anthropologist can never become 'the same' as her Runa teacher, just like a Runa woman can never become 'the same' as the Grandmother of Clay or anyone else. And yet, the tension between likeness and difference needs to be sustained: in its fragile equilibrium we can find the basis of what the Runa think of as a good, knowledgeable life.

# Appendices

## Appendix I. The Runa festival (*jista*)

According to the ethnographers of the area (Reeve 1988a), most Runa festivals (*jistas*) coincide with important times of the Catholic tradition, such as Christmas and generally, by February, all *jistas* in the Pastaza region are over. This period of time between December and February also coincides with the rainy season, followed by the time of *cushillu huira uras* (time of fat wooly monkeys) which takes place in March-April when fruits are ripened and animal meat is rich and fat. 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 15 days) in which men and women work separately. Women dedicate this time to the preparation of manioc beer and to the manufacturing of ceramic vessels, while men go hunting in their *purina* territories. The meat and the beer will be then exchanged and consumed during the festival proper. This begins with the arrival of hunters from the forest.

The *jista* lasts generally 3-4 days, beginning with *shamunguichu* (the arrival of the hunters), *sisa puncha* (day of flowers), *camari* (day of the eating) and *armachina* (day of manioc beer bathing). The majority of *jistas* in the Pastaza region involve only two ceremonial houses (Whitten 1976; Reeve 1988a) which are respectively called the *cari jista* and the *buarmi jista* (male and female festivals). Each house is guided by a married couple, who are the owners of the festival. The *jista* consists in reciprocal visits to the ceremonial houses, with exchange and pouring of manioc beer.

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 *asua* were served and poured on people (*ima mundu asua tiara*), where pottery was beautiful and original, drums were played hard and incessantly all day, where people danced *sumaj* and *sinzhi* (beautiful and hard), and where peace and amusement reigned supreme. For more detailed ethnographic

accounts of the festival see Guzmán (1997) for Canelos, Reeve (1988a) for Curaray, Whitten (1976), Whitten & Whitten (1987, 2008) for the Puyo area and my own work on Runa festivals (Mezzenzana 2014).

## **Appendix 2. The story of the Moon (*Quilla Runa*).**

Very far in the forest lived a mother, a son and a daughter. The daughter at night used to receive the visit of an unknown man. He would make love to her at night but she couldn't see his face. So, one day, she decided to take the juice of *huituj* (*Genipa Americana*) and, at night, when her lover came, she stained his face with the juice. In the morning, when they woke up to go to the garden, the brother did not want to get up. 'Let's go! Come to drink manioc beer!' the mother would tell him. However he did not want to go because his face was black with *huituj*. It was him who used to sleep with the sister. And she had got pregnant. When the mother realised what had happened, she became very angry at her daughter. The daughter was very upset. The mother decided to bring her to the garden to work. The son got up and went to the river. On the shore, he called different types of fish so that they could bite the *huituj* stains from his face. But it didn't work. So he called all the ants of the forest so that they could bite the paint off. However, this didn't work either. Mother and daughter came back to the house and the mother was very angry at them. The following day, before his mother and sister went to the garden, the man told them: 'At midday you shall look at the sky!' The young man then summoned two birds-people, the *quihua pishcu* and *huataraco* who provided him with *bulauatu* (flute) and cotton. He then sat on the cotton and the birds-people began to move their wings so that they provoked a wind which lifted him up in the sky. He began playing his flute. At midday, his mother and sister saw him in the sky, sadly playing the flute. The mother cried: 'My son! My son! He is going to the sky!' The young man reached the sky and he became the moon. This is why the moon even today has a stained face.

The mother was angry at his daughter and said: 'Why did you make your brother leave?' They went home and slept. In the morning, when the daughter woke up, the mother had disappeared and the house was full of plants, birds and animals. The pregnant woman began to prepare herself to go looking for her mother. She asked the capuchin monkey where her mother had gone. 'This way', said the monkey,

indicating her a path. The woman began to walk, looking for her mother. But soon it got dark. She didn't know what to do. Her baby twins from the womb began to talk. 'We know where grandmother went!' They asked their mother to pick flowers for them. She picked many flowers and put them in her chest. A bee inside the flowers stung her. She became very annoyed. 'Be quiet', she told her children in the womb; 'I shall no longer listen to you!' So the twins didn't talk anymore. After much walking, she reached a crossroad. She took the path on the right. After a while she was walking, she heard some noise. She was very happy and run towards the manioc garden. There was a lonely grandmother. She said, 'Come, come, daughter-in-law (*cachun*). Are you hungry? Come to eat!' She brought her to her house which was very big. 'My sons always arrive at midday, they are jaguars who always kill many animals and bring a lot of meat. But they don't like humans, they will eat you. I will hide you into a large *tinaja*. You shall stay there and you shall not spit out of the *tinaja*'. So the woman hid inside the jar. The jaguar-sons came home shouting. 'What is this smell Mother? This is human smell!', the sons told the grandmother. She said: 'This is smell of grandmother's armpits!' But the sons kept asking about the smell. The woman in the jar had lots of saliva in her mouth and couldn't hold it anymore: she spitted out of the jar. So the jaguars realised she was there. 'Mother you lied to us!', she said. They thus killed the woman. The grandmother asked her sons to give her the woman's intestines. The grandmother went to the river and washed the intestines and rescued the male twins. She took them and put them in a *tinaja* with cotton. The twins grew very fast and when they were older they began to use the blowpipe and the spear. When the children grew up, they realised that the jaguars had eaten their mother. So they decided to kill the jaguars and the jaguars' mother. So they killed the old grandmother, cooked her and, when the grandmother's sons came back, they served them with their own's mother meat. 'Very delicious', the jaguars said tasting the meat. One wanted to eat more and he found, in the pot, his mother's head. 'Why did you do that? Now I am going to kill you', the jaguar cried. But the two twins became two birds and flew away. They thought of a plan to kill the jaguars. They called *susu* (ant) so that he could eat the wooden pillars of a bridge crossing the river. There, they waited for the jaguars to come. The younger brother, who was less clever, begged the older one to let him hold the spear. 'I will kill the jaguars, brother!' So the older brother let him have the spear. When the jaguars began crossing the bridge, this fell into pieces and the jaguars fell into the river and died. Only one female jaguar who was heavily

pregnant managed to escape to the shore. The younger brother tried to kill her with the spear but he couldn't. For this reason, up to these days, the forest is full of jaguars who devour people.

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