

London School of Economics and Political Science

Material Morality:  
An Ethnography of Value among the Sanema of  
Venezuelan Amazonia

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## **DECLARATION**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the value of manufactured items among the Sanema, a hunting and horticultural people of Southern Venezuela. By extending the ‘virtue ethics’ approach prevalent in the study of Amazonian societies, I suggest that artefacts are as much a component of Sanema virtuous conviviality as corporeal practices. Manufactured items are meaningful in a distinct way to the often-studied crafted artefacts, which are widely seen to embody the human subjectivities of the maker. Instead, the valuable prefabricated properties of industrial goods, which I refer to as ‘affordances’, can allow morality to be conceptualised and materialised. The focus on manufactured items reflects the recent influx of such goods into Sanema lives that feature centrally in their daily narratives of personhood, sociality and ethical practises. In drawing attention to these industrial goods that emerge from the wider national context, I contextualise Sanema experiences within the contemporary setting of political participation, the market economy and frequent encounters with non-indigenous people. In contexts that range from expressions of care, inter-ethnic dependence, acts of justice, manoeuvrability within state apparatus, and the moral actions of nonhuman beings within the cosmos, the ethnography demonstrates that morality is often articulated as being realised through or within ‘things’. As such, my approach attempts to transcend the human-artefact dichotomy by leaving open the possibility that morality emerges from manifold material forms.

In memory of *Na'ai* and *Japa*

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## A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

Sanema [*sánima*] is one of four closely related languages, listed by Rodrigues (1986:90) as Yanomámi, Yanomám, Ninám and Sanuma (Sanumá). A Sanema grammar has been developed by the linguist and missionary Donald Borgman of the Amazon Evangelical Mission (MEVA) (see Borgman 1990). However, it is not officially stabilised and I have thus opted to use the orthography that my Sanema hosts used, which was established by the ADIEL missionaries and employed in a number of their publications. The majority of the orthography is consonant with Spanish (including the *j*, pronounced as *h*), except the following:

1. The Sanema alphabet includes one additional vowel, the high central vowel: *ö*, which roughly approximates a cross between *e* and *i*.
2. The consonant *s* is sounded as *sh* (*ʃ*) before and/or after the vowel *i* as in feet.
3. Intervocalic consonants (equivalent pronunciation) exist between *p* and *b*, *t* and *d*, *k* and *g*. While I have used *p* and *b* according to subtle differences in pronunciation, in accordance with my hosts' utilisation, I have opted for the use of *t* over *d* and *k* over *g*.

While according to this orthography the correct spelling for the language group would be *Sanöma*, given that there is no official or accepted way to spell it, I have decided to utilise throughout this thesis one of the two more widespread spelling of *Sanema* (the other being *Sanuma*) that seem to be somewhat accepted in many of the recent publications. I have also opted for this spelling for accessibility in reading and pronunciation, as well as for ease in database or online searches.

## GLOSSARY OF FREQUENTLY USED TERMS

Cedula (Sp.)	Identification card.
Criollo/a (Sp.)	Non-indigenous Venezuelan or person of mixed heritage.
Diligencia (Sp.)	Bureaucratic errands.
Guia (Sp.)	Official documentation required to transport petrol.
Ipa aitö (Sa.)	My others (my family, my similars).
Jikula (Sa.)	Shaman's spirit ally who lives in his chest.
Kili (Sa.)	Fearful, respectful, modest, timid.
Matitö (Sa.)	Manufactured thing or possession.
Oka töpö (Sa.)	Sorcerers, raiders.
Omaö (Sa.)	Mythical creator.
Pebalo (Sa.)	To be poor, to suffer.
Pi mönaja (Sa.)	Contentment.
Waitili (Sa.)	Fearless, bold, courageous, reckless.
Yanomami	Southern group of the Yanomami language family.
Ye'kwana	Carib-speaking neighbouring indigenous group.

## TRANSLATIONS, FIGURES AND PSEUDONYMS

All translations, diagrams, maps and photographs are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

All indigenous personal and place names have been changed in order to protect identities. I have opted to indicate place names within *criollo* territory by their actual names, as well as the regions discussed. I believe these locales are easily identifiable by the maps as well as the historical accounts of the Ye'kwana and Sanema throughout the thesis.

Except for proper names, non-English words are italicised throughout the text. I use the abbreviation 'Sp.' to indicate words in Spanish and 'Sa.' for words in Sanema.

At the time of fieldwork the official fixed rate of exchange was 4.3 Bs.F. (Bolivars Fuerte) per USD. However, when indicating quantities in USD I use the black market rate of exchange of 8 Bs.F. per USD, unless otherwise stated, in order to offer a more realistic account on the values presented.

## PROLOGUE

### Generator-Shaped Kinship

I had not long been back in the Sanema community of Maduaña, where I was conducting fieldwork, when my host brother Santiago paid me a visit. I showed him the selection of action films I had brought back with me from the frontier town so that the community could enjoy a night of movie watching. Santiago smiled and seemed animated by the prospect of an evening's entertainment, but his excitement soon fizzled to disappointment when he exclaimed, 'The only problem is that we have no petrol for the generator.' I was well prepared for this all-too-common response and responded keenly, 'oh, I brought some petrol up with me this time' pointing to the jerry can in the corner of the room. I was soon to discover, however, that my anticipatory contribution of petrol alone would add very little to our hankering for an evening's entertainment since there were a number of other components that were essential if our film night was to be a success. Although I was supplying the petrol and Santiago had the generator and the DVD player, he informed me that it was his brother Eloy who had the correct type of engine oil required, his *sioli* (brother-in-law, WZH) Mauricio who owned the only circuit breaker, his niece (classificatory daughter-in-law, ZD) who owned the only plug sockets, and his other *sioli* (ZH) who owned the spark plug.

Being ignorant of the workings of mechanical things, I had not even known that the generator had so many parts; I had just assumed that it was a fixed object that simply needed turning on and occasionally fed with petrol. Not only did the generator have many bits, but those bits also seemed to have been distributed out among different people. This was when Santiago told me that some of the people who had generator parts in their care might, for one reason or another, not take too kindly to his request to borrow them. Quarrelling with his brothers had meant that the generator could not be consolidated into its whole state, and thus there would be no movie watching—and consequently no community cheerfulness (Sa. *pi mönaja*)—that evening.

As I circled the community asking permission from each household to borrow all the necessary components, I slowly began to realise that using the generator was

not a matter of simply turning it on at all. Little had I known during the many evenings happily watching movies that there had been such an intricate web of social relations guiding affairs behind the scenes. Several things struck me as intriguing about this partible generator. Firstly, family members needed to be peaceable for the generator to come together. Secondly, community contentment also relied on this affable relatedness, as everyone in Maduaña used the generator to charge their torches, watch movies, listen to music and light their houses at night. But most importantly, the unique separable properties of the generator had been appropriated by people, and with moral consequences. In other words, on a number of levels the generator drew attention to the importance of conviviality, since its use required the cooperation and good humour of almost all kin. It was as though the cooperative use of generator components reflected the cohesion of kinship relations and networks.

The partible generator emerged during fieldwork as a case of ethical action mediated through an object. But more than that, moral judgements seemed to be prospering from the generator's unique properties. Indeed, as time went on, I started to notice that manufactured objects and morality resonated in all facets of Sanema daily life, and what's more, they seemed to be intertwined. Once I had become mindful of these central concerns, I began to see that not only were manufactured belongings—*matitö* or 'things' as they were often called—a prominent preoccupation, but that they were generally portrayed as far from trivial or practical. *Matitö* were infused with emotive and ethical meanings. In particular, morality seemed to be realised through material things, whose 'affordances' often gave rise to ethical understandings and experiences of the world.



**Figure 1: Maduaña's generator**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Uncovering the Source of Manufactured Value



**Figure 2: Outboard motor**

#### **Virtue Ethics in Amazonian Scholarship**

In 1985, Joanna Overing published an edited volume—*Reason and Morality*—on the limits of the notion of rationality, questioning the very idea that universal ‘truths’ exist separate from values. The contributors to the volume set out to demonstrate that in many non-Western contexts, rationality (beliefs, knowledge and actions) cannot be extricated from systems of morality, affect and cosmology. As Overing states in the introduction: ‘The notion of rationality as decontextualized thought, the ideal of objective cognition which places thinking outside the realm of intentions and morality, is a barren one which at the same time frames questions about human activity in a very peculiar and ultimately pointless way’ (1985a: 13-4). This inquiry



led her to later develop a model of the ‘aesthetics of community’ that was outlined in her 2000 book *The Anthropology of Love and Anger*, edited with Alan Passes. This volume assembled a number of works with a specific focus on Amazonian socialities of virtuous practice and the ‘good life’. The attention to virtue-centred ethics was an attempt to depart from the ‘overly coercive models of morality’ (Overing and Passes 2000b: 4) in which the Durkheimian rights-centred view of society had prevailed.<sup>1</sup> Amazonian peoples, as the contributors to the volume assert, strive to maintain harmonious relations premised on egalitarianism and a ‘moral economy of intimacy’ even if through the negotiation of destructive emotions such as jealousy and anger. This pursuit of the ‘beautiful good life’ in Amazonia is integrally tied up with ‘the everyday virtues of love, care, compassion, generosity, and the spirit of sharing’ (2000b: 3).

The notion of beauty in the good life is central to this characteristically Amazonian form of ethics, and offers an alternative language to that presented by the conventional ethical-moral enquiry. By describing sociality as an ‘aesthetics of conviviality’, Overing and Passes specifically direct attention to beauty in daily practice—of the domestic domain in particular—and the individual and collective gratification in this process. Integral to this approach, then, is a corporeal and sensual dimension to virtuous action; and indeed most contributions to the book focus on the embodied intersubjectivity of community. This approach was to become extremely influential among scholars of lowland South America, particularly students of Joanna Overing’s herself (see e.g. Gow 1989, 1991, 2001; McCallum 2001). One such student who recently utilised this approach—and with the explicit framing of morality—is Carlos David Londoño Sulkin, who worked amongst the Muinane of Colombia. In his monograph, *People of Substance* (2012), Londoño Sulkin is motivated both by the virtue ethics approach set out by Overing, but also by the ‘moral turn’ in anthropological scholarship, which he employs in order to consider people’s reflexive self-awareness in sensible experiences.<sup>2</sup> His ethnography draws on

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<sup>1</sup> On this discussion see Laidlaw 2002 on freedom, Zigon 2008 on reflexive ethics, and

<sup>2</sup> The aim of my thesis is to specifically conceptualize a non-corporeal material ethics, and so will not engage directly with the debates and varying approaches of this so-called ‘moral turn’ in anthropology. This moral turn distinguishes between the Durkheimian/Kantian notion of determining values and norms (commonly referred to with the term morality) on the one

Muinane corporeal idioms and how the substantive composition of bodies—in particular with the substances of tobacco, coca and chilies—relate to moral personhood and social life:

[Muinane's] most frequent expressions of concern, claims and evaluations concerning the admirable and the despicable, the human and the inhuman, and matters of worth in general ... were articulated in terms of persons' bodily composition, and often particularly in terms of the quality of substances (2012: 69).

Substances that were consumed became 'incarnated capabilities and subjectivities' (2012: 95), linked to thoughts and emotions that were socially created through feeding and consubstantiality (encapsulated in the phrase 'consuming the same tobacco juice'). Londoño Sulkin's monograph illustrates that human bodies are produced through collective care and nourishment, and provides an excellent example of the body as the quintessential site of virtuous practice in Amazonia.

This interest in embodied modes of existence in lowland South America, which was first proposed by Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro in 1979, has been an enduring approach when exploring subjective, agentive and dynamic realities in the region. Many scholars have found inspiration in this corporeal view of selfhood, stressing that social activities become inscribed in the representations, processes and reproduction of bodies (see for example Gow 1989, 1991, 2000; Grotti 2007; Lagrou 2000; McCallum 1996; Santos-Granero 2009a; Stang 2009; Taylor 1996; Turner 1980, 1995; Vilaca 2002, 2005, 2007). Like Londoño Sulkin's Muinane case, these accounts reconceptualised the notion that a body exists *a priori*, instead framing it as the site of both individual perception and social cohesion. Most importantly, the body is gradually fabricated through cohabitation, food sharing, exchange of bodily fluids and ritual participation.

Advocating for an attention to what he termed 'bodiliness'—a notion of the body emerging from processes of social production and self-making—Terrence Turner (1995) shows how Kayapó bodily form is created through value systems that

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hand, and the Aristotelian/Foucauldian virtue ethics as subjective and agentive experiences/practices (commonly referred to with the term ethics) on the other. I tend to believe, like most, that a dialectic exists between self-awareness and normative modes. As Fassin states, the 'lack of empirical significance of the distinction between ethics and morality' (2012: 8) illustrates that the terms used are somewhat inconsequential.

mark every stage of social development in the life cycle. He is careful not to represent the embodied orientation of worldviews as a product of Cartesian philosophy, but as a standpoint that ‘does not imply the abstraction of “the body” from social relations and processes but on the contrary points towards the integration of the body and social relations as parts of a single continuum of material activity’ (1995: 168). The use of adornment among the Kayapó, in particular, conjoins the physical body to the social relations and natural environment that constitute it—what he refers to as ‘the social skin’ (1980). In adapting this notion of corporeal subjectivity, many have also explored how bodily representations become central to indigenous encounters with wider national society and the state. This corporeal mediation with wider society is apparent in accounts of authenticity in identity politics, indigeneity, and political representations among Native Amazonians (see Conklin 1997, 2007; Conklin and Morgan 1996; Jackson 1997).

It is clear that, for many, body-centric and phenomenal modes of analysis in Amazonia have been productive in generating new insights into social life and personhood in the region, building on the virtue ethics approach advanced by Joanna Overing (see also Overing 1988, 1989, 2003). Sanema narratives were indeed infused with everyday concerns and evaluations of morality similar to cases described above. Yet, during fieldwork, I was waiting with bated breath for the Sanema to offer descriptions of their consubstantiated and permeable bodies, or of narratives that described virtuous practices as centred on the body. I found, however, that the phrase ‘I made her grow with the meat I fed her’ was the only unambiguous indicator of body fabrication through the sharing of substance. My Sanema hosts presented a different orientation on the matter, not entirely centred on the body, but rather on artefacts, and more precisely, on manufactured ‘things’. While the importance of food sharing between family members was indeed referenced, personhood, relatedness and moral discourse were more often than not objectified in manufactured items. As we shall see in Chapter 5, where I return to a more detailed discussion on the body, adornments are of key significance in kin making, but it was above all the beauty of beads themselves that was articulated, rather than the transformation of the body. In this sense, we might re-conceptualise the body as a placeholder for material adornments rather than an object of meaning in and of itself. In Chapter 7 I also explore the body in terms of corporeal experiences of mobility (instigated by

paperwork) rather than as a mere article of beautification and consubstantiality. As such, while not insignificant for the Sanema, the body is discursively subordinated to manufactured items. It is my aim in this thesis to take these priorities seriously.

My ethnography thus reveals that the enduring focus on the body and bodily substance in Amazonia has tended to eclipse other forms of relatedness and alternative virtuous practices that exist alongside, but apart, from 'bodiliness'. The objective of my approach is to consider what role manufactured goods in particular have in the virtue ethics of everyday Amazonian life. With this in mind, the next section will consider the arrival and significance of manufactured goods in lowland South America.

### **Coexisting with Manufactured Things**

It has often struck me that a good number of monographs set in lowland South America mention only in passing the machetes, shotguns, clothing, plastic plates, frying pans, outboard motors and stereo systems that likely constitute daily lives. The remarks are placed discretely in sections entitled 'historical overview' or 'setting the scene'. In even the oldest of monographs, photographs are strategically selected to show unsullied practices of 'traditional' life, only to be betrayed by a battered metal pot in the background, a knife lurking at the edges of the shot and, in almost all cases, women wearing glass beads.

This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 3: Boy with a pot**

If, as Santos-Granero has stated, ‘objects figure as prominently, if not more prominently, than animals in native Amazonian cosmologies and imaginaries’ (2009b: 1), then material things in Amazonia merit further reflection. In fact, as many ethnographers of the region will agree, it becomes immediately clear when living among native Amazonians how material their existence and daily concerns are, and not merely in terms of the baskets, masks and hammocks crafted by hand. Goods such as machetes, outboard motors, generators, petrol, beads and paper pervade everyday Amerindian lives and have become integral to their livelihoods. If we wish to take their worldviews seriously, then, it is essential that we explore this contemporary material existence. What’s more, as we shall see throughout the thesis, far from being a degradation of a supposedly pristine culture, manufactured goods are salient manifestations of moral desires and subjectivities in contemporary daily life.

For a long time, the concrete fabric of material life beyond the body and the forest in Amazonia had all too often been neglected due to the perceived paucity of elaborate material culture in the region. It was also believed that inherent egalitarianism somehow precluded the existence of property, and that its introduction

into Amazonian life would inevitably bring about inequalities (Clastres 1987; Overing 1986). Such representations, Brightman has noted, ‘perpetuated an idealised image of indigenous Amazonians as somewhat ephemeral or ascetic beings, unburdened by material desires’ (Brightman 2010: 151). In spite of this tendency to overlook the material things in Amazonian life, there was, however, a somewhat influential and longstanding inquiry into the impact of trade goods in the region that led to an impassioned discussion on the subject in the 1970s and 80s, chiefly from the field of ecology. South America had long been the site of numerous studies of ecological materialism because it was seen to be a region only recently affected by outside influences. One of these studies culminated in an infamous debate that concerned the Sanema, or more precisely, the nature of Yanomami warfare. Chagnon’s provocative monograph *The Fierce People* (1968) sparked a heated dispute on the topic by first suggesting that warfare among the Yanomami was grounded in socio-biology, which incorporated an evolutionary and inherent drive for aggression. His conclusion was that, ‘Violence is a potent force in human society and may be the principal driving force behind the evolution of culture’ (Chagnon 1988: 985). The prominent political-economic counter argument to this controversial claim, though, pushed for a recognition of the impacts of European explorers and colonists, who introduced manufactured goods and disease into the area, and which consequently instigated a phase of indigenous warfare in the ‘tribal zone’ (Whitehead 2000, see also Blick 1988, Ferguson 1990; Tierney 2000). Ferguson argued that it was steel tools in particular that caused intertribal conflicts because they were so scarce and valued that Yanomami resorted to any means to obtain them. Violence and raiding were only the most radical of techniques utilised to obtain these tools, which also included alliances, settlement by mission outposts, and amalgamation of villages. We will learn more on the importance of steel tools among the Sanema in Chapters 4 and 6.

Intriguingly, one of the first anthropological studies of the Sanema, conducted by Marcus Colchester in the late 1970s, was a further attempt to consider the influences of material goods on Sanema ecology. Colchester (1982) found that the Sanema were affecting slow environmental degradation since the advance of missions and *criollo* townships, and the resultant introduction of steel tools, shotguns, outboard motors and torches. He argued that Sanema behaviour first and foremost followed a ‘least effort principle’, that what they attempted to preserve was not the environment but their energy, demonstrating that ‘the economy, far from being planned and

objectively controlled, is opportunistic and controlled subjectively' (1982: 591).

Hugh-Jones (1992) attempted to draw attention to these very circumstances that Colchester had observed, focusing on how merchandise is received in Amazonia beyond a depiction of their harmful impacts or their incorporation into 'traditional' landscapes of trade. All too often, Hugh-Jones states, Amerindians have been portrayed as 'seduced by worthless trinkets, pressured to accept unwanted and unnecessary goods, turned into indiscriminating consumers forced to sell their labour and produce on a ruthless market, who begin by losing their heads, and end up by losing their autonomy and their culture as well' (1992: 51). Yet, as he rightly argues, what many ethnographers experience in Amazonia does not adequately reflect this. Manufactured items are as much a part of everyday Amazonian life as are myth, ritual and subsistence tasks; and in fact, many of these items become intertwined within the socio-economic-cosmological spheres of life. Hugh-Jones goes on to state that the fact that Indians actively continue to seek credit with itinerant traders despite the exploitative nature of such relations, is both testament to the high value placed on such goods, but also to the misrepresentation of the bonds that are established in trade relations. Indigenous persons involved in inter-ethnic exchange should be seen as agents who instigate the appropriation of trade goods themselves, rather than being seen as mere victims of bondage.

The influence and use of trade goods in Amazonian communities was extensively explored by William H. Fisher (2000) in his account of Brazilian Xikrin Kayapó experiences of the capitalist market through the lens of their cultural logic. It is essential, he argues, to keep in mind historical and political circumstances when considering the arrival of industrial goods, as periods of war and peace both determine access to such items (see also Turner 1992; Dean 2009). The Xikrin context takes place amidst a backdrop of boom-bust cycles of extractive economies which have determined the acquisition of goods, patterns of sedentarization and 'subsistence strategies'; in particular, their shift to the production of bitter manioc which is 'easily portable and stores well' (2000: 83). This change in subsistence activities gave rise to an increased dependence on chiefs who maintained trade relationships with whites and subsequently distributed trade goods to their followers. This relationship of dependence on chiefs enabled household autonomy through the private ownership of machinery and steel tools. Nevertheless, once goods become

central to the workings of every-day life, needs became ‘inflationary’ and further dependency on extractive industries ensued.

Several years later, Cesar Gordon (2006, 2010) presents a more contemporary ethnography of Xikrin ‘consumerism’ and finds it to be at a new scale; more conspicuous, ostentatious and intricately tied to all aspects of Xikrin life. Rather than focusing solely on goods as primarily desired for ease of subsistence tasks, as Fisher does, Gordon explores commodities as binding kin through practices of care, gift giving and ‘pleasing people’. He revisits the notion of ‘inflation’ introduced by Fisher in order to understand how commodities also serve to differentiate people in the same way as did exclusionary wealth of ceremonial ornaments and names in the past; both of which were the sole jurisdiction of beautiful (powerful) people. Given that value arises from uniqueness (restricted circulation), residents continually attempted to outdo one another in order to differentiate the ‘beautiful’ from the ‘common’. The result was opulent displays of manufactured goods—from hi-fi systems to trucks—bought with compensation funds that were awarded by mining firms. In this process of ever more extravagant displays, a reconfiguration of the beautiful/common distinction came about, developing instead into a dichotomy of ‘rich (with money) vs. poor (without money)’ (2010: 15).

More recent literature has brought manufactured items into sharper focus beyond their prior peripheral status, and has offered valuable contributions that enable a deeper comprehension of the contemporary lives of Amerindians. These analyses include, to name but a few, manufactured items as gestures of love (Walker 2013b), displays of accumulated external relationships (Grotti 2013), and as components of incorporated fertile exteriority (Ewart 2013a). All of these examples illustrate that manufactured items are imbued with a value that transcends their utilitarian uses, instead becoming integrated into fundamental systems of social relationships, and even processes of cosmological reproduction. It is already evident, then, that goods facilitate relationships and become integral to the project of the ‘aesthetics of conviviality’. But could they do more than that? Could they be *constitutive* of morality?

It may be productive to consider goods not merely as facilitators of this aesthetics of conviviality, but to start rethinking their role in moral concepts. For example, the Yanomami spokesperson and shaman Davi Kopenawa wrote with great



frequency about foreign goods in the context of moral appraisals in his prose of *The Falling Sky* (2013). Most notably, the immoral behaviour of the whites seemed to somehow actively permeate the goods that they supplied:

As soon as the white people opened their enormous wood boxes to give out their trade goods, curls of fine sweet-smelling dust came out. This penetrating odour spread everywhere. All the things they distributed smelled strongly of it: the metal tools as well as the cotton cloth and hammocks. Our fathers and grandfathers did not have a white person's nose. They recognised the metal tools' sickening smell from a distance. This scent seemed dangerous to them and they were afraid of it because it made them cough and immediately made them very sick. Old men, women and children died of it very quickly. This is why they call it *poo pë wakexi*, the metal tools smoke. They thought this was the origin of the *xawara* epidemics that were devouring them (Kopenawa and Albert 2013: 178).

It is interesting to note from this passage that illness is described as emanating from the goods of the whites rather than from the bodies of the whites themselves, which would be consistent with Euro-American notions of epidemiology, and perhaps even with the primacy of corporeality as it is foregrounded in Amazonian literature.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note, too, that pathogenic substances in Amazonia as a whole, but certainly among the Yanomami, are often related to the immoral realm of the 'other' and their malign intentionality. With this view, it is reasonable to suggest that the objects of the whites are dangerous due to the immoral behaviour of the whites themselves, who are widely considered to be angry, stingy, lacking in compassion and consumers of inappropriate foods (see Erikson 2009: 179; Ewart 2008: 517; Walker 2015: 50). When noting the references to dangerous smoke in Yanomami mythology, Jose Kelly (2011) too drew a connection between 'anti-sociality' and diseases:

'Down-river where the Orinoco goes underground' is almost certainly a reference to the land of criollos, for they came from down-river. When I enquired about the origin of *shawara* [pathogenic smoke] in Ocamo, many suggested that epidemic diseases arrived with criollos. Given the predatory nature of *shawara*, it is not surprising that these narratives locate its origin in anti-social *yai* demons or at the limits of the known world, red lights on the horizon or 'where the Orinoco goes underground,' being spatial equivalents of the anti-social (2011: 59).

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<sup>3</sup> See also Oakdale (2005: 91) for an additional example of the smell of goods attracting spirits and causing illness among the Kayabi.

Such notions sustain the idea that the extraordinary objects of the whites further contribute to their wicked and peculiar reputation, so that ‘epidemics, objects, and whites became linked’ (Kelly 2011: 59-60; see also Hugh-Jones 1992: 46). Granted, the moral predicament in which the Yanomami found themselves arose from the very real and devastating experience of epidemics, but the extent to which these judgments about goods continue to be felt today, even with reduced mortality (although not perhaps morbidity) is revealing, and Bruce Albert states that a similar dread of goods persists even to this day among some Yanomami (Kopenawa and Albert 2013: 518, n. 34; see also Kelly 2011: 67).<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the fusion of morality and objects created what Kelly describes as a whites-objects-epidemics compound that has persisted over time, albeit continually reoriented, with the more recent manifestation being economic and matrimonial troubles between communities (Kelly 2011: 60).

The Sanema that I know certainly did not have the same apprehension of white (or *criollo*) people’s things that the Yanomami are described as expressing. As a matter of fact, quite the opposite was true; they desired industrial goods at times above all else. And yet, the strong moral sentiment connected to manufactured goods, as we shall discover throughout the thesis, remains faithful to this principle, and to the notion of a moral-material compound. I use this example of the epidemic smoke to introduce the idea that materiality and morality can create a composite entity; or put it another way, that morality can take a material shape.

### **Things as Concepts and Concepts as Things**

The case of the epidemic smoke might bring to mind analogous interpretations of material things carrying the essence of their donors, the most acclaimed of which was Mauss’ gift, described as ‘invested with life’ (1990 [1950]: 13) because it retains attributes of the giver. Another well-known case is that of Parry’s Indian gift (1986, 1989), which describes how ‘true’ unreciprocated gifts to Brahman priests convey the sins of the donor as a means of purification and atonement. In this way, sin is ‘a bio-moral phenomenon which manifests itself in quite tangible and material ways’ (1989: 69).<sup>5</sup> These examples demonstrate that the notion of material things mediating

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the infamous case of the Fort Pitt infected blankets show that in some cases goods did indeed carry disease (although see Ranlet 2000 for a re-interpretation of this).

<sup>5</sup> See other examples of polluted money in Shipton (1989); Hutchinson (1992); and High (2013).

concepts and taking on potency as a result has a long-standing history in the discipline. However, the move to explaining material things more extensively as an object of enquiry within anthropology only gained traction in the 1980s. This field of ‘material culture’ studies proposed to expound the relationship between the social and the material (see Hicks 2010: Chapter 2), but theorising materiality beyond the subject-object dualism—beyond the ‘relationship between’—came with Daniel Miller’s edited volume *Materiality* (2005b). In this, Miller challenged what he described as the ‘tyranny of the subject’; that is, the idea that material things are semiotic representations of selves or social relations (2005a: 3-4). Drawing on the work of Gell and Latour, who attempted to dissolve the subject-object dualism and rethink the location of action, Miller reminds us that the exterior environment brings persons into being through the processual phenomenon of objectification, whereby the very act of creating form creates consciousness. Objectification predominantly facilitates a dialectical relationship between subject and object such that there are no pre-objectified forms (i.e. no *ex nihilo* thoughts or mind), and any attempts to transcend the tangible inevitably become further grounded in physical things (Engelke 2005). Rather than being seen as an epiphenomenon of the social, then, this approach began to see the material world as constituting humanity itself. As an example of this approach, Webb Keane’s contribution to this volume objects to the ‘radical separation of the sign from the material world’ (2005: 183, see also Keane 2003) suggesting that the sign should not be seen as representative of society, but an integral phenomenon. ‘Redness’, for example, cannot be manifest without an embodiment, and indeed only becomes instantiated in material form. Morality too is an important component of this material manifestation of signs because it ‘depends on the correct understanding of the materiality of things and the immateriality of persons, a balancing act that invites perpetual anxiety’ (2005: 192). Keane thus makes the connection between the moral and the material, reiterating that morality comes into being through the material world.

In a further move to dissolve the distinction between concepts and things, Henare, Holbraad and Wastell have proposed a model for *Thinking Through Things* (2007). Much like Miller, they appeal for a heuristic approach to the study of materiality, taking “‘things’” encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something

else' (2007: 2). Transcending previous studies of material culture that presented meanings as detached from the material world rather than being part of it, Henare *et al* argue that '*things might be treated as sui generis meanings*' (2007: 3, original emphasis). They suggest that native categories should not be seen as 'reified' in objects *per se*, but that certain objects and concepts are mutually constitutive. In this volume, for instance, Holbraad takes seriously Cuban diviners assertion that aché is both powder and power, claiming that 'its abstract meaning as "power" is internally related to its concrete nature as powder. So the meaning of aché (the "concept") is literally constituted by the things to which it would otherwise be assumed simply to "apply"' (2007: 206). Holbraad is showing us that among the Cuban diviners, powder facilitates a relationship with the deities through its composition as a multiplicity of particles, which engender an 'ontological leap' from 'transcendence to immanence' (2007: 206).

Confronting this same subject-object dichotomy was a challenge also undertaken by some in the field of ethics. In *Moralizing Technology* (2011), for instance, Peter-Paul Verbeek critiqued dualistic approaches to ethical judgements as emerging exclusively from either the subject or the object. On the one hand, deontological ethics understands morality as arising from subjective judgments and is fundamentally free from external influences; an ethics bounded within the mind, as it were. The other approach, known as the consequentialist approach (specifically utilitarianism), sees morality as stemming from objective consequences of human action, an ethics existing entirely outside of the mind. Both approaches, Verbeek argues, 'represent a humanist ethical orientation in which humans are opposed as autonomous subjects to the world of mute objects' (2011: 31).

Verbeek's background is situated within the field of Science and Technology Studies, but his approach is valuable for the aims of this thesis in shedding light on the material dimension of morality; advancing a moral mediation approach with specific attention to how technology informs our way of 'doing ethics' (2011: 1). This approach posits that objects and artefacts play a mediating role 'in human practices and in the experiences and interpretations on the basis of which human beings make moral decisions' (2011: 141). He draws on the work of a number of anthropologists, philosophers and sociologists to rethink assumptions about the moral subject, critiquing in particular the humanist notion of the autonomy of the subject; that is, the belief in the absence of external influences as a prerequisite to moral agency. On the

contrary, all reality exists through and with things, so that the human-world-experience is concomitantly a human-thing-amalgam, or as Verbeek describes it, active mediators of human-world experience.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, human intentionality, Verbeek argues, is not fully autonomous but technologically (or materially more generally) mediated. Initiating this move away from an exclusively *human* ethics, then, Verbeek's approach uncovers the idea that morality is composite in nature, with intentionality distributed among human and nonhuman elements (what he refers to as 'hybrid intentionality' or 'composite intentionality'). Accordingly, he advocates a non-dualist outlook on ethics and materiality, as well as on the human and the nonhuman, because neither are pre-existing entities, but are constitutive of and belong to one another. In so doing, he calls for a broadening of the humanist foundation of ethics and moral action in order to further an approach to humanity beyond humanism, and a view of moral agency as 'distributed among human beings and nonhuman entities' (2011: 38, see also Latour 1992).

In an analogous stance to this post-humanist approach, Tim Ingold (2011) asks us to consider that the material world has an existence independent of human action. In his collection of essays on human experience, he maintains that the use of the term 'materiality' reproduces the dichotomy of mind and matter, entrenching further the notion that objects only come into being when incorporated into the social life of human beings, or that human mental schemas are somehow mediated through the material world. He argues, instead, that 'in the world of materials, humans figure as much within the context for stones as do stones within the context for humans' (2011: 31). In accordance with my own paradigm of 'material morality' that I explore throughout the thesis, a post-humanist approach can help to elucidate how morality might be located within things, and how an 'aesthetics' of conviviality can be manifest beyond the body.

We might gain further insight into the idea of 'material morality', however, by exploring what it is about materiality that promotes moral realisations and conceptualisations. Recalling that Miller proposed that materiality constitutes humanity, and that objectification is the nature of consciousness, we might ask what allows for such a process. To put it another way: what unites morality and the material world? This next section will consider how the concepts of value, aesthetics

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<sup>6</sup> When using the term 'active' here, he refers to Ihde's (1990) hermeneutic argument that technologies have 'intentions' as they transform perception.

and morality might be comparable notions that are united through human action in the material world.

### **Value, Aesthetics and Morality in Action**

The information laid out in the previous three sections have demonstrated the importance of manufactured items in Amazonia, but also their centrality in the human moral economy. The purpose of this thesis is to make sense of the notion that morality and materiality can in some ways be intertwined, connected or mutually constitutive. In order to grasp the concept of ‘material morality’, as the title of this thesis describes it, a comprehensive grasp of the ideas involved in both concepts is required.

Overing and Passes’ description of ethical practice and conviviality in Amazonia outlined in the first section of this chapter was employing a language that took account of the significance of beauty, accomplishment and satisfaction in Amazonian virtuous practice; described as an ‘aesthetics of conviviality’. As they put it, there is ‘an aesthetics of Amazonian ways of acting, and styles of everyday relating that are morally—and therefore aesthetically—not only proper but beautiful and pleasing’ (Overing and Passes 2000: xii). Ethical practice as an aesthetic pursuit develops from an Aristotelian concept of practical activities that advance a personal and creative self-formation, taken up by Foucault in his now widely cited notion of the ‘ethics of the self’ (1985, 1990). In describing morality in aesthetic terms, Overing and Passes conjoin the field of morality with a notion that is often associated with pleasure in phenomenal and material experience. Beauty is, after all, received through sensual experiences of the material, leaving open space for pleasure in artefacts as well as in personal relationships or corporeal perceptions. For Gell (1998), aesthetics arises from the ‘index of agency’, which is normally situated with an artefact. The creative process is essential because artwork is the product of agency, resulting in sensual and visual qualities that captivate viewers through ‘abduction’, namely the inference of agency and intentionality of the artist, an indexicality that imparts potency to the artefact. In Gell’s model, then, aesthetics is the manifestation of human action and agency within creative artefacts, which subsequently effect social outcomes.

David Graeber (2001) also addresses the notion that ethics and aesthetics might also be conjoined by the material world when he outlines three different ways

of thinking about value: economic, ethical and semiotic, all ‘refractions of the same thing’ (2001: 2). Although he traverses a range of anthropological works, from Turner and Munn, to Strathern and Weiner, Graeber sets up his analysis as a dialogue between Marx (and his theory of labour value), and Mauss (and his theory of the gift). He ultimately proposes that in creating a theory of value we must look towards human action (rather than meaning, contemplation or merely exchange theory) and the way that action is made visible in concrete, perceptible form. With this perspective, objects become most valuable when they point to relations that make existence meaningful, or that demonstrate a capacity to act in the world, an action that is recognizable by others. In this way, the most valuable objects in gift economies are those that ‘embody some human quality, whether this be the creative potential of human action, or fertility, or the like, or particular histories and identities that have already been achieved’ (2001: 211). In addition to this, when created, appropriated or used by their owners, valuable objects gradually absorb their identities and in turn become inalienable possessions (2001: 114).

Following Graeber’s lead, Michael Lambek (2008) suggests that the arbitrariness of value might be resolved by analysing the relationship between economical value (which applies predominantly to objects), and ethical value (which relates to virtuous character and practice). Like Graeber, Lambek pinpoints human action as the identifying characteristic of value because it ‘is like a current of electricity but with its source always in human activity’ (2008: 149). In bringing together ideas about value and virtue, Lambek draws attention to the creative and productive components of economic value, linking this to the practical element of ethics. He does, however, contend that the two values are fundamentally different. Firstly, drawing on Aristotle’s model of ethical practice, Lambek highlights that ethical values pertain to the means rather than the ends; that is, to purposeful activity in daily life. Economic value, on the other hand, focuses primarily on the ends—goals, objects and consumer satisfaction. He goes on to contrast the economic and the ethical in terms of absolute and relative value: while economic value is continuously fluctuating and relative, ethical value as ‘measurable, certain and integral’ (2008: 135). This, in turn, leads him to consider the difference between choice within market value and judgment intrinsic to ethical value, concluding that choice operates on a set of commensurable values while judgment applies to

incommensurables. In situating economic value in the broader ethical sense, objects and virtuous action are drawn closer together by the notion of productive acts. Lambek (2013) later expands on this relationship between ethical and material value by distinguishing between making (material production) and doing (ethical action). Following Arendt's work on the human condition, his objective is to prevent action from being eclipsed by objects in theories of value, because value is generated in all aspects of human activity including everyday banal acts such as speaking. In this sense, the gift, he says, 'does not merely represent social relations, it constitutes them; it *is* the social relation' (2013: 147, original emphasis). Lambek thus sees objects as the 'signs' of action rather than being valuable in and of themselves.

The approaches to value that both Graeber and Lambek advance posit that it arises from productive acts, human activity or the outcome of social relationships. In using terms such as 'condensed' and 'congealed action' when referring to objects of value, the suggestion is that materiality is chiefly an outcome of valuable human action. While it is granted that some (previously fabricated) items might be appropriated into these systems, the underlying principle that material things of value are conceived or generated out of human action is apparent. Value *comes out* of the action, as it were; or to put it in Graeber words, objects become desirable by 'representing the value of an actor's own actions to herself' (2001: 259).

The cases presented here have highlighted that action in its many forms unifies, and perhaps even consolidates, the concepts of value, aesthetics and morality. For Overing value is virtuous practice, for Gell it is creative agency, for Graeber it is human action made concrete, and for Lambek it is purposeful activity. This might lead one to conclude that 'material morality' pertains to a notion of valued material things that are the result of human action. However, there is a caveat that must be introduced here, and one that relates specifically to the Amazonian context and the place of prefabricated items in this setting.

### **From Crafted and Subjectified to Prefabricated and 'Moralised'**

In Amazonia, the notion of value emerging from creative activity is particularly well-established, as was evident in earlier descriptions of fabricated bodies, but is also powerfully inculcated in the entrenched theory of subjectification. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004) has noted that while some ('modern') epistemologies create meaning



through objectification, the Amerindian stance is to subjectify and personify in order to create knowledge. Objects are given intentionality through being “expanded” into a fully fledged subject—a spirit; an animal in its human, reflexive form—or else understood as related to a subject’ (2004: 470). Descola (1994) has likewise noted that this Amazonian manner of subjectifying objects is so fundamental that it might in fact subvert the category of objects altogether.

Santos-Granero’s volume on Amazonian materiality, *The Occult Life of Things* (2009c), targets this primacy of subjectivity by offering an alternative inquiry to the fascination with animals, people, elaborate cosmologies and extraordinary rituals that had previously obscured ‘cosmologies and imaginaries’ (2009b: 1) of the material world. The publication of this volume was a move to direct attention to artefacts in lowland South America, and most importantly to the deep significance that they hold for Amerindian societies. The dominant analysis of the collection was the role of subjectivity in the creation of valuable Amazonian objects, particularly handcrafted artefacts such as slings, flutes, clay pots and masks, which index the knowledge, skills and affects of their makers. These ‘occult’ objects are seen to ‘partake in their maker’s subjectivities’ (Santos-Granero 2009b: 16), but at the same time to ‘depend on human intervention for their agency to become activated’ (2009b: 20). This is because handcrafted items in Amazonia not only become inalienable in the process of fabrication, but also become “ensouled” or infused with the soul substance of their owners’ (Santos-Granero 2009b: 12). Elsewhere, Santos-Granero expands on this notion, relating human creation to ownership so that ‘the action of “giving origin to”, or “causing something to exist”, grants rights of ownership over that which is produced’ (Santos-Granero 2009d: 168-9). In this way, one can ‘own’ songs, gardens and houses, but they can also ‘own’ children and abducted persons who were ‘brought into existence’ by their makers (Santos-Granero 2009d: 168-9; see also Fausto 1999).

These ideas bring us back to the descriptions above of ethical practice in the fabrication and production of kin in lowland South America. Here again we see how value, aesthetics and morality are drawn together through creative action, and bring into sharper focus Overing’s model of the aesthetics of conviviality. Indeed, Elizabeth Ewart suggests that these practices of creation might constitute a particularly Amazonian precedence for ‘processes of making, of becoming, and of fabrication over finished objects, fixed identities, and complete and stable bodies’ (2012: 186).

Creative action, in this way, imparts value, but also subjectivity (see also Brightman 2010).

This leads to the question of manufactured items. Where do they sit in these regimes of ownership, subjectivity and value? A number of contributors to Santos-Granero's volume on the *Occult Life of Things* consider this very question. Most conclude, however, that the archetypal Amazonian process of subjectification is also applied to manufactured goods. Philippe Erikson, for instance, notes that goods are treated like pets among the Matis, as both enter a process of familiarising before they can become fully integrated into the community (2009: 179; see also Walker 2013b: 58). However, he addresses the idea that 'the notion of ownership is closely associated with that of craftsmanship' (2009: 175)—a concept that Santos-Granero's quote above highlighted—in order to ascertain where manufactured items fit into the rubric of property. Foreign goods, which seem not to have an inalienable owner, sit in a 'neutral' realm of their own, and in having no 'imprint' of their masters, are freely shared. Yet, merchandise may not always be conceived of as devoid of owners. Walker (2012a) notes that the Urarina believe manufactured goods to be the possessions of a being known as Moconajaera—'the Burner' and owner of fire—widely likened to the Christian devil. Given the opaque origin and fabrication of industrial goods, they are said to have an owner as enigmatic as the goods themselves, enabling the 'unnatural' alienability of commodities to recover a form of valued inalienability, and the underlying social relationships therein.

Among many of my Sanema research participants, I have found that subjectifying manufactured goods, or indeed subjectifying objects in general, does not seem to be as prominent a practice as is presented in many of the accounts in Santos-Granero's volume. Ownership is as close as the Sanema get to subjectifying things, but not precisely in the sense of 'personifying' their owners. This is perhaps most evident in the fact that, I have been told, only the hammock is burned with the deceased upon death, while all other items are appropriated by kin. As we shall see in Chapter 3, even ownership is an elusive and unstable concept. Chapter 8, in which petrol is described as possessing a kind of spirit, also demonstrates that any subjectifying that might take place among the Sanema is not necessarily the result of 'pointing to a subject' *per se*, but rather of a correlation with animist vitality. What I shall be demonstrating throughout this thesis is that prefabricated and industrially

manufactured items in particular lend themselves to ethical practices not because they are subjectified, but because they are lifeless non-subjects.

In her monograph, *Space and Society in Central Brazil* (2013b), Elizabeth Ewart devotes a chapter to ‘things’ among the Panará (which refers to ‘items of everyday usage, ceremonial objects, ways of doing things and food’ 2013: 86), but cautions that it would be misleading to suggest that industrial items are treated differently or as more valuable than handcrafted or locally produced things, because both are used for similar purposes (2013b: 98). Although they are crucial to Panará relations of alterity, trade goods are not invested with any particularly influential ‘emotional energy’ (2013b: 48). I would be hesitant to make an analogous claim for the Sanema, since they invest a great deal of emotional energy in manufactured items. In fact, this is precisely what the thesis explores: why goods compel and enable this so-called ‘emotional energy’. As will become apparent through the ethnography, a desire for industrial goods is the principal reason that the Sanema have established a close association with their neighbouring Ye’kwana (Sa. *napö töpö*), their chief motivation for travelling to the cities and embracing the projects of the current political regime, and central to their preoccupation with local mining industries. In her own work, Ewart (2002) also reflects on the value of manufactured goods as prevailing from a fascination with the exterior, in particular the non-indigenous realm. Panará enthusiasm for white people’s things, Ewart argues, is embedded in a cultural logic of innovation and transformation. Fertile things (be they songs or steel tools) have always been appropriated—through exchange, raid or theft—from enemy others and subsequently circulated among Panará people as a mode of creating ‘real’ social beings. While I agree with Ewart’s claim that the fertility of the exterior impels the desire for manufactured things, for the Sanema, not all industrial items were necessarily thought to originate from the non-indigenous domain, and some were even described as being passed down from the ancestors and forefathers (see Chapters 4 and 5 on beads and machetes respectively). Moreover, I feel there is another story to be told here.

Given the fact that manufactured goods arrive in Sanema lives prefabricated; that is, the productive process is absent in their emergence, then where does their value lie? If Graeber is right in stating that most valuable objects in gift economies are the ones that embody the creative potential of human action (Graeber 2001: 211), and

if manufactured goods are indeed highly valued, then where is the creative potential in manufactured goods? Graeber might go some way to answering this question himself when he states that both human action and human thought ‘can only take place through some kind of material medium and therefore can’t be understood without taking the *qualities* of that medium into account’ (Graeber 2001: 83, emphasis added). It perhaps comes as no surprise that the ‘qualities’ of manufactured items imbues them with immense value, but I propose to advance this claim by asking what the qualities *are*, and what they *do* for value.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse merchandise not as a generic material phenomena, but as a range of different material things that are valued for different reasons according to their unique material properties—or affordances—that allow for manifold moral journeys. That is, I focus on the particular material qualities of different manufactured things and how these ‘afford’ a number of moral principles in Sanema daily life. Gibson describes the affordances of an object or environment as, ‘what it *offers* ... what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill’ (1986: 127, original emphasis). In the second part of the thesis, in which I analyse four different ‘things’ in depth, the physical properties of those things uncover what they offer, provide and furnish for the Sanema. As such, I endeavour to describe not just goods in the abstract, but how specific things are used, processed and understood, a direction that has seldom been systematically and comprehensively undertaken in the past, at least not in Amazonia.

As mentioned earlier, previous theories of value have seemed to suggest that it emerges from action, either as virtuous practice (Overing), creative agency (Gell), human action made concrete (Graeber), or purposeful action (Lambek). Material morality, I suggest, is in some sense the inverse: action that emerges from value. It is for this reason that manufactured goods are such a compelling medium from which to explore notions of ethics and value, because they are already in some ways imbued within the ready-made affordances of the artefact, from which then emerge particular forms of moral action. It is important to note that the Sanema do recognise that manufactured goods are the product of human action, but just not their own (which itself could be significant). This recognition of human production is nonetheless of lesser significance to the fact that these goods ‘afford’ particular modes of ethical action.

Using ‘things’ as a lens through which to understand the moral dimension of social relationships is not merely an analytical trope, but an ethnographically motivated response to Sanema daily narratives, actions and preoccupations. The material scope of their daily experiences in the contemporary context was frequently foregrounded, with the ubiquity of modern industrial goods taking centre stage. Manufactured goods are an important analytical frame for another reason too: they provide a perspective on Sanema lives that takes into consideration the wider political and national context into which they are increasingly imbricated.

### **Reflections on Fieldwork and Methods**

I first visited the Caura in 2005 for a short trip with a friend who had been attempting to implement education and health projects there since 2003. The project worked predominantly with Ye’kwana nurses in the region, but I was aware of the existence of a Yanomami subgroup in the area too, who were rumoured by many to be ‘the Ye’kwana’s slaves’. Only a few times on this trip did I encounter a small number of shy individuals who helped to unload Ye’kwana boats, but who would have been all but overlooked if it weren’t for their strikingly different appearance to the Ye’kwana, in both stature and demeanour. It was the relationship between the two groups that initially sparked my interest.

I looked into returning again in 2008 for a longer period of time assisting in an international micro-enterprise cooperative NGO (EarthBound) that exported decorative Ye’kwana baskets to international trade fairs. During this six-month trip, I was able to spend a month in Maduaña living with a host family and initiating relationships that would become invaluable during my PhD fieldwork a year later.

I began field research for my PhD in October 2009 and continued until November 2011. Including the preliminary fieldwork stint from November 2007 to May 2008, I was in the region for a total of 30 months. Much of the data is based on fieldwork in three locations, the most significant time being spent in Maduaña in Bolívar state, and the *criollo* frontier settlement Maripa, where residents also spent considerable time. I also stayed in a community in Amazonas State—Ulinuwiña—for two months (see Figure 4). Between these three locations, time in the field site consisted of around 20 months in total. Much of the remaining time was spent waiting in Puerto Ayacucho for access and permission to work in the Amazonas region, or

recuperating, transcribing and buying supplies in Ciudad Bolívar, the capital of Bolívar state.



**Figure 4: Map of Venezuela with field sites**

Returning to Venezuelan in 2009 as a researcher, however, placed me in a more tricky role than my prior involvement in NGOs, particularly given the continued reverberations of the El Dorado controversy (see Tierney 2000; Borofsky 2005), rising gang violence, political insecurity and increased suspicion of ‘gringos’ in the nation at large. Venezuelan Amazonia had a chequered history into which I became entangled, and from which I could not entirely escape. The Caura region also had a number of additional sensitive issues related to illegal mining, corruption and disagreements between conflicting institutions. My original plan to study the relationship between the Ye’kwana and Sanema had to be abandoned due to the delicate nature of such a topic, particularly since many Ye’kwana claimed they had been falsely accused of ‘slavery’ by academics in the past.

The anti-imperialist sentiment of Bolivarianism (Chavez's socialist regime, which I shall explore in greater depth in Chapters 7 and 8) did little to aid my attempts to conduct fieldwork in Amazonia due to a widespread suspicion of foreign researchers, particularly those who wished to work among indigenous peoples. Witch hunts and accusations of spying for imperialist governments were surprisingly frequent and many local academics were reluctant to help me for fear of becoming embroiled in another controversy. Not long after I arrived to begin fieldwork, an ecological conservation organisation published a defaming report on their web site about British imperialism and the motivations of anthropologists in the region to exploit indigenous peoples and the lucrative natural resources in their territories. Accusations against Marcus Colchester, a British anthropologist who worked among the Sanema in the late 1970s, as well as other anti-government (i.e. anti-chavista) Venezuelan anthropologists, fomented conspiracies and political factions that were taken very seriously. Needless to say, my position as a British anthropologist made it difficult for me personally and, somewhat predictably, made others want to distance themselves from me and my objectives.

Rather than becoming enmeshed in the thorny political situation and potentially burning my bridges, I decided instead to pursue a different path. I was put in touch with a government funded health organization based in Puerto Ayacucho that worked with indigenous peoples in Amazonas State. Enthusiastic about my desire to study a group that had been little-investigated and all-but-forgotten amid the famous Yanomami and powerful Ye'kwana, they encouraged me to pursue my objectives. After a number of presentations and meetings in the local offices of the Ministry of Health, they issued me with a *constancia*, an official letter informing of my legitimate entry into indigenous territory, signed and stamped by a number of prominent health officials and military personnel in Puerto Ayacucho. I was to enter the municipality of Manapiare with a *criollo* doctor stationed at a health post in a large Ye'kwana settlement, and from there make my way to a nearby Sanema community.

Upon arrival in the Ye'kwana community, the leaders seemed surprised and unsure as to my presence, but after calling a meeting in which I explained my objectives to work among the Sanema in conjunction with a health project, they agreed to take me to a community one hour upstream, inhabited by what they called 'good clean Sanema', Ulinuwiña. It was a small community founded in 1994, with essentially one family of around 50 people in total. It was located only one hour boat

ride from the Ye'kwana settlement, and seemed in some ways to be located in Ye'kwana 'territory', as it was close to a Ye'kwana hunting camp and some of their upstream garden sites.

Things seemed to be going well for the first month, until I decided to accompany the community back down to the Ye'kwana community for a health operative and political gift-giving ceremony, to which all surrounding communities were invited. I was naïve in thinking that all my doubts were behind me. The political spectacle of the operative was far more elaborate than I had anticipated, with both a prominent lieutenant of the military and the Vice Minister of the Puerto Ayacucho Ministry for Indigenous Peoples present. Other Ye'kwana who had not been in the community during my initial arrival also looked on me with suspicion. I had not been there long when I was asked to attend several meetings with the Vice Minister and the lieutenant, and later also with a group of Ye'kwana leaders. Being without a letter of permission from the Ministry for Indigenous Peoples, I was told that I was not permitted to be there and so must leave as soon as possible. They allowed me to return to the Sanema community to collect my things after which time I was to take the next flight out of the region. It was another month before a plane would be leaving, and I spent that time in Ulinuwiña, a tense period during which numerous rumours arrived in the settlement about 'angry Ye'kwana' who wished me to leave.

After the incident in Amazonas I grew increasingly anxious about the future of my research. I investigated alternative options in other regions and even other countries (with a brief trip to Peru) but in the end decided to pursue work among the Sanema in a different capacity. I resolved to return to Madaña in Bolívar State, where I had spent time during my preliminary fieldwork in 2008, and frame my research on their regular trips to the *criollo* town of Maripa, their burgeoning political participation, and their engagement with Bolivarian initiatives.

Maripa was located 4 hours by bus from Ciudad Bolívar (See Figure 4), and Madaña was an additional 8 hours by motor canoe up the Caura River. In this sense, Madaña was very accessible for me, only one day's travel from national society, unlike Ulinuwiña, which required several weeks travel by boat. Madaña's proximity to Maripa was unprecedented and indeed an important facet of my study. While I spent two to three months at a time in Madaña, I often also travelled with my field companions on trips to Maripa for important events, meetings and errands, which I considered an important aspect of my research. And so fieldwork was not in the least



a static experience within one community. In fact, living like the Sanema required regular movement, and in Madaña this meant a considerable and rather exhausting degree of back and forth to Maripa.

Although my fieldwork was multi-sited, my freedom of movement within indigenous territory was limited in both Amazonas and Bolívar (reduced access anywhere south of Puerto Ayacucho or in the Upper Caura) due to continued suspicion of outsiders, particularly foreign anthropologists, as well as the illegal mining taking place in the Upper Caura which resulted in increased military presence and denial of passage beyond the Salto Grande. After being refused access to Sanema communities in the Amazonas region, I was limited to interactions with those visiting Puerto Ayacucho, which in fact turned out to be the site of an important study on bureaucracy (Chapter 7). In Bolívar state, my interaction with Sanema from other communities was predominantly with those who regularly visited Maripa.

The multi-sited approach I employed during fieldwork was essential but at the same time something of a hindrance in other areas. The movements I undertook mimicked those that many Sanema experience on a daily basis, travelling to and from the cities. At the same time, however, for a researcher familiarizing herself with the lives, cultures and language of the group, continual movements outside the regular rhythms of community life were both disjointing and exhausting. I found Maripa so much more stifling and tedious than Madaña because the regular activities of life were absent—many people merely laid in their hammocks most of the day—and as a result I found myself taking more regular interludes to the air-conditioned café than I would have anticipated (particularly towards the end of my research period or when I was feeling unwell).

Spending time in Maripa also impacted any headway I had made in learning the Sanema language. The dominant language of Maripa was Spanish, both when spoken to *criollos* and when talking to me (perhaps relating to the surroundings), as well as in the bureaucratic errands that the Sanema undertook in the cities. I spent considerable time attempting to learn the Sanema language, and made some progress. Nevertheless, it proved to be a difficult and time-consuming task, particularly since many of my research participants, as well as my assistants, spoke fluent Spanish, meaning I was not entirely immersed. I did learn some solid basics with the help of a copy of a small hand-written dictionary that Marcus Colchester compiled during his

fieldwork in 1977, as well as a short linguistic article by Borgman (1990) and regular ‘classes’ with my assistants. I found that Yanomami linguistic literature, although extremely thorough, was of little use in learning the Sanema language (although good for reference of certain terms since returning from the field), since the differences were too inhibiting for progress and only served to confuse my interlocutors further.

For these reasons I made a conscious decision to change my strategy, particularly given that I was afraid I would be told to leave by government officials or military at any moment. Although I never stopped learning, I found that my time was best utilised in working with my assistants to translate certain important recorded speech genres such as life histories, myths, shamanic chants and some interviews. During interviews I found it most efficient and convenient to record the dialogue and ask questions with the help of a translator, but towards the end of fieldwork I would often simply place a voice recorder in front of the participant and ask them to talk about their lives, which I would then translate and discuss with my assistant at a later date (with varying results, I will admit). With the help of my assistants, a number of the complex ritual discourses such as shamanic chants and myths were also translated word for word into both Sanema and Spanish in order to retain the nuances of the language. The task of translating ritual language was rather complex, however, partly due to the fact that many Sanema themselves found it difficult to translate some of the archaic language utilised in such discourse (see also Lizot 1994: 221).

It was clear in my interactions with Sanema from different regions, including a few from Brazil, as well as reading what literature exists on them (Ramos 1972, 1974, 1979, 1995; Colchester 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985; Borgman 1990) that their customs and dialects vary greatly. There also seemed to be much variation within communities and groups, with certain practices, beliefs and responses to questions varying greatly, especially on topics of the spirit realm, death, shamanism and illness. This is probably partly due to varying personal experiences, but also to the rapid transformation and priorities of the youth, many of whom have little or no interest in shamanism or even hunting. The community of Maduaña was composed of people from a number of upstream villages who were invited to settle in Maduaña because they were ‘friends’ and ‘good people’, of the same or affiliated lineages, and—an important prerequisite—did not drink manioc beer (this is partly due to the influence of Christianity). Some of the settlements where these residents originated

were much more isolated from missionaries and national society, and thus arguably less influenced by outside (Ye'kwana and *criollo*) cultural traits. Hence, I did have somewhat of a variety of perspectives and histories within Madaña itself. Some, for instance, although described as 'poor' by others in Madaña, were far richer in their knowledge of the spirits, the ancients and the forest realm. However, it is important to note that much of my data originates from a missionised section of Sanema society.

While in Madaña, I lived as the daughter of an old couple—René and Anita—and I slung my hammock in their back room. My main companions were the women of René and Anita's family—their daughters and granddaughters—as we worked together regularly in the fields and they tended to display less 'shame' towards me as did many of the older men of the family. Nonetheless, their sons were good friends of mine, particularly in the context of talking together in Spanish. Their second eldest son, Marco (who will make an appearance throughout this thesis), was one of my closest friends, the 'chief' (Sa. *kaikana*, Sp. *jefe*) of Madaña, and a strong link to Maripa and national society. I also had two main assistants, Mauricio and Feliciano, young men in their twenties from different families and different backgrounds. While Mauricio had lived his entire life in the mission community upstream encountering national society only recently, Feliciano was briefly in the army and partly educated in the cities. Both assistants helped me with interviews and translation work. When considering the data obtained it must be kept in mind that much of my information was translated through a young male assistant.

I took on a somewhat ambiguous gender role in Sanema society myself, eating with the men in the morning, working with the women in the gardens during the day, and then later conversing with the Spanish speaking men in the evening. With the women, I conversed as much as I could in Sanema, and we talked openly about many things. Only one Sanema woman who I met late in fieldwork spoke Spanish, having been educated in Maripa, and she helped me interact with women on a much deeper level than I had previously been able. She later helped me as an assistant predominantly for interviews with women rather than detailed language analysis. Being a woman, and as a result of the roles I took on relating to my gender, I was never able to participate in a hunt (although I once found myself inadvertently in the midst of one on the outskirts of Ulinuwiña), although I attempted to participate in all

other activities associated with foraging, fishing and ‘barbasco throwing’ (fish poisoning).

During my time in Maduaña, I came to realise that the mining activities in the region were a critical and delicate issue, and a topic requiring adequate sensitivity on my part. The destructive potentials of mining are immense, in terms of deforestation, pollution of the rivers, the effect on the ecosystem, reduction in local skills such as basketry and hunting, and increased rates of malaria and sexually transmitted diseases. Few locals in the region actively oppose mining due to the immense potentials for wealth if one is able to tap those possibilities. The activities of a government-initiated plan to eradicate mining in the area have had very few positive results. Due to the mining that was occurring in the region, and a number of other related informal activities (presented in the final two chapters on paper and petrol), I have had the challenge of protecting the people involved while attempting to tell an important story. In so doing, I have decided to change all personal and place names throughout the thesis to make it harder for these people to be identified.

Most of the data throughout this thesis emerges from my time in Maduaña, whose access to manufactured items was more acute. And yet, it was also clear that Ulinuwiña was experiencing (and observing in their neighbouring Ye’kwana communities) a sudden flood of *criollo* things into the region. What is more, they desired these things themselves and often discussed how they could access them (their experiences with this will be explored in Chapter 7). While wishing to avoid a description of the Sanema as a homogenous group, the information gained from Sanema in different regions of Venezuela reveals a similar discourse of the desire to procure goods. Indeed, the contemporary political context of Hugo Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution has made access to goods a reality more so than ever before.

Maduaña’s location at a distance from affiliate—or indeed all other—Sanema communities on the lower Caura meant that their trading with other communities was by and large absent. Residents of Maduaña would very rarely travel upstream. Instead, manufactured goods would be procured from the *criollo* town of Maripa, or very occasionally a nearby Ye’kwana community, with whom they might trade a back basket for manioc beer. During my time in Ulinuwiña, I witnessed only two incidences of trade, both of which were with Ye’kwana who obtained liana vines and cotton in exchange for an adze and nylon hammock thread. While I was in Ulinuwiña,

residents were also in the process of making a large dugout canoe for a Ye'kwana community. I was told that it was worth 3,000 Bs.F. (about US\$450), although I was not able to confirm if they did indeed exchange it for cash or for goods. In Ulinuwiña, money very rarely exchanged hands, but in Maduaña, it was becoming more prevalent, significantly due to their location and to residents' engagement in government funded posts in ministries and schools, but also to the Bolivarian projects and mining.

For my part, I too was a source of goods for my Sanema hosts. They were perhaps not as demanding and direct as is represented in McCallum's (2001: 95) analysis of the Cashinahua, but most Sanema saw me as something of a 'bead-woman' to the extent that the first thing many people would ask me when I appeared in the mornings was, 'do you have any beads?' even if I had never met them before. I had started bringing a few small gifts of beads for my host mother, but then started to receive requests from my host sisters and assistants. Requests gradually spread outwards from there. Czech seed beads were expensive and difficult to procure (I had to order them from the USA), but I did not want to seem stingy, so continued to bring them as gifts for people. In an attempt to make relationships more reciprocal, I asked for something in return, such as baskets or fish. I then found that I was inundated with baskets and fish, far more than I could ever use, and so decided to ask for interviews instead, at a loss for other ideas. So, the last few months of fieldwork saw me inundated with requests for interviews. I am aware that I could be seen to be 'buying' my data with beads,<sup>7</sup> but beads were desired and requested above all else, and I still receive phone calls from Marco asking if I can bring him more beads.

## Chapter Outline

This thesis is about 'things'—*matitö*—a term that denotes possessions, but is predominantly used for manufactured objects that come from the world of the *criollos* (non-indigenous Venezuelans, Sa. *setönapö töpö*). I will be using the term 'thing' throughout the thesis as a faithful interpretation of the Sanema term, but also to allow for some ambiguity and even abstruseness that many of these things evoke.

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<sup>7</sup> A number of friends have joked since returning from the field that I was like the first explorers to the Americas who bought the island that is now New York for a hank of beads (see also Graeber 2001: 91).

The thesis is presented in two parts. The first—Desiring and Procuring Things—introduces the reader to the broader historical and regional setting, inter-ethnic dynamics, and internal idioms of relatedness. The three chapters frame these concerns around manufactured things. The aim of part one is to orient a new view of the ‘aesthetics of conviviality’ model to include the gifting of goods alongside corporeal practices.

The second part—Four Valuable Things—explores in depth four *matitö*, paying particular attention to how their properties enable ethical action to be realized. Besides Ewart’s work on beads (2012) and the contributors to Santos-Granero’s volume (2009c), very few studies of manufactured goods in Amazonia have offered detailed analyses of particular objects and so my aim is to contribute to understandings of specific material things in lowland South America. Following Ingold’s (2011) call for a return to materials and properties themselves, I shall pay particular attention to the sensuous qualities of things and their significance for Sanema sociality. Chapters 5 to 8 will explore the concept of material morality in different ways, and each of these chapters demonstrates how the material affordances of certain ‘things’ enable material, processual and performative ways of realizing morality. The role of goods in Sanema social and moral lives will be explored with the use of different analytic frames in each chapter. For example, I shall be arguing that what we understand as kinship should be explored through beads, justice through machetes, manoeuvrability through paper, and animism through petrol. At the heart of the thesis will be an exploration of how the Sanema procure, exchange and possess goods amidst the backdrop of a burgeoning interaction with national society and the Venezuelan state.

In Chapter 2, which follows, I describe the historical context with a specific focus on goods procurement, from accounts of first contact to the present day. This chapter will give an overview of the Sanema’s relationship with their neighbouring Ye’kwana, missionaries, and later with *criollos* and the state. I also describe everyday life in a Sanema settlement, including an overview of subsistence activities, shamanism, hunting and kinship.

Chapter 3 lays the groundwork for an exploration of Sanema moral and material existence through descriptions of their narratives and mythology on manufactured things that constitute their realization as moral human beings. I explore

the sharing and gifting of objects within the community, and by taking note of the limits of demand sharing model, I demonstrate that spontaneously given goods are essential to the expression of compassionate relatedness. These descriptions disclose a Sanema perception of their place in the cosmos as established through artefacts, and more precisely, manufactured goods.

Chapter 4 will combine the insights gained from Chapters 2 and 3 to move outside of the community and explore the historical trajectory of the Sanema in their relationship with their powerful Ye'kwana neighbours, a relationship that has made the Sanema distinct from other Yanomami language groups. This affiliation, I argue, is motivated by the pursuit of manufactured things, access to which the Ye'kwana monopolised. Crucially, the dynamic entered into in order to procure these goods is one of subordination on the part of the Sanema. Deference is a demeanour that is pursued and that reveals unexplored notions of indebtedness. I conclude that this 'submission as extraction' can be seen as a form of predation.

Chapter 5 will be the first of part two that offers four in-depth explorations of particular things, and in this the focus is beads. It builds on the proposition presented in this introduction that we consider alternative approaches to personhood and sociality beyond the body. I suggest that bodies only become moralised entities when adorned with exterior components that are valued precisely because they are gifted by kin. Bodies are vehicles for the display of gifted materialities, which visually present one's place in a network of kin who are 'adornments to the self'. This chapter ultimately argues that goods and concepts are mutually constitutive insofar as goods create kinship as much as kinship brings forth goods. Here we see that displacing the abstraction of 'kinship' with 'beads'—suggesting that kinship *is* beads—will be a technique for understanding that concepts integral to the moral obligations of kinship are anchored in materiality.

In Chapter 6 I will be focusing on how the machete is central to systems of justice. Linked to and building on Chapters 2 and 4, the history of the machete among the Sanema is essential to understanding who the Sanema are today. Mythology and oral histories tell of the machete bringing about the differentiation of beings through unequal access to steel goods. In contrast to the 'mutually constitutive' approach utilised in the beads chapter, the machete will be explored as a material mediator,

particularly through actions that maintain an important balance between fearlessness and fear.

The long historical presence of beads and machetes in Sanema lived worlds has meant that their source and manufacture is not explicitly associated with the *criollo* domain, but rather with the ancestors and Ye'kwana trade partners. Chapter 7, however, moves to a more definitive exploration of things that are identified with the contemporary context of national society and the state. This chapter ponders the value of one of the most important material things that have become representative of contemporary Venezuela—paper. New patterns of movement—travel to and from cities, daily errands and manoeuvring within social spheres—are understood with reference to the state and its bureaucratic pervasiveness, but also as congruous with customary practices of ‘journeying for knowledge’, which forge an intimate link between physical and social mobility. Paper is integral to this process as its properties propel movement to centralised state entities. It also concretises an analysis of mobility and corporeal experiences of state apparatus as impelled by a moral incentive to gain knowledge of the fertile world of the other.

The final chapter on petrol links the ubiquitous material presence of national society and the Venezuelan petro-state to the Sanema ontology of animism. It leads on from—and is deeply connected to—the previous chapter by emphasising a new sociality forged through the ‘things’ associated with wider national society and the state. Along with paper, petrol engenders movement through an extensive participation in Venezuelan democratic and socialist projects, but most importantly offers alternative avenues to the promises of state conferred riches that fail to materialise; that is, through gold mining. The unique substance, though, seems to have a vitality that has led to it be described in pseudo-animist terms. As such, petrol offers an opportunity to explore what constitutes vitality or a ‘spirit’ in animist cosmologies. I argue that it is specifically moral relationality that governs the vitality of things. Employing a post-human approach, I explore how things might have intentionality independent of networks of human relationality. This final chapter, then, considers the implications of the ‘material morality’ approach to the wider field of ontology.





**PART ONE:**  
**Desiring and Procuring Things**

## CHAPTER TWO

### Sanema Historical and Regional Context

#### The Sanema

The Sanema<sup>8</sup> are a hunting, gathering and horticulturalist Amazonian group that make up the northernmost branch of the Yanomaman language family (see Figure 5).<sup>9</sup> The language family as a whole, which has become known as the Yanomami (Ramos 1995: 21), is one of the largest native Amazonian groups in South America, numbering approximately 35,000. Spanning the frontier between Venezuela and Brazil, the Yanomami inhabit approximately 9.4 million hectares in the region. The Sanema language is said to be the most lexically distinct from other Yanomami languages, believed to have been the first to branch off from the others in Pre-Columbian times (see Ferguson 1995: 99; Ramos 1995: 21).



Figure 5: Yanomami language groups

<sup>8</sup> The Sanema have been referred to by a number of other names and spellings in various sources, including Sanumá, Shiriana, Guaharibo, Guaica, Chirichano, Guaika, Samatali, Samatari, Sanima, Tsanuma, Xamatari.

<sup>9</sup> The other three linguistic groups include Yānomāmī (Yanoama, Yānomāmö), Yānomām and Ninam (Yanam, Shiriana).

At the time of fieldwork, the Sanema had a steadily increasing population of approximately 6,360 (5,840 in Venezuela and 520 in Brazil).<sup>10</sup> In Brazil they occupy a small area of the northern most part of Roraima state on the Auris River, and in Venezuela the Ventuari, Caura and Erebató watersheds, all major effluents of the Orinoco River. Sanema territory sits within the western Guiana shield, a region of tropical rainforest but with the occasional area of savannah in the northern reaches of Amazonas state. Like present-day Yanomami, the Sanema customarily lived in elevated interfluvial locations away from large watercourses, travelling predominantly on foot. Since their intensified interaction with the Carib-speaking riverine Ye'kwana neighbours,<sup>11</sup> however, they have been establishing settlements on large rivers in order to travel greater distances in dugout canoes with outboard motors.

While they continue to inhabit their rainforest location, their gradual migration northwards has recently seen them drawn ever closer to Venezuelan national society, with new Sanema communities being established with every passing year in the lowland regions of the Lower Caura (see map of the Caura Basin in Appendix 1). In Bolívar state there are approximately 34 Sanema communities, 21 Ye'kwana communities, 2 Jivi and 1 Piapoco (see Appendix 2). Numbers of Sanema communities in Amazonas state are much fewer and predominantly limited to the northernmost parts of the state, with Yanomami to the south.<sup>12</sup>

The Caura River, where the majority of my data is from, is a major affluent of the Orinoco River, and is divided into two sections by Salto Grande waterfalls (see Figure 30 in Appendix 1), marking the accessible downriver Lower Caura from the more remote Upper Caura region to the south. Within this, there is also a division by two main watercourses—the River Caura and the River Erebató. Access to communities in the Basin is via canoe and outboard motor on the Caura River, setting out from the port town of Maripa, which links the river to the regional capital Ciudad Bolívar via a cross-state highway (see Figure 4).

Maripa is a small town of approximately 5,000 inhabitants, composed of permanent and transient *criollos*, Ye'kwana, and Sanema as well as an increasing number of other indigenous peoples from the Piapoco, Jivi, Kariña and Pemon

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<sup>10</sup> Data from <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=14751&rog3=VE>

<sup>11</sup> Also known as Yecuana, Soto, Makilitari, Maquiritare or Maiyongong.

<sup>12</sup> Data from the 2001 census has numbers as follows: in Bolívar state there were 2,287 Sanema and 2,455 Ye'kwana; in Amazonas state 669 Sanema and 3,050 Ye'kwana.

groups. As a result, the Sanema are more frequently interacting with other native groups, and even play ethnically divided football tournaments set up by the Ministry for Indigenous Peoples. Most indigenous communities that make up the Caura Basin have constructed their own semi-permanent encampments in Maripa, usually consisting of a thatch structure on the outskirts of the town where people from the community can sling their hammocks when visiting.



**Figure 6: Maduaña's encampment in Maripa**

Much of the historical overview of the Sanema, though, will feature the Ye'kwana as, to some extent, the Sanema *are* the Sanema because of the Ye'kwana, or as Ferguson observed, 'the main thread running through Sanema history is their changing interaction with the Yecuana' (Ferguson 1995: 100). This is a relationship of dependence that stems from a long, tumultuous and well-documented history of intimate contact between the two groups in both Venezuela and Brazil (see Arvelo-Jimenez 1974; Colchester 1982: 94-97; de Civrieux 1980; Ferguson 1995; Gheerbrant 1953; Peters 1998; Ramos 1979, 1995). The complex and long-term association is often referred to in the literature as one of mutual distain, although accounts seem to vary from enmity to intermarriage. This relationship will be described in greater depth in Chapter 4.

There are a number of anthropological accounts of the Sanema (Colchester 1981, 1982, 1984; de Barandiarán 1968; Jabur 2014; Ramos 1995; Taylor 1974), although relative to the Yanomami and other neighbouring groups, little has been written on the Sanema in recent decades (although less still been written on the Ninam and Yanomam). This is partly due, I believe, to their Ye'kwana gatekeepers who mediated and limited Sanema access to the non-indigenous world in the past, but also because the notoriety of the Southern Yanomami (see Chagnon 1968) no doubt eclipses Sanema legitimacy as a group in their own right. Insofar as the Sanema are officially a 'sub-group' of the Yanomami, they nevertheless differ in a number of important ways, and indeed would much rather associate themselves with the Ye'kwana than the Yanomami, who they deride for wandering the forests naked, lacking knowledge of the non-indigenous *criollo* world, and killing each other indiscriminately. In fact, I came to realise the word 'Waika', a term used to convey fierce and 'wild' Sanema, was in fact referring to Yanomami. The abundant literature on the Yanomami is nonetheless a good reference point from which to understand many aspects of Sanema lives—and I do so throughout the thesis—as the two share many traits and mythological traditions.

### **Historical Context**

Colchester has noted that linguistic evidence points to a Sanema territorial origin much further southeast—somewhere near the Branco-Amazon area of Brazil—than historical records have tended to attest. While Yanomami languages are considered isolates, they in fact have a number of Tupi linguistic components, along with oral traditions closely connected with Tupi mythology, which suggests contact with Tupi groups at some point in the past (Colchester 1982: 67). Official reports of the Sanema did not start emerging until the early 1900s, with the first recording found in an ethnographic survey conducted in 1838 by Augustin Codazzi (Ferguson 1995: 101). Referring to them as 'Ririshanas', Codazzi documented the Sanema occupying the Sierra Parima Highlands between the headwaters of the Ocamo and the Orinoco, often living adjacent to Ye'kwana settlements.

During the previous two centuries, Yanomami groups had been undertaking a 'great expansion' northwards and westwards from the Parima (Colchester 1982: 72; Chagnon 1968; Lizot 1972: 139), drawn northwards towards the industrial goods that

were in the hands of the Ye'kwana and the *criollos* in the northern cities. These powerful neighbours had direct access to these goods since as far back as the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century when Spanish invaded Ye'kwana territory in the search for El Dorado (see Arvelo-Jimenez 1974: 15-27; Koch-Grünberg 1979: 370). The Ye'kwana also had a longer history of trade relations with colonial representatives and missionaries, as well as engagement in diamond mining, cash crops and trade with Piaroa groups to the east.

Arvelo-Jiménez (1974: 42-44) notes the earliest instance of the Sanema's encroachment into Ye'kwana territory occurring in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century according to reports from Robert Schomburgk (1841). This was around the same time that steel goods began to flood into the region during an era of increased development, trading and resource extraction (Ferguson 1995: 102). Arvelo-Jiménez states, however, that there were a number of other external pressures that caused their movement northwards, the most notable being the invasion of a *criollo* 'caudillo' into the area, the rubber boom,<sup>13</sup> trade relations and invasions from other groups to the south. The migration of Yanomami groups in general, Lizot believes, was spurred by a quest for industrial goods along with a concomitant population increase (Lizot 1972, 1977), while Colchester also found that many Sanema recount being 'chased up into the highlands' by raiding groups from the south (1982: 84), causing them to fan out into the upper tributaries of the Auris and Ventuari (1982: 91).

By the 1920s, Sanema villages began to appear even closer to Ye'kwana communities in the Upper Ventuari and Merevari in order to gain access to machetes and other steel goods. Sometimes they were able to procure tools through the peaceful trade of arrows and cotton, but often resorted to violence and raiding. During the 1930s the Ye'kwana decided to take action against these 'savage' raiders under the leadership of a renowned chief named Kalomera of the upper Ventuari (Arvelo-Jiménez 1974: 43; Colchester *et al* 2004: 10; Gheerbrant, 1953: 181) who rallied numerous Ye'kwana from surrounding villages. Obtaining shotguns from the neighbouring Pemon, many Ye'kwana cooperated in a vicious attack in which scores of Sanema died, their bows and arrows unable to match Ye'kwana firearms

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<sup>13</sup> The rubber trade, however, was not as extensive or long-lived in Venezuela as it was in the main suppliers Brazil, Peru and Bolivia. Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela together supplied less than a few per cent of the total Amazonian rubber production (Barham and Coomes 1994: 41).

(Colchester 1981: 27; Ferguson 1995: 113; Ramos 1979: 5). This period of conflicts has often been referred to as a 'war' in the literature, which also describes the outcome as a period of relative peace. After this time, the Sanema participated in fewer raids but instead adopted a subservient relationship to the Ye'kwana, shifting 'to a pattern of peaceful but subservient coexistence with their former enemies ... all to obtain worn-down steel and other second hand Western manufactures' (Ferguson 1995: 113).

By the time Arvelo-Jiménez conducted fieldwork among the Ye'kwana in 1968, she observed that the Sanema had an entrenched pattern of affiliated settlements in and around Ye'kwana communities, stating that, 'In the last 20 years, the Guajaribos [Sanema] and the Ye'cuana have learned to co-exist peacefully within the same territory ... The Guajaribo give their labour force to the Ye'cuana in exchange for industrial commodities which the latter obtain from the missionaries and creole merchants in exchange for canoes, baskets and *farinha*' (Arvelo-Jiménez 1974: 26-7). The war, then, did not cause the Sanema to retreat at all, since to do so would result in a severe deficiency in indispensable steel tools that they required for daily subsistence tasks. Instead, they established 'satellite' settlements affiliated with Ye'kwana villages, usually only a short walk away, or at times even within the Ye'kwana community itself, which brought new and more direct trading opportunities.<sup>14</sup> When Colchester conducted his fieldwork among the Sanema in the late 1970s, only four of the seventeen Sanema settlements in the Caura Basin were not associated with a Ye'kwana community (Colchester 1982: 104). As Arvelo-Jiménez mentioned, these 'post-war' satellite communities exhibited a patron-client dynamic in which the Sanema supplied cheap labour for Ye'kwana communities in order to obtain steel tools. The Sanema engaged in activities such as collecting thatch, constructing houses, felling gardens and portaging goods around rapids (Arvelo Jiménez 1974: 43; Colchester 1982: 348).

Missionary activity in Bolívar State was initiated in the 1950s among the Ye'kwana, beginning with Baptist missionaries settling along the Cunucunuma River in 1956, and two Catholic mission in 1958 in Alto Erebató. The Jesuit missionary Daniel de Barandiarán first contacted Sanema groups in the Caura region around 1955

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<sup>14</sup> Colchester states that these satellite communities were encouraged by the Ye'kwana (1981: 55), but my experiences indicate that the Sanema instigated this pattern of settlement. See chapter 4.



after he founded a mission in the Ye'kwana community of Santa Maria del Erebató. By the 1960s the Sanema were sending word that they too required a preacher in their settlements, the reason given being 'so that they could learn to read and write' (Colchester 1982: 387). In response to this, de Barandiarán established a mission among the Sanema in Kanadakuni in the 1960s around the same time that another Jesuit priest named Padre Korta created a mission community in the Amazonas state. After these initial settlements, the five main missions that were established among the Sanema were thenceforth evangelical: the Unevangelical Field Mission in Auris, Brazil; the Orinoco River Missions in Amazonas state; and the Iglesia Evangelical Libre in Bolívar state (Colchester 1982: 386-7, n. 4). The expulsion by Chavez of the North American New Tribes Mission from southern territories in 2005, in combination with the rapid arrival of grassroots Bolivarian projects, resulted in a considerable weakening of missionary infrastructure throughout Sanema territory. All of the above mentioned settlements no longer have either North American or *criollo* missionaries station there, but rely instead on Sanema trained pastors to run sermons.

According to Colchester (1982: 404), the late 1970s saw the beginning of a movement in which some Sanema communities attempted to trade independently of the Ye'kwana; but it was not until the 1990s that some abandoned the satellite villages and the patron-client networks associated with them (I explore my Sanema hosts' description of this regular abandonment in Chapter 4). Nevertheless, despite a degree of autonomy and a transforming dynamic between the two groups, they continue to inhabit the same territory and thus interact on a very regular basis. From my experience, many Sanema communities remain close to those of the Ye'kwana, and a number of satellites communities still exist today. The community of Ulinuwiña, where I conducted a period of fieldwork, continues to rely on the Ye'kwana for their goods, mostly through the trade of liana, baskets and canoes, and I believe this continues to be the dominant arrangement in the region.

The close proximity between the two groups has resulted in the adoption of many Ye'kwana customs that have diverged from their Yanomaman roots. Such shifts have included the preparation of cassava over banana gruel; the weaving of baskets required for the production of cassava; hunting with dogs and fire arms rather than arrows; weaving hammocks with cotton instead of liana; the use of glass beads adornments rather than body paint and cotton thread; and the introduction of new products and skills required for their proximity to large rivers such as line fishing and

the construction of canoes. In addition to this, the Sanema have adopted many elements of Ye'kwana mythology and leadership practices (Colchester 1981; Ramos 1995: 111). In spite of this close relationship, intermarriage between them is rare and continues to be frowned upon by both groups (although see Ramos 1979), even though stories of illicit relationships and children born of Ye'kwana/Sanema relationships do exist.

Procuring goods independent of the Ye'kwana in more recent years has been made possible through increased interactions with *criollos*, a burgeoning dynamic that has circumvented Ye'kwana control. The people of Maduaña had been able to access goods without direct interaction with the Ye'kwana for decades, as they obtained their manufactured wares directly from the missionaries, and later from political patronage with leading politicians. Residents of Maduaña clearly contrasted to those of Ulinuwiña in their regard for the Ye'kwana. They had infrequent contact with and dependence on their neighbouring group, instead aiming in many ways to 'become *criollos*', more emphatically now due to their location on the Lower Caura closer to national society (see Figure 4). This complete independence from the Ye'kwana, however, is still relatively extraordinary for the Sanema in general.

Today the Ye'kwana and the Sanema seem to be moving towards a more symbiotic relationship, less defined by the dominance and distain that characterised their relationship in the past (Colchester 1982: 94). Now the Ye'kwana often refer to the Sanema as their 'brothers' and have encompassed them into their political agenda, albeit symbolically as the Sanema seem to have no notion that they are being 'advocated for'. The Ye'kwana of the Caura basin have set up a tribal council—Kuyujani—that defends the rights of all indigenous people in the area, stating in their reports that they represent the interests of both the Ye'kwana and the Sanema. The two groups collaborated in a management plan for the Caura Basin in which they jointly mapped the territory with GPS technology. This information was used as supporting documentation for the land titling application pack that was submitted in 2002, although the status has been somewhat dormant ever since (Colchester *et al* 2004: 35).

Sanema participation in Kuyujani activities since this management plan has greatly waned, partly because they were initially invited by foreign NGO representatives rather than by Ye'kwana. Kuyujani also stages a yearly assembly

meeting that is open to all indigenous peoples of the Caura. On the one occasion that I attended in 2008 it seemed that Sanema participation was at best marginal, with very few participating on equal footing. Since then I have never heard a word about this meeting from any of my Sanema research participants, who only say upon questioning that they stopped attending because ‘the Ye’kwana never listen to us anyway’. In fact, at least in Maduaña, the main perspective on the Ye’kwana was that of indifference, and current collaborations revolve primarily around mining pursuits.

As mentioned, state presence and increased contact with *criollos* has become an important new facet of Sanema lives, and one that will be explored in the final two chapters of the thesis (Chapters 7 and 8). The expansion of party politics in southern Venezuelan states had been gaining traction since the late 1990s, but with increased pace since the election on Hugo Chavez in 1998. Chavez’s regime initiated a political strategy to secure a wide catchment of votes for local and regional authorities, often in exchange for goods and salaried positions in state institutions (see Kelly 2011: 25-7; Lauer 2006; Rodriguez Aponte 2011). According to the indigenous promoter of the municipal government offices in Maripa, in 2011, of the 2,200 Sanema in the municipality, approximately 500 were registered to vote, which represents 22% of the population (although this could simply mean they have obtained their ID cards). This is a strikingly high percentage given their ostensibly remote location.

## Life in a Sanema Settlement



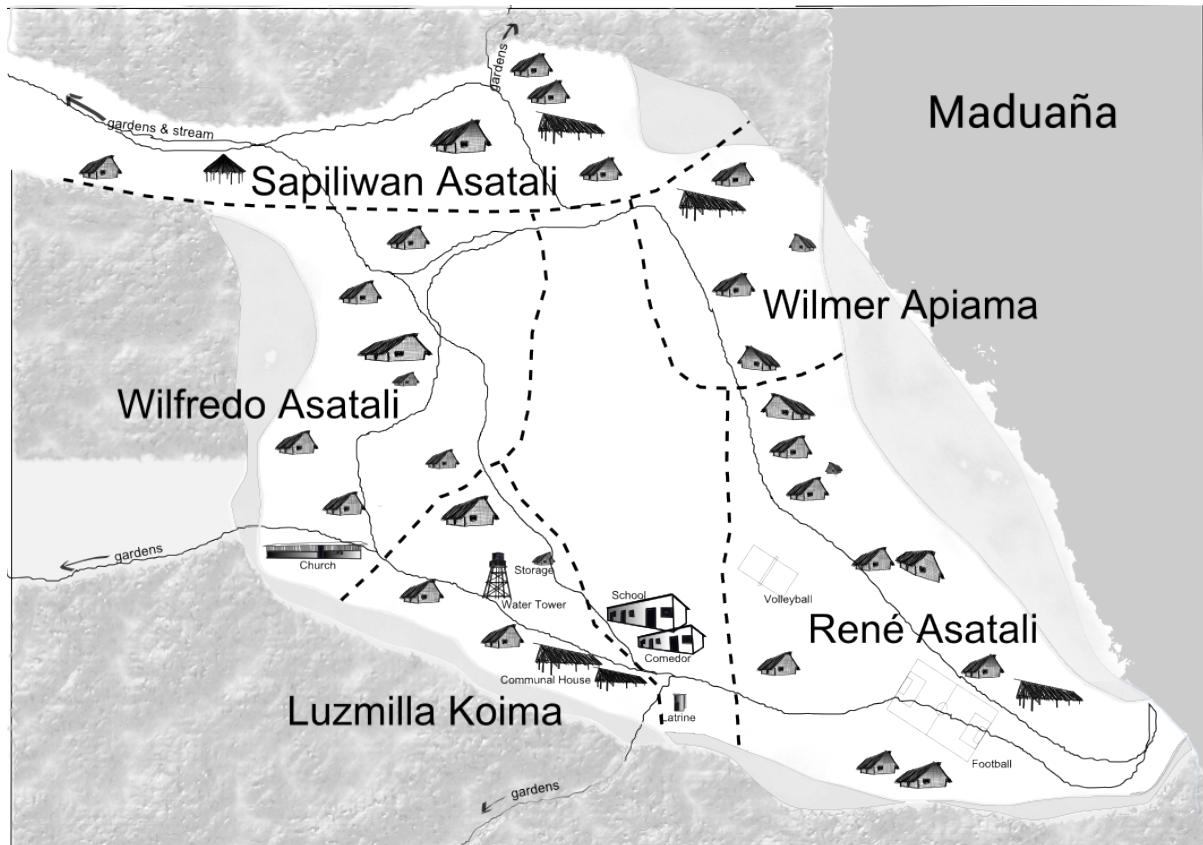
**Figure 7: Maduaña with Venezuelan flag**

Maduaña was relatively large by customary standards. The central lawn of the community, which was invariably overgrown, had numerous interlacing paths between houses that carved deep channels through the grass. Elegant yet contrasting structures of wattle and daub houses formed a large circle at the fringes of the trees. A number of half-finished breezeblock constructions spilled into the central green—the school and the canteen—state-funded buildings that sat starkly juxtaposed against the flimsy pole and thatch household structures. Outside each house was a long thread line stretched between two poles upon which was often hung a motley succession of multi-coloured clothing drying in the sun. The community had a number of, often broken, manufactured items scattered around, such as an old two-way radio, a large plastic water container and disused plastic chairs that children salvaged for their

inventive games. The background peep and squawk of the forest birds was often accentuated by the baseline accompaniment of a recurring motorised canoe, passing on its way upstream. And at the edge of one of the paths was a slightly sloping pole with a torn Venezuelan flag fastened to the top. This was an Amazonian community strongly tied to its national context and, in turn, to its manufactured goods.

Maduaña, on which I shall focus in this section (as it was the main location of fieldwork), was a community of approximately 150 people. It was a relatively new Sanema settlement on the Lower Caura, below the raging Salto Grande waterfalls that divides the accessible Lower Caura from the more remote Upper Caura (see Figure 30 in Appendix 1). The settlements in the hot lowland region of the north, occupy a markedly different political and seasonal climate to the more remote southern highland interfluvial locations that were previously inhabited. Maduaña was founded in 2005 by a group of older Sanema men and their wives who decided to break away from the large missionary community upstream, Sakuniña (see Appendix 3 for the tale of their search for a new territory).

Sanema settlements, while customarily semi-permanent (moving location several times a year), are currently relatively stable '*comunidades*' (communities) that can possess between 3 to 20 houses (Sa. *saia*) forming in a circle around a central plaza or green. The circular Sanema community was described as taking its shape 'because it used to be one house', presumably reminiscent of the conjoined unbroken ring structure of the Yanomami *shabono* (the Sanema cognate *sapöno* refers to the central plaza). Present-day Sanema communities are slightly different from the Yanomami structure and yet retain many of the same features. Sanema circular communities are divided into 'sectors' much like Yanomami *shabonos* (see Smole 1967: 64), the individual houses now spaced out but connected by paths.



**Figure 8: Maduaña with family sectors**

As can be seen in the map of Maduaña (Figure 8), the perimeter consists of about 32 residential structures, which housed around 17 nuclear units, as well as other communal houses such as the school, canteen, communal meetinghouse and the church. The sectors constituted René’s family of the Asatali lineage, Wilmer’s family of the Apiama lineage, Luzmilla’s family of the Koima lineage, Wilfredo’s family of the Asatali lineage, and Sapiliwan’s family who are also Asatali (but who also refer to their forefathers as ‘Kumaotō people’). Each household had a head couple, with their children and their children’s families either in the same house or in adjacent houses.

In the centre of Maduaña was a large empty clearing predominantly of grass but also a dirt section for five-aside football and volleyball. The two parts of the community—the centre and the periphery—seemed to relate partly to a distinction between the social/communal and the residential (see similar examples in Ewart 2003; Grotti 2007). Some of the non-residential buildings (communal meeting house, school, canteen, storage structure and water purification tower), however, did not seem to have as clear a designation in the residential periphery, spilling instead into the central space. Residential dwellings, on the other hand, belonged at the periphery.

While the outer ring was the location of family life, cooking, sleeping and relaxation, the central area (Sp. *campo*, Sa. *sapõno*) was the location of games, running, walking between houses and ceremonial life.

Households in Sanema communities are square structures with thatch roofs, and the majority with wattle and daub walls. Each dwelling, however, has its unique style, size and structure: some with internal walls, some with raised pole floors, some without external walls and even one with a circular structure (adopted from Ye'kwana communal house construction). Houses are encircled by their own 'patio', an area that must be regularly cleared of weeds by the women of the household. Hammocks are slung around a central hearth, with distance from the fire increasing with relational distance to the central couple, the son-in-law sleeping furthest away. Tobacco leaves hang above the hearth to dry, as well as some other items of symbolic potency such as animal bones from successful hunts and *alawalia* (sorcery spells) roots, all left to mature in the rising smoke. Pots and pans are often strewn on the floor or on raised table structures constructed from poles. Clothes are draped over a line of string and other belongings are kept in baskets hung from the rafters (see Figure 12, page 89).

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**Figure 9: Sanema men after a hunt**

Customary subsistence among the Sanema consists of hunting, fishing and swidden agriculture. The gardens (Sa. *jikalia*) are the locale for female subsistence tasks and the cultivation of the staple bitter manioc (Sa. *nasikoko*), as well as sweet potato (Sa. *jukuma*), yam (Sa. *kapuluma*), banana (Sa. *okoma*), tobacco (Sa. *pini*), pineapple (Sa. *sama*), and sugarcane (Sa. *puusö*). Once created, the garden will pass through cyclical phases of planting, weeding and harvesting—tasks carried out by women—until their productivity diminishes (normally after a few years), at which time they are left to fallow and return to forest, and a new garden at another site is created. Each mature woman has two to three gardens at different phases of development at any given time.

With the bitter manioc that they cultivate, women create the staple cassava bread (Sa. *isiai*) and cassava gruel (Sa. *nasia koi*) through a process of grating, squeezing out the arsenic with a special basket (Sp. *sebucán*), sieving, and roasting into a flatbread. More recently, and certainly more so in the northern communities who have greater access to national society, many Sanema are consuming non-indigenous processed foodstuffs such as rice, arepas (cornmeal flatbreads), beans, soda and chicken. Some remain fearful of such foods, particularly domesticated animals whom some say should not be eaten as they ‘walk with you’ (meaning they are co-residential pets), or because they possess vengeful spirits. Cows, for instance are thought to have potent and thus highly dangerous spirits because they are unusually large creatures.

Segregation between men and women was minimal in Sanema society and often existed primarily due to division of labour. Many older women occasionally shamanised, but as a rule women were shy than men and seemed to concentrate their efforts on the domestic sphere (perhaps by choice). The majority of women did not speak Spanish and those that did, chose not to use it. One of my host brother’s wives, for instance, allegedly spoke fluent Spanish, but I only ever heard her say a handful of mumbling words. While some women from Maduaña had been educated to high school level, many dropped out in order to have children or were persuaded by their mothers to leave school so they could tend to family responsibilities such as working in the gardens. Men, on the other hand, had a more outward focus beyond the community and to speak more Spanish. They spent more time travelling, running



bureaucratic errands, receiving education in the cities, engaging in military service and participating in mining activities.

Shamanism is a daily and integral practice in Sanema society and eight in every ten men are practicing shamans (Colchester 1982: 499, although this number seems to be reducing); yet, ability and reputation vary greatly. In Maduaña, for instance, some were said to only sing when they were drunk, many were ‘dormant’ (leaving the role to pursue at a more advanced age), others had abandoned the practice altogether, and others still were in the early stages of ‘practicing’. Interestingly, many of the shamans had not learned from a young age, as seems customary for apprenticeship elsewhere, but instead decided to pursue it later in life after they had had many children. In such cases, I was told that the reason they decided to wait was because it was too dangerous to pursue shamanism during youth and that the sexual and dietary restrictions are too much for a young man to endure. Discussing shamanism is not a straightforward task as the topic is highly complex and one that seems to have no unified descriptions. The majority of my information comes from my host father, Old René, who at the time was the oldest and most respected shaman in Maduaña (now deceased).

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#### **Figure 10: Dancing Shaman**

Shamans obtain their power and knowledge from their spirit ‘allies’ (Sa. *jikula*), who they often address as ‘son’ (Sa. *pösa*), and with whom they attack and

subdue malevolent animal spirits who are the main cause of illness in Sanema society. The *jikula* are a class of supernatural beings that represent both animal spirits and the mythical ancestors (since they are essentially the same thing). Shamans themselves are also called *jikula*, said to become the *jikula* when the spirits come to live eternally in their chests, which is the seat of thought and mindfulness. Their main mode of interaction with the spirits is through song and dance, as well as the occasional use of hallucinogens. Each *jikula* represents a different animal being and so have different songs, tools and even varying postures, which the shaman represents when dancing. Shamans ‘enlist’ *jikula* throughout their lives until they have so many that they are said to argue with one another inside the chest. A ‘great’ Shaman will not only have many *jikula* and thus a large repertoire of songs, but will also be known to have cured several people. ‘Special’ shamans, perhaps a step up from the great shaman, have been known to extract objects from sick bodies through suction and massage, and even to be able to fly.

As well as individual shamanising sessions, which are relatively sedate and intimate periods of singing within the shaman’s house, communal sessions—*okamo*—also regularly take place. In this, a group of shamans join forces to heighten the command of their individual *jikula* dialogues, particularly when there are high cases of illness in the community. With the help of stimulants such as the virola snuff (Sa. *sakuná*), and currently also alcohol, shamans demonstrate their prowess to full might in a public setting. In these cases, the performance is taken up a notch as they replace their shorts with red loincloths, paint their bodies with *annato* and adorn themselves with beads, a bodily display described as emulating the attire of their *jikula* companions (see Figure 10 above). It is said that shamans consume *sakuná* and alcohol because the *jikula* ‘like it’, thus enticing their spirit children to join them in alleviating the suffering of their kin. After the intoxicating substance begins to take hold, the shaman’s songs increase in volume, their dances become more dynamic and they intersperse their rhythmic chants with raucous, growling exclamations, increasing in fervour as the session progresses. The sight of the disarray of men dancing, intersecting each other’s footsteps in the dust, releasing arcs of saliva spray from their mouths, swooping their arms, rolling their eyes, squatting and growling, with black snot streaming down their faces, is impressive to say the least. The cacophony of layers of men roaring their independent songs over one another is often

so resounding that it is audible from far away gardens. This display, however, is an important event of well-being and healing as ill people stop by and request one of the shamans and their *jikula* to purge them of whichever vengeful spirit is causing the illness.

Along with shaman songs, past forms of ritual discourse were much more diverse than today: including *wasamo*, a formalised chant between visiting villages, and stylised songs for festivities sang by women and children. Now these latter two genres are rarely used ritually, although old shamans can re-enact *wasamo* upon request and women singing the traditional songs can often be heard in an attempt to lull children to sleep.

The decline in use of such genres of ritual discourse is in part due to the fact that ritualised visits do not occur to the same frequency as in the past. The Sanema's gradual move northwards to the Lower Caura region, along with settlements along large rivers, has resulted in a reduction in proximity to other Sanema communities, affecting traditional agglomeration patterns in which clusters of related affiliate communities were located at walking distance from one another and visited regularly (see Lizot 1994: 216). While this pattern was still somewhat recognisable in the Upper Caura (see Appendix 1), it does not exist in the Lower Caura as the few Sanema communities that exist in this region are not affiliate communities (in fact some of them seem to be more like enemy groups). A corollary of this new pattern of settlement distance is fewer visits from affiliated communities. My host mother talked a great deal about the sadness she felt since moving to the lower Caura because being so far away meant that she was unable to independently visit the communities of her kin far away in the Upper Caura. Indeed, she never returned to the Upper Caura since she moved to Maduaña in 2005, and often spoke with tears in her eyes of her wish to see her brother again.

There are no *criollo* itinerant traders in this region (or in Venezuelan Amazonia as a whole as far as I can gather), as seem to be common in other parts of lowland South America, and thus if the Sanema wish to procure or purchase goods, they must either do so from the Ye'kwana (as do residents of Ulinuwiña) or they must travel to the cities to do so (as do residents of Maduaña). This latter option serves to augment their mobility further. Indeed, Maduaña's proximity to Maripa—the *criollo* town linking the river to the road—is no trivial thing, as it is a new and easily

accessible site of entry into the *criollo* world, which also creates a new point of triangulation in Sanema social spheres. Maduaña was the first Sanema community, established in 2005, to be founded in the Lower Caura, below the raging Salto Grande waterfalls and only a day or two's boat ride from the road and frontier towns. When René's family made their long journey downstream in search of a new territory in which to live (see the story in Appendix 3), they were not initially intending to end up so far down and close to Maripa. My host mother described the move northwards as motivated by the educational opportunities available there. During my fieldwork, she expressed this clearly when one young man (aged around 15) wished to marry a young girl rather than go to high school in Maripa, Anita scolded him, saying that, 'For you we came here without food, we suffered from hunger, so that we could found a community and you could study and become teachers.'

Maduaña was to become the first direct Sanema link to national society, and the first to independently interact with external actors beyond their missionary and Ye'kwana intermediaries. Visits to Maduaña from other, sometimes very distant, communities had become so frequent by the end of fieldwork that on any given day there would be many new faces that I had never seen before wandering around the settlement. What is more, since Maduaña was established, not only had it grown rapidly as family members from upstream regularly came to make their own homes closer to the curious and lavish world of the *criollos*, but two more Sanema communities also emerged on the Lower Caura for the same reason.

Being so close to Maduaña, Maripa is progressively becoming a site of astoundingly regular visits. At times the Maduaña canoe would literally travel downstream one day and back up another, and occasionally up and down in one day. Reasons for trips included the purchase and collection of supplies, attendance in meetings and workshops, purchase of petrol, collection of wages (by schoolteachers), bureaucratic errands, the receipt of political gifts during electoral campaigns, or sometimes merely in response to a desire to visit and drink a sweet carbonated soda. When people travel to Maripa, they stay in Maduaña's specially made community encampment where inhabitants of the community are free to hang up their hammocks when visiting (see Figure 6, page 53). In some ways, this encampment is an extension of Maduaña itself and some people even lived there permanently, particularly young boys who were going to the high school in Maripa, or adults living off gold money in the town. I also noticed that during the school holidays, particularly at the end of the

school year, there would be a huge influx of Sanema people from all regional communities arriving in Maripa to pass several months. Maripa, at these times, became a centralised place to congregate and see other family members who normally live in other communities. It thus becomes a hub of visits, displacing the need to visit different communities independently.

## **Kinship**

Throughout the thesis I use the term ‘kin’ and ‘kinship’ a great deal, and so will here give an overview of what is meant by the terms. Determining what ‘kinship’ is proved to be a frustrating endeavour during fieldwork, as the terms used seemed to be unstable and vague. One person might use clearly delineated and distinct terms, another might not distinguish between consanguines and affines in the terms used, others seem to prefer the term ‘friend’ (Sp. *amigo*) for all kin—near and distant alike. The fluidity of words used reflects in many ways the fluidity of kinship, but also the changing categories and dynamics that are emerging from contact with missionaries and *criollos*.

Nonetheless, I shall attempt to offer an overview of the common features here. The Sanema are a patrilineal society who traditionally practice cross cousin marriage (bifurcate merging, same sex sibling equivalence) with Dravidian terminology (see Appendix 4). Being agnatic, the Sanema distinguish cross- from parallel-cousins, and classify siblings with parallel cousins. This customary pattern was far more noticeable in the more remote and small community of Ulinuwiña. Marriage exchange is practiced between specific agnatic groups and forbidden with others, although the rigour of such prohibitions seems to be relaxing, or varying by location. There are several groups and lineages of Sanema who comprise the same named groups (what Ramos 1995: Chapter 2 refers to as ‘sibs’) but who are not connected. For instance, the two groups with whom I worked, despite living almost 100 miles apart, were of the same lineage—Asatali—and yet they knew nothing of each other, and were indeed afraid of one other. When I asked one of my Maduaña Asatali companions if the Ulinuwiña Asatali were the same people, he responded, ‘I suppose we must be as we are both Asatali, but I do not know them.’ It was also interesting to note that, while the Asatali of Maduaña practice marriage exchange with the Apiama lineage,

the Asatali of Ulinuwĩña state that the Apiama are their sworn enemies and that ‘they will kill any they see’.

In the past, defining one’s kindred was often determined by co-residence patterns: kin were those who inhabited what was once ‘one house’ or an independent endogamous socio-political unit. The structure of many contemporary Sanema communities, Maduaña included, has made the notion more fluid, with kinship now comprising a dynamic scaling of one’s people (Sa. *töpö*). The innermost sphere includes ‘those who sleep near the same fire’ (Sa. *kuataja kasöna kökö wani kutia kule*) which constitutes the nuclear unit. Beyond the hearth-unit is the lineage, which consists of proximate hearth-groups that are considered to be ‘my people’ (Sa. *ipa töpö*) or ‘one of us’ (Sa. *ipa aiwa*). The next sphere would normally have been nearby affiliate communities with whom one has established political alliances and regular exchanges, units that might be defined as ‘potential affines’ (see Viveiros de Castro 2001), but which in the past fell under the category of ‘friend’ (probably meaning affiliated agnatic groups).

As mentioned above, Maduaña’s move downstream has meant that it no longer sits within such networks of agglomerate communities and thus such external alliances are weakened due to distance. Instead, the community consists of three lineages who intermarry and who are described as ‘friends’. As Figure 8 shows, Maduaña is made up of Asatali, Apiama and Koima lineages who are all related in affinal relationships (although not necessarily always through cross-cousin marriage). Another consequence of this separation from affiliated Sanema communities is the absence of specific ‘enemy’ communities against whom accusations of sorcery are directed. This sphere of people outside the affiliate ‘friends’ would have been known as ‘other people’ (Sa. *tiko töpö*) or enemies (Sa. *naiataö pai*).<sup>15</sup>

While the Sanema traditionally practice uxori-local residence, there are a number of cases in which sons, after completing a few years of bride service, have returned with their wives and children to live with their parents. There are even some cases in which the man never engaged in bride service at all (one whose father-in-law had died, one who was the schoolteacher so had to remain in Maduaña, and another two who were in their second marriages after a divorce). Bride service duties also

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<sup>15</sup> Colchester (1982: 477, n. 22) notes that there is a difference between ‘completely different people’ (*tiko töpö pasio*) and ‘people of a different agnatic group’ (*tiko töpö hidu*). See Kelly (2011: 56-8) for more information on spheres of sociality among the Yanomami.

seemed to be shortening in length. Some state that the bride service period is a matter of negotiation between the conjugal pair, and others simply state that young men (Sa. *jisia töpö*) are becoming lazy (Sa. *moi ipö*) and this is why they do not appropriately commit to their bride service duties. Sororal polygyny continues to be practiced throughout the region, particularly by community leaders, although many evangelised Sanema have divorced their older wives.

It is clear to see that kinship in Maduaña was responding somewhat to the backdrop of increased sedentarisation, larger community size, missionisation and contact with the *criollo* world. In this context, a number of new arrangements were emerging which were said to be ‘bad’ or ‘not right’, particularly marriages within categories previously considered anomalous such as with ‘enemy others’ (Sa. *naiataö pai*), and even several cases of incest (Sa. *sawö lösö*).<sup>16</sup> My assistant, who was married to his classificatory sister, informed me that if two individuals did not occupy the same domain while growing up, then such circumstances do not constitute incest. ‘When we first got married’, he told me ‘some people called me “*sawö lösö*” (incestor) to tease me, but by then we were already married and so I responded, “She wasn’t with me when I was young so she isn’t my sister.”’

This brings me to the important topic of proximity, which is perhaps one of the most significant current delineators of kinship (for a similar phenomenon among the Piro, see Gow 1991).<sup>17</sup> Cross kin, for instance, do not establish the same intimate and affectionate terms of address as parallel kin (in which the mother’s sister is referred to as ‘mum’, the father’s brother as ‘dad’, and their children as siblings) as a result of their physical distance. Among the Sanema, many cross kin did not live in the same community due to the combination of lineage group marriage exchange and uxorilocal residence. This often results in all brothers living in the same community and all sisters living in another community at a distance from their opposite sex siblings. When compiling genealogies I found that many did not remember the names

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<sup>16</sup> One girl was given to her blind uncle by her mother because she ‘felt sad for him’. Another boy was in the process of marrying his brother’s step-daughter, and the step-father did not like the idea of ordering his brother to do bride service tasks. I believe that many cases of incest are a result of increased divorce, with resulting ambiguous categories and greater distance of immediate kin following re-marriage. The current context of increased mobility, marriages, divorce and re-marriage may push kin at greater distances from one another, and so they cease to be kin in the same way because they did not grow up together.

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting overview on geographical relationality and alterity among the Sanema of Brazil see Jabur (2014).

of their opposite sex siblings or tended to omit them entirely when describing their families. Children thus have a greater number of parallel kin in close proximity and address them by intimate kin terms such as *naiwai* (lit. little vagina) and *pöta* (affectionate term for boy).

It is this proximity, along with the contemporary setting of increased contact with the *criollo* world, political motivations and sedentarisation, that the new concept of ‘community’ is becoming the salient approximation of one’s ‘people’ (see also Killick 2008a for a similar phenomenon among the Ashéninka). The encompassing term *aitö*, which is discussed on a number of occasions throughout the thesis, reflects this new proximate notion of kinship. The term literally means ‘other’, although not in the sense of ‘alter’ but rather ‘similar’. When one talks of ‘my similars’ (Sa. *ipa aitö*), they refer to people of the same ‘group’ or ‘name’, that is, of the same lineage or sib (such as Asatali or Apiama).<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, even this term has shifting meanings. My assistant seemed to use the term as a gloss for distant or affinal kin, but on different occasions Marco described the term as meaning ‘my friend’, ‘my brother’, ‘close family’ and even stated that, ‘If someone is your friend and they live far away, but when you see each other and you are familiar again, that is your *aitö*.’ Peters notes that among the Ninam (another Yanomami sub-group, see Figure 5) ‘a simplified listing of the kinship terms would be father, mother, sister, brother, son, daughter, father-in-law, mother-in-law and “friend”’ (1973: 63). Although he does not discuss in detail the term ‘friend’, we can infer (by exclusion) that it applies to extended cross-kin who are simultaneously potential affines. As such, *ipa aitö* refers to a unit of kin that encompasses consanguine and immediate affines (who, in spite of being different lineages, are affiliate agnatic groups or ‘family’). Another term also used to delineate this group is *ipa töpö pewö*, ‘all my people’.

When I talk of kin being a ‘whole’, as I do in Chapter 5 for instance, I am referring predominantly to this concept of *aitö* as being consanguineal and close affinal relations that inhabit a proximate space. Those who spend considerable time in one another’s houses (which incidentally is visible in the direction of paths that cross and skirt the central plaza), and who consequently share food, are ‘friends’ and kin, evidenced in their practical enactment of closeness, but also in their gifts of beads (Chapter 5) and their gesture of ‘standing behind you during a fight’ (Chapter 6).

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<sup>18</sup> Although the term literally means ‘my others,’ throughout this thesis I shall use the term ‘my similars’ in order to avoid confusion with ‘alters’.



Indeed, given the ambiguity of terms used for kinship, Chapter 5 will demonstrate that kinship is often a practical rather than an entirely discursive act, as the visible adorning by kin is the most salient manifestation of 'real' kinship, beyond the ambiguous terms of 'family' and 'friendship' that are often used. Most of these notions, of course, are inherently fluid and depend very much upon kin performing these significant actions.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Pursuit of Good Things:

#### Manufacturing Personhood and Sociality with Goods

The case of the partible generator that was featured in the prologue told the story of a manufactured item that was appropriated by the Sanema in an ingenious way to materialise moral actions. When I offered the movie selection to Santiago, he had indicated that the various parts of the generator were in the care of many different kinfolk. Although he was familiar with this scenario, he still seemed somewhat defeated, as though our prospects for a night's entertainment were already a failure. 'Can't you ask them for the parts?' I enquired, presuming that, as kin, most of the people he mentioned were easily approached in such situations. He explained, though, that a few of the relationships involved were not so straightforward. He was currently in a family dispute in which his brother, Eloy—who had the engine oil—had sided with the opposing faction; and to add to that, Mauricio—who had the circuit breaker—was away in another community. Mauricio's wife, who now had the circuit breaker in her care, was someone to whom Santiago must display *kili* (fear-shame), which meant he could not look at her, let alone ask to borrow one of her possessions.

Even so, after explaining these apparent obstacles, Santiago added with a trace of a shrug, as though an afterthought of consolation, 'Well, they cannot refuse me.' In this phrase, he was indicating the moral obligations of kin to supply food and goods upon request, commonly known as demand sharing (see Bird-David 1990; Rival 2002: 102-5), a phenomenon I shall address in greater detail shortly. In spite of this duty, however, most people would not have the audacity to ask directly from those with whom one was quarrelling, or from those in a relationship of fear-shame. So, I offered to ask for the parts on Santiago's behalf, since indirect requests were a common way around such issues.

These parts that I was in search of were merely components of the generator that separate participants happened to own because they were purchased when in town or salvaged from previous generators, rather than being actively dispersed. However, what was interesting was the fact that each member of the network was safeguarding their individual component between each use, rather than leaving them

permanently with a so-called ‘communal’ generator. In such a way, each person was intentionally maintaining control over their unique part, and in the process imposing a dispersible quality onto the machine. This was much like the dispersible quality of kinship, of which we shall learn more in Chapter 5. The generator was incomplete without the cooperation of kin, but its partitioning also somehow allowed kin to coalesce. You might even say that kinship became ‘generator-shaped’ in each instance that the machine came together through the merging actions of the component-guardians. These ‘generator-shaped’ moments of kinship call to mind Chagnon’s (1968: 100) description of the artificially cultivated division of craftsmanship among the Yanomami, which are created to foster alliance through trade (see also Chapman 1980: 45). In a similar way, the generator served to morally bind Sanema kinspersons in an expression of, and perhaps even a reason to maintain, affable relationships.

This example of the generator serves to illustrate how the general primacy of both materiality and morality are intertwined. The generator indexed the moral obligation of kin to offer goods that are requested, and indeed made requests a necessity. It also maintained collective contentment (*Sa. pi mönaja*) by obliging the friendly sharing of constituent parts. Furthermore, it enabled contentment at a wider scale than kin circles, as the functioning generator was necessary for the entire community to watch movies, recharge their torches, and light the community at night. In this way, all residents were in some way linked in this network of generator-part guardians. But the generator was not the only example of relatedness taking material form, nor of the compulsion to give; many *matitö* possessions were lent and gifted as crystallisations of the continued moral obligation to care for kin.

In this chapter, I will introduce the concept of material morality to first consider the primacy of manufactured items in Sanema lived worlds, before turning to an overview of morality as it relates cosmologically to manufactured goods. In this, I demonstrate through mythological and historical accounts that the Sanema perceive their place in the cosmos as facilitated through artefacts, and more precisely, through much-valued industrial goods. Finally, I shall explore how goods are integral to the construction of virtuous relatedness in alleviating the suffering of ‘poverty’ (*Sa. pebalo*) and sustaining the well-being of kin. In this process, manufactured goods constitute the realisation of moral humanity.

This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 11: Sanema man with a yucca-grating machine**

### **The ‘Goods’ Life**

As was illustrated in Chapter 1, a dominant framework for exploring industrialised goods in lowland South America in the past had been that of trade relations in particular. From this perspective, manufactured items become a means of relating to outsiders and the fertile exterior (see Dean 2009; Ewart 2007; Hugh-Jones 1992; Killick 2008b; Santos-Granero 2007). Until recently, though, little attention had been afforded to the procurement of goods as impelled by the desire for those goods alone, or as premised on the desire of one’s kin to have such things. For the Sanema, the accumulation of things does not only express the accrual of exterior relationships as has been described in other cases (see e.g. Grotti 2013), but also the maintenance of internal ones. Sentiments of compassion (Sa. *otetaö*) in kinship relations are central to the appropriation of these items. Chapter 4 will demonstrate in particular that certain interethnic relations are *tolerated* in order to procure manufactured items rather than

being the reason that certain items are sought. This is because an eagerness for goods in-and-of-themselves compels kin members to procure them as gifts and hence as displays of compassion. As such, this chapter will demonstrate that belongings and kinship relationships are intimately entangled, and it is precisely this link between relatedness and material things that elucidates the concept of material morality.

Goods, then, are essential to what has been referred to as the ‘good life’ in Amazonia, which refers to a moral schema of conviviality and intimacy which creates a ‘community of similars’ (Overing 2003: 300). As argued in Chapter 1, this creation of a ‘community of similars’ is not merely achieved through commensality (Fausto 2002; Gow 1991; Londoño Sulkin 2012; Vilaça 2002). Instead, I shall demonstrate in this chapter that the pursuit of the good life is also the pursuit of good things, or perhaps even the ‘goods’ life. Among the Sanema, contentment was regularly articulated with the Sanema word for ‘good’—*toita*—encompassing the concepts ‘beautiful’ and ‘perfect’, but also ‘proper’ and ‘correct’. In this sense, proper human existence was not merely a matter of correct practice, but also of manifestations of virtue in the form of beautiful things, and how those beautiful things were employed in social relationships (thus illustrating the link between aesthetics, morality and value outlined in Chapter 1).

This use of things to augment relationships in Amazonia commonly takes the form of demand sharing, which is premised on the obligation to give things upon request without the expectation of equivalent return (Barnard and Woodburn 1988).<sup>19</sup> Whereas reciprocity and delayed return govern systems of exterior transactions (see Killick 2011; Walker 2012a), exchanges between kin are guided by quotidian generosity. Bird-David, who describes the phenomenon in South India, captures the daily interactions involved in demand sharing: ‘They give and request to be given; they feel obliged to give and expect to be given; they criticise others for being stingy when they do not give; and they hide in order not to be asked to give and thereby avoid giving’ (1990: 191; see also Ewart 2012: 183; Rival 2002: 102-5; Siskind 1973: 7).<sup>20</sup> The moral primacy of care, nourishment and protection that demand sharing

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<sup>19</sup> Sahlins (1972: 193-4) refers to this as generalised reciprocity; and Graeber as communism (2012: 94-102).

<sup>20</sup> Loitering when food is being cooked is also a form of ‘non-verbal demanding’ (Altman and Peterson 1988: 92). Then again, the Sanema word *jonimo* is a pejorative term for someone who goes around eating scraps off people’s plates, perhaps indicating that non-verbal demanding and loitering is less than desirable.

realises is such that ‘its potential as an index of the state of social relations is powerfully inculcated’ (Peterson 1993: 863). However, demand sharing is often only analysed in relation to food or to immediate items that can be handed over in the moment of the request, such as the use of one’s machete.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the initiative in these systems of giving within kin groups are often portrayed as lying with the receiver in the form of demanding, but I would like to suggest that it could equally lie with the giver in the form of unsolicited gifts. As a response to these partial descriptions of the phenomenon, this chapter will seek to explore two things: the first is the role played by manufactured goods rather than food, and the second is the notion of unsolicited and compassionate giving rather than solely demanding.

As we shall see, the Sanema case illustrates that the giving of manufactured goods exemplifies the ethical actions of kinship and the good life as much as the sharing of food, the nurturing of bodies or the mutuality of communal labour. A number of other anthropologists have touched on these same issues, exploring the gifting of manufactured items as constitutive of kin relationality. Allard’s work among the Warao of northern Venezuela (2010: Chapter 1), for example, underscores the exchange of ‘things’ among kin as a salient manifestation of virtuous humanity. Morality, he stresses, is not simply a matter of rules, but a process of ‘compelling others to take one’s own suffering into account and act accordingly’ (Allard 2010: 10), primarily through the gift of goods. The durability and visibility of manufactured items mark them out as particularly suitable representations of morality, since the displaying or concealing of one’s property can signpost one’s moral behaviour. Walker (2013b) likewise draws a comparison between goods and care when describing that, among the Urarina, the word for love—*belaiha*—also means ‘to give as a gift’, as goods are the ‘material instantiation of love through concrete acts of giving’ (2013b: 55-6; see also Walker 2012a: 146). Gordon’s (2010) description of ‘consumerism’ and the desire for industrialised goods amongst the Xikrin Kayapó of Brazil is explored with a two-fold moral premise. The first is the conferring of material ‘pleasantries’ as a marker of care for kin. The second mode of materialised morality is the use of industrial items in initiation festivities that create beautiful

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<sup>21</sup> Although there has been some discussion as to whether immediate or delayed gifts emerge from different moral premises of giving and sharing (see Peterson 1993), it might also be seen to relate to the type of resources at one’s disposal. Manufactured items, particularly in my field context, were seen to be increasingly accessible and an ideal means through which to express generosity.

people and epitomise the logic of symbolic differentiation between individuals. Gordon found that, ‘through commodities the Xikrin have found new ways of realising these values and practices’ (2010: 9): of caring, good living and sharing.

These cases demonstrate that manufactured goods are increasingly pivotal in the moral actions of kinship in Amazonia. While Allard’s case among the Warao is one of demand sharing in which kin are compelled to take suffering into account, there is sense in the latter two cases that gifts are given spontaneously: in Walker’s case as a gesture of love, and in Gordon’s case as accoutrements bestowed upon kin as actions initiated by the giver so that they may be ‘remembered’. Some may well argue that manufactured goods in these cases have merely supplanted the role of food in contexts of sharing; but as we shall see, industrial items are different from food in a number of ways, the most evident being their durability and long-term capacity to be ‘owned’, or more precisely, ‘cared for’.

### **A Historical Desire for Good Things**

For the Sanema of Maduaña, the pursuit of *matitö* was paramount to the pursuit of the good life. Chapter 1 revealed that the term *matitö*<sup>22</sup> was translated as ‘things’ (Sp. *cosas*), but was most often referred to with the phrases ‘good things’ and ‘things we want’. *Matitö* were objects for personal use which these days predominantly comprise of manufactured goods such as beads, clothing, plastic bowls and washtubs, fish hooks, hammocks, pots and machetes, among many other things. One interlocutor, Marco, described *matitö* as ‘things made by men, made by *criollos* in factories (Sp. *fábricas*)’. The desire for these *matitö* was a prevailing narrative in Sanema everyday life, often articulated as the reasons why they sell petrol in the mine or participate in the projects of the Bolivarian Revolution (see Chapter 7), pursued because the resulting gifts are given to kin is a marker of compassion, and thus true humanity.

Manufactured items were often used as reflexive or relational devices. A common motif in historical narratives (Sa. *sudu upa*) was the material poverty of bygone times, often emphasised by a lack of these ‘good things’. Many evenings were spent sitting around the glow of the hearth as an elder family member recounted stories of the past, invariably opening with phrases such as, ‘What I am saying is the

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<sup>22</sup> This term is related to the Yanomami term *matohi*, which means ‘product, manufactured goods, property or belongings’ (Lizot 2004: 207).

truth, the ancestors did not have good things, they walked around poor.’ The term ‘poor’/‘suffering’ (Sa. *pebalo*) in this case was used in reference to paucity of ‘good things’ and thus indicating the hardship that previous generations endured. The past was encapsulated in phrases like, ‘back then we didn’t have good things like machetes, soap, pots and shotguns’ or ‘our forefathers were poor, they had no generators, chainsaws, clothes for our children or televisions. We didn’t have good things.’ Both of these were just a few of numerous similar utterances offered during interviews.

In addition to prompting temporal reflexivity, trade goods also served as markers of alterity; that is, concepts of otherness. Ye’kwana and *criollo* people, for instance, were often characterised by their superior goods, as Nerys described it:<sup>23</sup>

The forefathers weren’t rich; they didn’t have machetes or shotguns so now we are poor even today. The Ye’kwana are rich, they have beautiful houses, they have pots and shotguns and beautiful hammocks. The Ye’kwana are rich. In the beginning, the Ye’kwana had pots, machete, griddles. They are the ones who had them first, not the Sanema. *Criollos* know how to write and use computers, they make clothes and pots, they have beautiful houses, and so they are even more different (Sa. *tikotö*) than the Ye’kwana.

When Nerys talks of the Ye’kwana receiving things ‘first’, she may have been referring to the Myth of the Origin of Modern Goods in which primordial Ye’kwana accepted the goods offered by the mythical creator demiurge, Omaö, but the Sanema did not (see Appendix 5).<sup>24</sup> During the process of creating all living beings, Omaö pondered his ‘incomplete’ (Colchester 1981: 68, 115, n. 221) creation—the Sanema—thinking that to adequately finish his job, he would have to provide them with modern goods. He attempted to equip them with an array of manufactured items including aeroplanes, shotguns, pens and paper, blankets and shirts. The Sanema took a good look at all the items in turn but complained about them in each instance, moaning that they were fiddly, too heavy, noisy, or that they simply did not like them. In the end, they did not accept any of the gifts and Omaö, in his frustration,

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<sup>23</sup> Likewise, those without access to goods, such as the ‘*Waika*’ (Lizot 1994: 227 describes *Waika* as Northern Yanomami, although my Sanema friends described them as ‘naked Sanema’ who live upstream or in the ‘centre’ of the forest) are considered inferior and often dangerous or immoral beings.

<sup>24</sup> My Sanema interlocutors never told this myth (The Origin of Modern Goods) or the ‘Myth of the Origin of The Sanema’, both of which I have obtained from Colchester (1981).



proclaimed: ‘O dear! This is really bad. These Sanema don’t want to be like Yekuana at all I’m afraid. Not yet it seems. I think it must wait until later’ (Colchester 1981: 68). It was Omaö’s trickster brother, Soawe, who responded to their complaints by furnishing them with rudimentary items such as hammocks made from liana, arrows and dogs. Omaö decided to ‘prepare the Sanema really slowly’, so that they remained as ‘children’ while all the others—including Ye’kwana, *criollo* and *Shamatali* people (a Sanema group of the Auris region of Brazil that are considered materially advanced)—flourished thanks to the manufactured goods they received. Those that recount the myth conclude with vexation:

‘O! Woe! My ancestors they really make me *angry!*’ that is what we say now. ‘Walking slowly along on the ground—over mountains, along the trails, crossing rivers!—all this is really tiring. And all the while those others go swiftly by. And all thanks to our ancestors.’ That’s what we say now, and we are really angry too (Colchester 1981: 70, original emphasis).

Many Sanema describe this rejection of manufactured items in primordial times as resulting in a present-day differential access to wealth, and a continued voracious desire for goods to this day.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond the origin myth, though, Nerys’ statement about receiving goods first might also have been referring to the Ye’kwana’s monopoly over goods due to their long history of exchange with non-indigenous peoples. Contact between the Spaniards and Ye’kwana dated back to the search for El Dorado the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century, which resulted in regular and long-term trading relations between the two. Since the 1950s, the Ye’kwana have also had intimate interactions with a number of missionary groups, beginning with Baptist missionaries who settled along the Cunucunuma River in 1956, and later with two Catholic missions in Alto Erebató in 1958. The catholic clergy emphasised the material advantages of settling near their mission posts, offering long-term credit and manufactured goods in exchange for crafts that they sold to folklore shops in the cities (Arvelo-Jiménez 1974: 16-27). As will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 4, this material differentiation between the Ye’kwana and the Sanema has deeply influenced the relationship between the two groups.

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<sup>25</sup> This mytheme is in fact relatively common in Lowland South America (see e.g. Allard 2010: 14; Hugh-Jones 1988), which seems to be a particularly interesting but relatively underexplored component of relationality and alterity in Amazonia.

The Sanema's autonomous procurement of goods was made possible initially through a catholic mission founded in Kanadakuni in the 1960s (Colchester 1982: 387). Soon after, a more prosperous and regionally coordinated evangelical mission network arrived in the headwaters in the 1970s, first in the Caura region in the east of the municipality (in Simaraña), and later in a tributary of the Erebató further west.<sup>26</sup> This second mission settlement, which I call Sakuniña, from which Maduaña splintered, was established in 1984 by a *criollo* man named Guillermo and his wife Norma. Many Sanema from surrounding areas heard rumours of his arrival and slow clearing of land to create a large aeroplane landing strip. This act alone attracted many to move to Sakuniña, partly in order to 'see an aeroplane', as some described it, but most importantly to obtain manufactured goods as payment for clearing the airstrip. These evangelical missions did indeed initiate an inflow of goods directly into Sanema hands, and many of my research associates defined their migration to Sakuniña as a time of welcome access to items that had previously been difficult to obtain. One man described it rather matter-of-factly: 'As Guillermo was a missionary, he gave us pots, machetes and hammocks. This is how he made the community grow.' In a similar vein, when I asked my host brother what the missionaries did for the community, he responded in notably material terms: 'they brought us a lot of machetes, a generator that made light at night-time and files for sharpening machetes. They built a clinic, a school and a church.'<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note here, though, that this dynamic should not be seen as a one-sided elicitation of resources, as the bestowal of gifts is also an expression of, in this case paternalistic, care (as we shall see in Chapter 4, whether this dynamic emerges as extraction or nurture depends on shifting relations of mutuality). Guillermo's responsibility as a benefactor was reinforced by his 'giving of names' (i.e. their Spanish names), also important personal belongings.<sup>28</sup> In the past, names were more than mere identifiers, but constituted a component of an individual's soul. The animal hunted by the father on the first ritual hunt after birth not only became the

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<sup>26</sup> The evangelical mission was associated with ADIEL (Asociación de Iglesias Evangélicas Libres de Venezuela), incorporated into and funded by the EFCA (Evangelical Free Church of America). ADIEL was also supported by Alas de Socorro (Mission Aviation Fellowship), which facilitated the easy transport of goods into the mission by plane.

<sup>27</sup> In a similar way, Marcus Colchester, the anthropologist who conducted fieldwork among the Sanema in the late 1970s, is always remembered as the man who 'brought lots of good beads'.

<sup>28</sup> On names as property see Brightman 2010: 146; Gordon 2010; Lea 1995.

child's name, but its spirit entered the child through the lower spine, becoming its *humabö* (coccyx) spirit (Ramos 1974: Chapter 8). It is for this reason that given names were never uttered aloud lest the bearer become vulnerable to sorcery attack. Bestowing the Sanema with Spanish names, initially to be displayed on their Venezuelan ID cards (Sp. *cedula*), was a significant gesture for many Sanema, and one to which they regularly referred when talking about Guillermo and his compassion towards them.

From the Sanema perspective, the divine moral dimension of missionary activities was closely linked to the material exchanges that took place alongside the sermonising. Jose Kelly noted that the Yanomami understood the flood of manufactured goods from missionaries as a 'preparation for receiving the Christian message' in order to 'better convince the soul' (2011: 97). Sanema sermons, on the other hand, seemed to present a tension between the desire for goods and the salvation of the Christian faith. Church sermons disfavoured the perpetual yearning for property, instead anchoring devotion to the ultimate paradise in which believers find they no longer desire goods. The following excerpt from a sermon by the Sanema pastor of Maduaña illustrates this point:

We live here on earth and we always want good things that are lacking. I want a television; it never comes. I want a beautiful house; it never comes. Satan gave this problem to Eve. That's why we're poor, why we don't have good things. When we go to heaven, we won't think like that any more, we'll live better.

While the desire for merchandise is presented as an adverse condition, it is in some ways beyond one's control as Satan, who bears many resemblances to the trickster demiurge Sowae, cursed the Sanema with an unnatural and tenacious desire for commodities that preoccupy them daily. In this way, rather than portraying their unrelenting longing for goods as an unfavourable avarice in the present, it is presented as merely a natural circumstance of living 'here on earth'. In other sermons the pastor posits the inevitable yearning for merchandise as a burden that will be relieved in the hereafter through regular 'praying'. This material desire became the archetypal moral phenomenon contained within the discourse that accompanies that of 'God' (Sa. *tios*).

In addition to the goods that the missionaries bequeathed to the Sanema, the education offered in the mission schools furnished them with the capacity to later

obtain jobs as community teachers in government funded Bolivarian schools. Such jobs, and the accompanying wages, enabled many Sanema to purchase more goods independent of their previous brokers (missionaries and Ye'kwana). Notwithstanding these new opportunities to independently obtain goods, many Sanema continued to define themselves in relation to the goods they desire, or to their material deficiency in comparison to others. The proliferation of new 'things' and technologies that they regularly encountered in other communities and towns served to maintain the relational dynamic in their sense of material suffering (Sa. *pebalo*). Leonardo described it thus: 'The first time I went to Maripa, there were things there that I had never seen before, things I didn't know existed like clothes, plates and pretty dolls. This was the first time I saw all this.' In fact, some stated that the Sanema are only poor when in the cities because it is there that they have no jobs, no money, no clothes and no food. Without the ability to equip oneself in an appropriately material way in these *criollo* locales, one's visible poverty became all the more evident. The idea of 'being like a *criollo*' (Sa. *setenapötō kua kua wina*)—also translated as 'being civilised'—was often related to the material indices of power and self-sustainability in the cities.

In addition to serving as a marker of interethnic disparities, the ability to access manufactured goods within communities was also differentially distributed. Some people in Maduaña, for example, were becoming identified by their inability to procure commodities from the cities, and so a visible disparity in status was emerging.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, many moved to Maduaña specifically to facilitate a more convenient access to goods and considered this proximity to be associated with a new sense of well-being. As one woman described it to me: 'Before I came here, before I moved to Maduaña, I had no pots, no clothes. But now I do. I have a machete, I have a pot, I even have a yucca-grating machine. I am happy, I have everything I want!' And so, with Maripa as an important and adjacent frame of reference, many see themselves moving away from a past of poverty and toward a future of goods.

### **Owning and Protecting**

This move towards 'being like a *criollo*' engendered a markedly manufactured mode

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<sup>29</sup> This capacity of commodities to differentiate is also strikingly presented in the work of Gordon among the Xikrin-Kayapó (2006, 2010).

of material life, with many more *matitö* appearing in Sanema communities with every passing day. Often, too, these *matitö* were becoming personal possessions with their owners mark or initials carved into them with a knife. The unique capacity of manufactured gifts to exemplify the care of kin beyond the feeding of meat, which was the previous physical conduit of relatedness, is partly due to the material properties of *matitö*. Manufactured items can become enduring possessions, and thus lasting visible representations of care; but crucially, as one man described it ‘they do not think anything, they do not have a heart’. My host brother Marco also stated that, ‘*matitö* do not have spirits because they are made by men.’ The first statement refers to their lack of vitality or soul, which beings such as peccaries and birds possess, and which is indicated by warmth, breath and movement (I shall return to this idea in Chapter 8). Marco’s comment, however, indicates that manufactured items do not have ‘spirit carers’ or ‘owners’. This notion of ‘spirit’ should not be understood as an internal soul as such, but rather as a caretaker or mother figure that fosters and defend their particular species of animal or plant (see Walker 2012b; Viveiros de Castro 2004: 471). By this same reasoning, handcrafted items such as baskets also have no spirits among the Sanema, a belief divergent to other accounts in Amazonia that stress the subjectivity of fabricated items because they become ‘the objectification of the capabilities, affect, and knowledges of the people who made them’ (Santos-Granero 2009b: 11). In this case, human creative action actually eliminates a disposition to selfhood in things, rather than bestows it.

Unlike manufactured goods, game animals have spirit-masters (Sa. *samani töpö*) who are the agents of illness precisely because their inalienable possessions have been taken from them. This agentic capacity of fauna and their spirit carers requires a process of de-subjectification before consumption in order to evade the potentially dangerous repercussions of seizing the property of another being (see e.g. Costa 2012; Fausto 2007a). In this sense, absence of a soul or spirit-master is an important and favourable feature of *matitö*, because being devoid of malign intentionality in this way means they can pose no danger to others.<sup>30</sup>

Guarded against non-kin, and worse still visitors from other communities, most *matitö* are nevertheless freely lent out to familiars, giving notions of ownership some fluidity as a consequence of the demand sharing economy. People did not tend

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<sup>30</sup> Walker argues, however, that among the Urarina trade goods and game animals are analogous in their possession of a master (2012a: 148).

to hoard and hide things away (aside from beads) in the way others have described (see Allard 2010: 37; Brightman 2010: 149; Ewart 2008: 516; Hugh-Jones 1992: 61); nor did they burn objects—other than hammocks—upon the death of their owners, as was said to be the practice in the past (Colchester 1982: 214). The majority of the industrially fabricated items were in clear view but were treated carelessly (except beads), strewn across the floors of houses, covered in dust, ripped apart, broken and vigorously used until they had worn out to the point of disintegrating. Indeed, it always struck me how little care the Sanema took of their belongings, much less care than I tended to take with my own possessions. This reckless treatment seemed rather unusual given the voracity with which they desired manufactured things.

Often the short life span of most goods was due to the number of hands they tended to pass through. Eloy, for instance, bought a brand new portable DVD player with his earnings as a translator in the hospital in Ciudad Bolívar. It was a superb, glistening machine that all the residents of Maduaña marvelled over. However, instead of carefully packaging it up after each use and storing it away so that others did not damage it, every day that passed I would see it being used by a different person. This would happen most days, at any hour of the day, provided the battery had been charged by the generator the night before. Unsurprisingly, it was not long before the DVD player ceased to function and I later saw it scattered in several pieces in the dark corner of the room after the younger kids had a final play with the defective item. As far as I could see, Eloy did not seem concerned by the fact that his *matitö* had been so rapidly damaged, most likely while in someone else's care. All objects seemed to transpire in similar ways, with only an expression of indifference granted to its broken and discarded state. These vanquished goods were invariably left forsaken for a significant time before finally being swept up and thrown to the vegetation at the edges of the community where the other rubbish is tossed.<sup>31</sup>

I do not wish to misrepresent the situation among the Sanema as one of staunch egalitarianism through the obviation of accumulation, or the apparent disinterest in concealment. What was evident in everyday life was the moral authority of sharing (Sa. *köpalo*) that impels one to privilege generosity (Sa. *ödö ipö*) over the satisfaction of one's personal desires. This is not to say that eagerness for things did

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<sup>31</sup> Ewart similarly states that 'the moral sense of "taking care of your possessions" so ingrained in Euro-American culture, seems quite absent among the Panará' (Ewart 2012: 183).

not exist, but rather that the satisfaction of desires was redirected: one must satisfy the needs of others before one's own (or indeed gain satisfaction from satisfying others, as it were). This value was instilled from a young age and discernable in the regular command '*pita!*' ('give it!'), often barked at young bickering siblings. The procurement of personal possessions was moreover a manifestation of one's autonomy rather than their greed or self-indulgence. Acquiring these items was a sign of the hard work one had undergone to obtain them (see similar cases in Alès 2000: 135; Allard 2010: 26), often a result of back-breaking chores for the Ye'kwana, hauling petrol to the mines or harvesting crops for long hours on *criollo* farms. Such work demonstrated one's commitment to the well-being of kin for whom they often undertook such labour. In addition, it was a sign of their adventuresome spirit through travels and interaction with the exterior that fundamentally enhanced status and personhood, as we shall see in the Chapter 7.

Another important factor in the treatment of manufactured items among the Sanema is their notion of ownership. As we have seen in the case of the generator, property among the Sanema does not precisely imply rights of exclusion. People become, in a sense, 'protectors' or 'guardians' of certain things (Sa. *kolo pasitibo*—to look after, manage) that must, by virtue of demand sharing, circulate freely among kin and cause individual owners to 'come together' through their goods. The verb 'own' (Sp. *poseer* or *ser dueño de*) was in fact rarely used among the Sanema, even though possessive pronouns were prevalent in contexts of objects and relationships. Instead, the Spanish verb '*cuidar*' (to take care of) was the most common term associated with a notion of ownership, both by spirits and by humans. In this sense, control and use were related to 'caring for', 'looking after' or protecting rather than owning. Even spirits were described as caring for things rather than being masters or bosses, as my host father René elucidated when describing the spirit of wind: 'the *pasoliwö töpö* spirits are the ones who look after the air.' In this sense, we might benefit from exploring an alternative approach to ideas of goods and ownership in which demand sharing is not a matter of relinquishing but rather 'giving back' or 'restoring'.

This notion of 'looking after' (Sa. *kolo pasitibo*) does in some ways adhere to the quintessentially Amazonian category of 'mastery', 'ownership' (Fausto 2008) and 'fellowship' (Walker 2013b; see also Fausto 2012; Kohn 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1992: 21; 2007). 'Familiarising predation', a conceptual framework advanced by

Carlos Fausto (1999), describes a schema by which predatory relations are converted into relations of protection and adoption and form part of a wide-ranging process of social production and reproduction. Fausto (2008) adds that those who do the familiarising fall into the Amazonian category of ‘master’/‘owner’, as described above. Everything and everyone, Fausto argues, has an owner, from animals to curves in the river, all of which are cared for and nourished by their individual paternal figures. Walker (2013a) also notes that, amongst the Urarina of Peruvian Amazonia, this form of mastery is essential to personhood and agency, and indeed a prerequisite to existence itself.

Nevertheless, to be a ‘carer’ or ‘guardian’ is different than being a ‘master’ or ‘owner’ because it precludes the notion of exclusive rights to something. However, as the generator illustrates, the Sanema even manage to outwit the idea of ‘collective’ property, as it instead existed as a sort of individual-collective entity. Whether the dividing up was intentional or not does not detract from the notion that the dispersible affordance of the generator was utilised for this very unique purpose: uniting kin with the separate protection of its parts.<sup>32</sup> Each part had its overseer and it was only when the parts were brought together that the machine was able to function as a whole. Similarly, the community student laptops that were part of a one-laptop-per-child scheme were safeguarded by the teacher (rather than the students to whom they were given), the community boat and motor were said to be cared for by the community leader (Sp. *jefe*), and even the schoolhouse was described to me as ‘Marco’s building’ which the children used for classes. In all these cases, items became collective-individual properties rather than *either* individual *or* collective, a dynamic that was facilitated through this notion of ‘caring for’ rather than ‘owning’.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> As mentioned earlier, this was not a case of intentional dispersal of parts for people to look after, but was more the case that different people happened to have necessary parts. That said, there did seem to be a tacit arrangement or acceptance of this dynamic, especially considering that Santiago did not put much effort into owning all the necessary parts himself so that he was sole owner of the generator, or indeed find a way to procure ‘communal’ parts. Indeed, the machine would in fact never be entirely communal for long as someone would have to periodically buy the petrol.

<sup>33</sup> See also Allard (2010: 20) on the imposed notion of Bolivarian collective property among the Warao. He notes, however, that there is difference in these cases between the owners and the carers of certain things.



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**Figure 12: Sanema family at their hearth**

### **Morality Materialised**

The descriptions offered thus far have illuminated that personhood is achieved through material things. Information garnered from the Sanema's descriptions of their paucity of material possessions, and their story of being 'left behind' in the creation myth, all highlight the fundamental artefactual component of Sanema subjectivity. Indeed, as was suggested in the myth of The Origin of Modern Goods, the completed form of true and strong Sanema human beings was never achieved due to their deficiency in goods. In another myth—The Origin of The Sanema—it was again Omaö's trickster bother, Soawe, who impeded attempts to create completed persons by continually deceiving them or hampering their true development (see myth in Appendix 6). While Omaö was in the process of creating beings out of trees, he sent Soawe to collect the hard *poli* wood to make strong people. But the mischievous brother ran out of time and so instead collected lots of 'trash', the weak *kodalinase* wood, and Omaö unwittingly made the Sanema out of this fragile material. As a result, Sanema bodies to this day are feeble and they 'die quickly' (Colchester 1981: 37). Accordingly, as The Myth of the Origin of Modern Goods inferred, the Sanema must augment their incomplete bodies with modern objects to compensate for their physical shortcomings. Nevertheless, there is an important caveat to this tale: one

must be materialised in the correct way—in a generous way—as the benevolent bestowal of things is what defines one as a truly human.

An emphasis in Amazonian anthropology on the primacy of substance in relatedness was described in Chapter 1 as eclipsing other forms of kin-making. It is true that Sanema men do often boast of making their children grow with the meat they hunt, and kinship is indeed enunciated through phrases such as ‘you know me, you have eaten my food’ or ‘I ate with them, they were like my parents’. Equally, expressions of relatedness could be symbolically severed through food, as Anita articulated with frustration upon discovering that one of her daughters-in-law had been intimate with another of her sons. She announced that, ‘I don’t want Juancita to call my son to eat. I don’t want my family to fight.’ As mentioned earlier, though, the gifting of manufactured items is central to the moral obligation to sustain kin as much as the sharing of food. I was reminded of this repeatedly when my interlocutors frequently framed relatedness as the giving, receiving and processing of goods in order to make kin content. When people weaved hammocks, a backbreaking and tedious task that takes several months, I was always interested to learn that it was never executed for the personal use of the weaver, but instead for someone else in the family—the mother, brother or child. If sharing were merely a matter of demanding, then gestures such as these would not be prevalent.

Through the lens of material goods, we see that kinship is reinforced through active compassion, rather than merely the passive and at times resentful relinquishing of things, as seems to be the common representation of demand sharing. It is true that many conferred items are requested, particularly preceding a trip to the town. I myself was often the recipient of numerous requests. When I brought a gift of beads for my host mother on my second trip to Maduaña, for example, she turned to me through a huddle of excited women and gestured her two hands together as though clasping something the size of a melon. ‘Next time bring me a bag of beads this size! Bring me more!’ she demanded enthusiastically. The next day, I was also timidly approached by Anita’s granddaughter, who told me that she too required beads as she had cried for me when I left the community the previous time. Both of these cases capture the inherently moral actions that emerge from the possession, endowment and requests of material goods: the importance of fulfilling promises and the empathetic response to the affective registers of relatedness. In addition to these requests, I would also

emulate my hosts by bringing unsolicited gifts for my closest family members because I too knew that this gesture made them content (Sa. *pi mönaja*).

I believe that unsolicited gifts hold such value among the Sanema in part because pre-empting demands maintains equivalence between ‘similar’. Advance requests might create the type of imbalance characteristic of delayed return and exchange (see Graeber 2012: 103 who states that exchange always has an element of competition or imbalance). Predominantly, however, the guiding moral principle of compassion (Sa. *otetaö*) is what compels such giving, a benevolence that is instinctively both active and materialised among the Sanema.

The importance of *matitö* for contentment was evident when failure to obtain such things resulted in an anguish in some cases akin to illness. In fact, the Sanema term ‘suffer’—*pebalo*—also means ‘to be without’ or ‘to be poor’, thus implying an emotional distress that accompanies a deficiency in material possessions. Alleviating or avoiding such suffering was often a matter of ‘helping’ (Sa. *pasila palai*), specifically through the conferral of *matitö*, both requested and unsolicited. A similar emphasis on the alleviation of suffering is expressed among the Yanomami, as noted by Alès (2000), who go to great lengths to ameliorate the pain, sadness, hardship and hunger of kin (see also Gow 2000). In this way, compassion is associated with empathy because seeing one’s kin suffer causes one to suffer also, what Overing and Passes describe as ‘other-regarding social virtues’ (2000b: 18). This empathetic response to suffering kin was often communicated in a high-pitched quavering voice—very similar to mournful keening—regularly adopted by my host mother when concerned about my well-being. I was interesting to discover, though, that Anita’s sons would often sigh in exasperation when she cried for others, or laugh that she was ‘emotional’. Perhaps these changing notions of appropriate responses to the suffering of others marks a shift from emotive compassion to a material compassion that is expressed through the bestowal of gifts.

Children, in particular, had their material desires met where possible, even to the extent of seeming over-indulged. Marco, who regularly proclaimed to be poor, would often spend whatever money he had on frivolous gifts for his children when in Maripa, rather than necessary foodstuffs or petrol essential for the trip back to the community. On one occasion he returned to the Maduaña encampment in Maripa with five plastic glittery pens, each with a fluffy feather ball suspended from a spring at the

end. He chuckled while showing them to me, announcing proudly that he had bought them for his children. Moments later he complained that he had no money left for rice (see Ewart 2002: 45 for a similar example among the Panará).

And yet, these sorts of purchases might not seem so superficial when we consider that, aside from indicating deficient humanity, failure to ‘help’ kin or make them content could place them in grave danger. Incessant crying of children, for instance, is treated with critical importance, not only because it implies a distress associated with neglect, but also because it attracts evil spirits and can cause the child to fall ill. Washai, Anita’s five-year-old adopted son, demonstrated the scandal of neglect very well when he decided to joke around by sucking in his stomach to make himself look emaciated. While I laughed at his comical caper, Anita did nothing of the sort. She took it very seriously indeed, frowned and snapped at him to ‘stop making yourself look hungry!’ It was clear that this harmless trick offended her deeply and in some ways reflected badly upon her acts of care, suggesting that she was negligent and stingy. Likewise, neglect of teenagers could also result in their ‘laziness’ (Sa. *moi*), a concept that is closer to that of illness than apathy, and which requires shamanic intervention. Laziness may result at best in the child’s abandonment of the community, or at worst in their loss of a soul.

Whereas in the past, such suffering may have predominantly been associated with a deficiency in sustenance such as meat, now it is becoming progressively bound up with manufactured goods. This is indeed why the generous sharing of ‘things’ constitutes relatedness. To make kin happy, one regularly shares (Sa. *tota jötöpo*) or gives gifts, and the delight elicited is palpable in the howled response of ‘*aitaköööö!*’ (great!). On trips to town, people often returned with merchandise for all family members—clothes and lollipops for their children, yards of cloth and pots for the women of the family, and shotgun cartridges for the men. Some of these gifts were requested, but many were spontaneous expressions of care and the acknowledgement of the material desires of one’s similars. When asked why they bring these gifts, people simply say that ‘because they are my family, I give them things.’ In fact, when the pastor preached that money was bad for the community as it makes people ‘crazy for things’, which are ultimately used to pursue women for sex, my assistant dismissed the message without hesitation because, he said, ‘I want my children to have good clothes too.’

This utterance is particularly revealing because clothes are in many ways the quintessential expression of everyday material morality, as it was the most frequent and visible manifestations of care. In this way, nakedness was associated with immorality on a number of levels. Firstly, it was used to reference degenerate ‘others’ such as sorcerers (Sa. *oka töpö*) who roam the forest alone, or ‘bad upstream Sanema who always get drunk’, both of whom are said to wander around naked. Secondly, being unclothed is deplored for indexing uncaring or absent kin and states of orphanhood. Parents of naked children were regularly described as bad parents, expressed by the disapproving term ‘he leaves his children naked’. A child who is ‘soft’ (Sa. *osiati*) after birth, remains so in their naked un-adorned form, and can become ‘hot’, ‘distressed’ or ‘sad’ without bodily embellishments given by their kin. Those who made an effort to earn money carrying heavy barrels of petrol up the large waterfalls in order to buy their children clothes, shoes and beads were thought to be admirable, caring parents. It was not unusual to find the children of recently returned fathers beautified in brand new colourful dresses or miniature polo shirts proudly displayed for all to see. Similarly, much teenage discontentment with parents stemmed from their proclaimed neglect, principally in their lack of clothing. One of my host family’s grandchildren decided to leave the community to live with kin elsewhere because his father ‘did not give him enough clothes’. Another resident described his childhood as a time in which he was naked until aged ten because he ‘didn’t have a father’.

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**Figure 13: Clothed children**

This last statement highlights the central role of the paternal figure in supplying goods, as he is the one who travels, trades and works. This fatherly duty is most evident in cases where people are described as having two fathers—one that ‘everyone says is my real father’ and one that ‘I call *japa* (dad)’. The one that is called ‘dad’ is the one who raised the individual, who was always close, who supplied meat, but who also gave gifts of clothing, beads and other items. Mauricio described his own situation in this way, explaining that, even though in some ways he has two fathers, the one that other people say is his father was ‘never around when I grew up, he was always in Maripa’. This man who ‘everyone said was his father’ continued to neglect Mauricio in food sharing and bestowals of manufactured gifts. The one he calls ‘dad’, on the other hand, was close to him when growing up, gave him the meat

that ‘made him grow’ and supplied him with ‘things that he needed’ like clothing and a hammock. While older men can still access manufactured goods through trade and the occasional labour in the farms or mines, in the current context there seems to be a shift taking place in which it is now the younger generation who have greater access to goods through their command of Spanish and their ability to earn money through state jobs as teachers or ministry ‘promoters’, or their participation in Bolivarian projects. It is common now for the children to show their generosity and care by giving gifts to their parents, and most importantly, to their parents-in-law.

Employing goods as a measure of relatedness or love does, however, cause frictions (in the same way as food sharing can). I have heard instances of people defining ‘others’ as ones to whom you should not give gifts, as Marco illustrated when reproaching his brother, asking him: ‘why did you give him your camera? He is not your brother, is he?’ One might also demand kin to return gifts when they quarrel, as when a man asked his father to return a pair of wellington boots he had gifted him when they had an argument. Similarly, problems that emerge from sororal polygyny, I was told, were not due to issues of divided affections, but rather of divided resources, as one demonstrates the other. I once asked one woman, whose co-wife was her younger sister, if she was ever jealous. She appeared embarrassed, but replied with: ‘when they go to Maripa together and he buys her clothes or a pot then, yes, I am sad.’

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the notion that manufactured items hold an important place in relatedness and acts of compassion. *Matitö* are referred to when contrasting the Sanema’s material well-being to that of ‘others’, whether it be the materially advanced Ye’kwana and *criollos* or the materially deficient and savage upstream Sanema (Waika). Manufactured items appear in myths of Sanema ‘childlike’ material development and incomplete bodily forms. Trade goods also become central in historical narratives of hardship, weakness and longing. Most importantly, goods continue to be constitutive of personhood and relatedness as active compassion through the bestowal of unsolicited gifts is as much a material component of kin realisation as is the sharing of food. Moreover, the common theme of care in both

demand sharing and the Amazonian master-owner category demonstrates that property and goods can be seen as central to virtuous acts of relatedness.

Manufactured objects, whose origin is somewhat opaque (see Walker 2012a: 149-56), may have distinct patterns of 'ownership' that are enabled through their special material properties. The case of the generator demonstrated that guardianship eclipses individual property, and can compel a dispersal and regular re-joining of items as a result of both its partible properties and the economy of demand sharing. This evokes Fausto's notion that certain forms constitute the collective (in his example he talks of the master-chief), so that 'a plurality appears as a singularity to others' (Fausto 2008: 334). In the case of the generator, the plurality of parts are to some extent individually owned, but only insofar as they ultimately assemble a singularity of kin (see also Chapter 5). As Bird-David describes among the Nayaka of India, when kin use the same objects, those objects 'become a sign of their closeness' and even in some ways 'aggregate separate selves' (1990: 193). In a similar way among the Sanema, objects that are given and shared reaffirm kinship. Sharing the generator through its parts also maintained equality between kin by diffusing Santiago's power as sole possessor over it. The cases offered in this chapter have shown that not only can kin be fabricated as though they were artefacts (see Chapter 1, pp. 17-19; Santos-Granero 2009a: 168-169), they can equally be fabricated *through* artefacts. By this I mean that kinship is produced not only through the sharing of substance, but also through the conferral of goods.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Submission as Extraction:

#### Active Strategies for Procuring Goods

Valentín crouched in the dark corner of the Ye'kwana communal house without saying a word. His eyes were fixed firmly on the floor ahead of him and he nervously fiddled with the keys hanging from a string around his neck. Despite the multitude of other people bustling around him, slinging up their hammocks and slurping gourds of cassava gruel after their long journeys, Valentín barely looked up to acknowledge the activity. Only occasionally would he reach out to one of his children and pull them back to him in a protective gesture, keeping a tight rein on their coy curiosity. To say he looked timid would be an understatement, and indeed his companions were of similar demeanour: all exhibiting what seemed like despondent apprehension at their surroundings.

Valentín and other residents of Ulinuwiña were in the large Ye'kwana community of Wayamú receiving a medical check-up at a government run pop-up clinic (Sp. *operativa*) stationed there for the weekend. Residents of Ulinuwiña were just one of a number of surrounding Sanema communities arriving in Wayamú that day for medical attention, all now piling into the large Ye'kwana circular communal house (Ye'kwana: *ättä*) and preparing their hearths to settle in for a few days. Wayamú was also buzzing with *criollo* politicians, medical staff and military personnel flown in from the state capital Puerto Ayacucho, as this 'operative' was also part of an extravagant gift-giving ceremony taking place in the run-up to elections.

A stocky and severe looking man strode over to Valentín and asked him something in Ye'kwana with a firm and irritated tone that betrayed a shade of reproach. Valentín merely blinked and gazed into the distance, all but cowering away from his overbearing interrogator. The Valentín that I was witnessing in this context, though, was nothing like the Valentín that I had been getting to know over the past month. Just days before in Ulinuwiña he had been asserting his bravery and confidently threatening to fight those who underestimated him, stomping his feet to imitate a ferocious peccary and shouting '*sa kili mai ke!*' (I'm not afraid!). I was learning that he was known for speaking his mind, for being an excellent hunter and

for often beating his wife, all characteristics of a *wano waitili*, a fearless man. This was not, however, entirely unexpected among the Sanema. As a member of the Yanomami language family, the Sanema were associated with an Amazonian group renowned for bellicosity and bravery, most famously portrayed in Chagnon's (1968) controversial monograph *The Fierce People*. True, the Sanema were not technically the same Yanomami with whom Chagnon had worked, but they were nevertheless closely related and certainly held something of a violent reputation of their own according to accounts from some Ye'kwana and *criollos*. More often than not, though, my Sanema friends would choose laughter over fighting, and some even assured me with a tone of disgust that they were not the Yanomami. They were, they asserted, a calm and peaceful people.

For the most part they lived up to this claim; but then again, I cannot say they were entirely comparable to the descriptions of peace-loving and tranquil people that are common in some Amazonian accounts (see Goldman 1963; and the contributions to Overing and Passes 2000a). My fieldwork was characterised by long periods of peace and humdrum, pierced occasionally with startling violence, blood, weapons and commotion, moments they curiously seemed to fear and yet relish at the same time. I recall witnessing fights in almost all of the households in both Maduaña and Ulinuwiña (about 20 main household units altogether), as well as regular outward expressions of anger, pride in fierceness and a sheer delight in stories of murder, danger and antagonism.

Despite some of the similarities between the Sanema and the Yanomami, there does not appear to be any mention in the Yanomami literature of submission to other groups, fear of outsiders or inter-ethnic dependence. In fact, Lizot asserts that for the Yanomami 'submission is contrary to Indian morality; it is dishonourable' (1994: 857). Moreover, the icon of indigenous resistance, the Yanomami activist Davi Kopenawa, is one of political assertiveness, self-determination and autonomy (see Kopenawa and Albert 2013). Valentín, face-to-face with the Ye'kwana in the communal house, seemed to be the antithesis of such assertiveness. He appeared afraid, awkward and even vulnerable. Yet, his change in behaviour was not unique to him, but something I observed frequently among the Sanema. I often wondered why there was such a stark contrast between the fearless, commanding Sanema I encountered in their communities, and the submissive, deferent Sanema I observed in the presence of the Ye'kwana.

As was described in Chapter 2, over the decades, the relationship between the Ye'kwana and the Sanema had changed from one of hostility and violence to a relation of peaceful dependence in which the Sanema now exhibit extreme deference towards the Ye'kwana. While the Sanema have at times engaged in relations of collaborative exchange with the Ye'kwana, this in fact seemed to be the exception rather than the rule. Yet, while at first glance it appeared as though the Sanema were being exploited by the Ye'kwana, closer analysis of their current patron-client relationship reveals that often it is the Sanema who have sought out this dynamic of dependence and in fact taken on the submissive role for their own objectives. Those objectives are to peacefully obtain 'things'. Symmetrical exchange relationships seemed to be deliberately rejected; in the past through direct acts of antagonism, but currently by entering into processes of peaceful extraction. This subordination, then, was in fact an ingenious act of power on the part of the Sanema. This chapter, then, explores material morality as it relates to their relationship with 'others' (in this case the neighbouring Ye'kwana).

Here I will follow on from the previous chapter in further grounding the Sanema's enthusiastic acquisition of goods in its historical context, this time with an outward focus on their long-term association with their neighbouring Ye'kwana. Furthering the discussion on goods exchange and procurement—both demand sharing and reciprocity—the relationship between the Sanema and the Ye'kwana reveals that, where inequality and subordination to others is the dominant dynamic, extraction is the prevailing modality of exchange. Beneath the surface of peaceful dependence, the relationship between the Sanema and the Ye'kwana is fraught with tensions partly, I believe, due to the Sanema's lack of true long-term commitment to the relationship. They continue to advance their autonomy, agency, and ultimately their ability to extract goods without partaking in long-term equal modes of reciprocity or sharing. I thus argue that the interaction between the Ye'kwana and the Sanema can offer a new theorisation on predation, a modality that is utilised in order to 'capture' much desired resources. However, contrary to common descriptions of 'predation' in Amazonian literature, in this case it is the subordinate group that act as predators: not hostile, but rather peaceful and submissive predators.

This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 14: Ye'kwana man speaking to a group of Sanema during the 'operative'**

### **Relations of Dependence**

Valentín's story above highlighted the contradicting demeanours of the Sanema in different contexts. Because of their reputation as fierce Indians, as well as their own portrayal of themselves as protagonists in tales of bravery and assertiveness, their deference toward the Ye'kwana seemed somehow out of place. How, then, can we place this peaceful dependency (that is, in contrast to their hostile independence of the past) within anthropological scholarship, as well as in theories on Amazonian sociality?

A growing body of literature has recently been emerging that challenges the axiom of a universal desire for independence and freedom. Ferguson, for instance, recently explored a number of cases in southern Africa in which relations of dependence and paternalism continue to be sought despite the abolition of apartheid and cheap migrant labour. This is because, he states, in this context '*being* someone continued to imply *belonging* to someone' (2013: 227, original emphasis). Generating great unease in the 'emancipatory liberal mind', this continued dependence seemed to be inimical to the valued autonomy and liberty that was thought to be intrinsic to human dignity and free will. Nevertheless, the idea that individuality is an asocial

state should be a familiar one to most anthropologists. Many have emphasised the importance of relationality to personhood (Sahlins 2011; Strathern 1988), arguing that persons are constituted through relationships and attachment to others rather than through exchange between discrete individuals. Mahmood too has argued for an alternative to a liberal assumption of the ‘innate desire for freedom’ (2004: 5) and a preoccupation with resistance. She maintains that within the Islamic revival movement in Egypt, subjection in the form of the veil—although viewed externally as female exploitation—was in fact not only the quintessence of piety, but also imbued one with profound agency in the religious experience. Much of this work is inspired by a Foucauldian notion of freedom (1990), which defines it not as a lack of forces or constraints, but rather as an existential realisation of ones’ subjectivity in relation to the world.

Similarly in Amazonia, a preoccupation with resistance to power structures, or with the creation of similarity out of difference, has eclipsed existing dynamics of inequality and dependence between Amazonian groups. The first approach, which was outlined in Chapter 1, emphasises egalitarianism and conviviality as the dominant and encompassing mode of social relations in Amazonia (see Overing & Passes 2000a; Taylor 1996). Scholars who adhere to this model posit that native Amazonians support few power structures or coercion (see Brown 1993; Clastres 1987), or as Overing and Passes put it, they express ‘an antipathy to rules and regulations, hierarchical structures, and coercive constraints’ (2000: 2b). The other influential approach to Amazonian sociality is that of alterity, which is premised on the endogenous values of enmity, capture and predation (see Chagnon 1968; Fausto 1999; Viveiros de Castro 1992). In this model, the exterior is the source of creativity and reproduction, so that while actual affines are gradually transformed into consanguines, all others are ‘potential affines’, and thus ‘sociality begins where sociability stops’ (Viveiros de Castro 2001: 24). Nevertheless, neither of these approaches to Amazonian sociality have explored cases of long-term and asymmetrical—but peaceful—interethnic relations in any depth. While these interethnic relations of asymmetry may present some similarities to both the model of conviviality and the model of alterity, there are also important differences with each. Such relations of dependence cannot be placed easily into either of the two approaches, as I shall describe below.

Accounts of longstanding relations of dependence similar to those between the Ye'kwana and Sanema do exist, and yet have seldom come to the fore in discussions of Amazonian sociality. Patron-client relations between horticulturalists and foragers in particular have a deep historical trajectory, with perhaps the best documented being that between the horticulturalist Tukanoans of northern Amazonia and their forager neighbours, the Makú (Chernela 1993; Goldman 1963; C. Hugh-Jones 1979; Jackson 1983; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997; see also the case of the Trio and Akuryo in Grotti 2007). Nevertheless, the topic of inequality emerges, in a subtle way, as a defining principle in accounts of difference in the region because, as Brightman asserts, 'inequality, or disequilibrium, lies at the heart of Amazonian sociality' (2010: 154).<sup>34</sup> Ewart (2013a), for instance, describes barter exchange between the Panará and Kayabi as dominated by inequality. Contrary to the presumption that parity is intrinsic to exchange acts in Amazonia, in this context, trading and raiding function in similar ways due to a fear of Kayabi witchcraft, which makes it impossible to refuse requests. Lorrain (2000) also argues for a more nuanced understanding of hierarchy in lowland South America, observing that 'hierarchy' is common between those of different 'kinds', such as between gender and age categories, concluding that the notion of egalitarianism within society as a whole does not exist in Amazonia.

In addition to this, voluntary submission and the aesthetics of deference also seem to be a familiar description of Amazonian forager sociality. The Huaorani of western Amazonia, for instance, affirm personhood in their position as 'victims' (Rival 2002, also referred to as the 'prey position'). They divide the universe into two distinct categories—*huaorani* (real humans) and *cohuori* (predators/others)—so that to be a true person one must be in opposition to predators; that is, a victim (Rival 2002; see also Goldman 1963; Grotti 2007; Fausto 2007b; Taylor 2007: 157). Walker (2013a) has also noted that for the Urarina of Western Amazonia, not only is submission voluntary, but it is considered a form of mastery. The concept of being 'watched over' and eliciting impulses of pity and 'paternalistic benevolence' in others (2013: 167) mirrors their relationship with the 'creator'. Submission thus enables the Urarina to 'maintain a sense of their own identity, and perhaps paradoxically their status as subjects and agents' (2008: 327). Bonilla has similarly argued that the Paumari, who are subordinate to outsiders, 'ended up dominating, to a certain extent,

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<sup>34</sup> See also Heckenberger 2004 for the ground-breaking archaeological thesis that complex hierarchical chiefdoms preceded conquest in Amazonia.

the relationship with the interlocutor, forcing the latter to adopt the position of domesticating boss, or adoptive parent, and therefore assume responsibility for supplying them with food and merchandise and for their general well-being' (2009: 141). This last point of obtaining merchandise, as we shall soon discover, is also the dominant motivating factor for Sanema deference.

It is clear, then, that cases of dependence and asymmetry are extremely common in Amazonia and beyond. What is surprising, perhaps, is the fact that such subjection is often voluntary. This observation begs the question of how subordinate groups perceive their situation, to what extent they are forced to assume a submissive position, and whether they do in fact see it as an adverse condition. Probing such dynamics may shed light on forms of dependence in Amazonia that are specific to the region, and may even challenge conventional ideas of inequality and resistance beyond Amazonia (see also Bétéille 2003; Strathern 1987).

### **Timid Fearlessness in the Presence of Others**

As the opening vignette indicated, I was often confused at what seemed to be a lack of self-sufficiency on the part of the Sanema, and the inexplicable power of their Ye'kwana gatekeepers. Yet this experience during the 'operative' in Wayamú was not the only occasion during which I observed this timidity among the Sanema, predominantly when interacting with 'others' such as the Ye'kwana or *criollos*.

It was this extreme acquiescence that was the original reason for choosing to do fieldwork among the Sanema. During my first trip to Venezuela in 2005, my *criollo* travel companions often mentioned the 'poor Sanema who are slaves to the Ye'kwana', exploited, ridiculed and made to work for free. I did indeed notice how painfully timorous they were when approached in the *criollo* town of Maripa or when visiting any Ye'kwana community. On this first trip to Venezuela, I attempted to speak to some Sanema who were loading a canoe, only to see them shouted at to 'get back to work' by the Ye'kwana who were with them at the time.

It was during the trip to Wayamú mentioned above that my own personal dilemmas with fieldwork permission (see pages 39-41) were to become entangled with this Sanema contradiction between self-assurance in one context, followed by complete obedience in another. While I was in Ulinuwiña, rumours had arrived that the Ye'kwana did not want me working with the Sanema, that they believed I should

leave. I was understandably concerned given the repeated issues I had already been experiencing with official permission form the Ministry for Indigenous Peoples up to that point. Before arriving in Wayamú for the health visit, Valentín and the other members of Ulinuwiña had promised me that they would talk to the Ye'kwana. They bellowed confidently in a meeting prior to the trip that, 'we will speak strongly with them, tell them that we want you in our community. They cannot tell us what to do!' I was comforted by their assertion to speak their mind to the Ye'kwana, and together we resolved to obtain permission for me once and for all.<sup>35</sup>

When we arrived in Wayamú, however, it became instantly clear that my hopes were an illusion. During the 'operative', a number of meetings were called with the Sanema of Ulinuwiña and the Ye'kwana leaders of Wayamú to discuss my presence. To my disappointment, Valentín and his companions remained mute and humble to the Ye'kwana's demands, quaking at each stern exclamation and conveying nothing that they had resolved to say prior to arriving in Wayamú. Finally, the Ye'kwana informed me that the Sanema 'don't understand' and cannot make these decisions for themselves, and so had decided on their behalf not to allow an anthropologist to work amongst them after all. After this incident, I was forced to leave the Amazonas region altogether, and, sadly, was never able to return to Ulinuwiña. I decided to start again in Bolívar State in Madaña, a community much more independent from the Ye'kwana and closer to the frontier town of Maripa. By the time I was settled in this region, I was beginning to re-think this dynamic between the Sanema and the Ye'kwana: it seemed as though the Sanema were seeking out the role of subordinates, and what's more, the Ye'kwana were revealing themselves as more generous or impartial than I had thought on previous visits.

During one particular encounter early on in fieldwork, the perplexing relationship became all the more mystifying when we visited a nearby Ye'kwana community for the day. A child in Madaña had been suffering from fever for many weeks and no shaman had been able to cure the ailment, so a small group of us piled into a canoe and made our way to a Ye'kwana-run clinic two hours upstream. As soon as we exited the canoe at the Ye'kwana community, my companions became unusually quiet and austere. Their hush was exaggerated by the lack of continual

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<sup>35</sup> During this meeting they also discussed the possibility of moving further away from the Ye'kwana in a push to be more independent. Given their desire to assert their autonomy, it was paradoxical and significant that they later asked Ye'kwana permission to move away.



laughter, chatter, bellowing shamans and frolicking children normally heard in Madaña. My companions suddenly seemed out of place and worlds apart here, smaller and more fragile even.

The door to the clinic was firmly shut and the community itself offered no signs of life other than the distant hum of a generator on a hill facing the central plaza. My companions huddled, silent and reticent, at the entrance to the stark white structure, waiting for a Ye'kwana person to emerge. Before too long a young woman appeared from nowhere and marched over towards us with a child on her hip. It was clear she knew our group well as they had been neighbours for five years by this point. She approached Santiago, the elder man among us, leaned into him, indignantly shouted something in Ye'kwana and then strode off again. Santiago was left looking ashamed and uneasy, a far cry from his normal confident and playful self. Not long after that, the nurse finally arrived and diligently took a blood sample to test for malaria. She squeezed a drop from the screaming child's earlobe, smeared it onto a glass slide, and told us to wait as the dye would take at least an hour to reveal the cells under the microscope. She casually walked off towards the sound of the generator and left us all to our own devices.

Interestingly, though, my companions did not sit silently or linger in the clinic as I thought they might, they boldly ventured out to explore and observe the goings on of the community, entering houses as they pleased. I accompanied my 'sister' Lucia as she made her way towards the sound of the generator where a group of women were clustered around a roaring fire, performing the hot and arduous task of preparing *mañoco* (roasted cassava flour) at an outdoor open hearth. The women ceaselessly stirred the contents of a huge flat cauldron with large wooden oars, as the immense fire caused red sweaty faces and teary smoke-filled eyes. In the background *bachata* (Dominican dance music) droned on frantically, powered by the choking generator. The image of the small Lucia—with her slight thin child fixed to her hip, her naked chest, unkempt sun-bleached hair, bare feet and frayed skirt—was an arresting contrast to the Ye'kwana women. These neighbouring women were tall and sturdy, they wore clean bright dresses or skirts, jeans, blouses and flip-flops. Their hair was well brushed and often dyed black (considered more beautiful than sun-bleached hair), and some even wore makeup and displayed shiny white-capped teeth.<sup>36</sup> They

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<sup>36</sup> At the time many had been replacing their missing teeth with dental implants.

guzzled fruit squash refreshingly cooled with the help of a nearby freezer that was also powered by the ever-running generator. Lucia gazed at the Ye'kwana women at work as she leaned against one of the building's posts adjacent to the group, her presence unmistakable but unobtrusive. The women seemed to accept her company indifferently, and eventually passed her a cup of *mañoco*, which Lucia munched through, barely acknowledging the gesture.

After a while I became engrossed in a conversation with one of the Ye'kwana women and did not notice that Lucia had disappeared. Later I found her at another woman's house eating spaghetti mutely while the old woman chatted away at her in all but a monologue. Lucia was silent and passive the entire time, not responding even when I asked her a few questions in Sanema to encourage her engagement with the woman. When I explored the community further I ran into many of my Sanema companions, all in different locations, all in some form of meek interaction with the Ye'kwana, and most having received some gift from them—the children with lollipops, and Santiago drinking manioc beer with the Ye'kwana men. I was intrigued that the harsh tone and indifferent demeanour of some of the Ye'kwana was, on this occasion, tempered by tolerance. It seemed as though the Sanema intrusion into their lives was even welcomed by some.

Many hours later, after finally receiving a negative diagnosis of malaria and provided with a stack of pills for fever and diarrhoea, the Sanema departed the community in the same unceremonious hush with which they arrived. No banter, no expression of gratitude, simply a meek and passive acceptance of offerings and a disappearance as stealthy as the arrival. Nevertheless, their demeanour had been a strange mix of reluctance and audacity: entering houses or crowding in doorways whispering, wandering all corners of the community while inspecting and marvelling at the Ye'kwana riches. Just as striking as in Valentín's case above was the fact that these inhabitants of Madaña had been far more introverted among their Ye'kwana neighbours than they ever were in their own community or when in other Sanema communities.

These types of encounters were common and I observed them regularly during fieldwork. Many more incidences transpired in the months that followed in which Ye'kwana women said they 'took pity' (Sp. *tener lástima*) on the Sanema, giving them small gifts, offerings of food, pulling up chairs for them to watch TV in their

houses or attempting to alleviate their ailments with medicine. One Ye'kwana woman told me that the Sanema of the satellite settlement near her community in the Upper Caura would come to visit her on a regular basis. She told me how she regularly invited them into her house, asking them to teach her some phrases in Sanema while she fed them and allowed them to watch her TV. I also observed that sometimes Ye'kwana men invited Sanema men for a beer while in the cities, and would often shake their hands calling them 'our Sanema brothers', stating simply that the reason they are 'poor' (Sp. *humilde*) is because they don't understand or aren't used to the 'civilised' way of life.<sup>37</sup> The Sanema remained taciturn and submissive, but, as was increasingly becoming clear, were anything but forced to interact this way. This is not to suggest that this deference was somehow disingenuous, but rather that it was a mode of action that was reserved for interactions with powerful outsiders.

When the Ye'kwana 'take pity' on the Sanema, this is precisely the emotive response that the Sanema elicit in order to inspire empathy (see similar examples in Allard 2010; Walker 2013a) and thus obtain goods.<sup>38</sup> As described in Chapter 3, this response of 'pity' or 'compassion'—essential to a demand sharing economy—is also enacted in relations between kin among the Sanema. However, as we shall see in a moment, were it not for the central dynamic of inequality that compels the relationship between the Ye'kwana and the Sanema, it might very well be consistent with the demand sharing model. To suggest that the association with the Ye'kwana is analogous to kinship or fictive kinship is to overlook the vital dynamic of deference, of placing oneself intentionally in a position of subordination. Indeed, while Peterson suggests that demanding and deference go hand in hand (1993: 869), I will suggest towards the end of the chapter that demand sharing becomes predation when devoid of mutuality.

As the cases above highlights, an exploration of the drive to obtain resources is perhaps the best analytical frame through which to examine the dynamic of dominance and submission at play here. As was discussed in Chapter 2, it was

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<sup>37</sup> Rather than denoting consanguinity, though, the term 'brother' is often a rhetoric associated with political cooperation and the language of indigenous multiculturalism.

<sup>38</sup> Alternative rationales for Ye'kwana motivations for giving such goods might include the accrual of status by being generous, and the fear witchcraft. One Sanema man explained that, 'the Ye'kwana always say to me that because they scolded me, I threw poison on them (Sp. *echar veneno*) and now they are ill. They always say this to me' (see also Ewart 2013a: 35). Whatever their motives, though, I will not be considering the Ye'kwana perspective in any depth here. My focus is on the perspective of the Sanema, on the receiver and not the giver.

predominantly a desire for steel goods that was the impetus for initial trading between the two groups, followed by a period of raiding, which resulted in a long episode of vengeance attacks (see Appendix 7 for Raul and Nerys' stories of the 'war'). This period of violent altercations ultimately transformed into the more recent relations of dependency, inequality, and the widespread pattern of Sanema satellite communities associated with Ye'kwana settlements. All of these modes of interaction were methods for 'extracting' precious resources from the Ye'kwana, whether violently or peacefully. What the Sanema gave in return was uncertain, and at times often consisted of nothing at all, as was the case when my hosts visited the Ye'kwana clinic. I will be focusing on the more recent dynamics of subjection and clientelism when analysing the relational mode of 'extraction' at the heart of this chapter.

### **A History of Extraction from the Ye'kwana**

On the many occasions that I observed Sanema individuals among the Ye'kwana, rarely did I see them cooperating on equal footing. The descriptions I offered above were the norm: the Sanema would act deferential or disengaged and the Ye'kwana would appear assertive and domineering. The historical relation between the two groups was driven predominantly by the Ye'kwana's monopoly over manufactured items and the Sanema's desire to access them. As such, here we have a case in which the Sanema seem to value the relationship largely for the goods that it brings, rather than seeking out goods as a way of establishing valued relationships. The description of the Sanema-Ye'kwana association offered in Chapter 2 resembled an 'official' account based on historical records and previous ethnographies. These accounts, however, lacked an analysis of the everyday interactions on the ground, particularly from the perspective of the Sanema.

My Sanema hosts rarely offered straightforward exegesis regarding their feelings toward the Ye'kwana and if I were to broach the subject of 'inequality' or the injustice inherent in the relationship, the majority said very little, or offered fleeting comments in hushed tones. In its most elemental language, the relationship with and reaction to the Ye'kwana was described with the word 'fear' (*kili*), as expressed in Iskisioma's words: 'When we arrived at their community, I'd never seen a Ye'kwana person before, so I was afraid. We didn't know who the Ye'kwana were, that they even existed. They were very large with big legs.' Jesus also explained that, 'When I

first came to Maripa there were many Ye'kwana and *criollos*. I was afraid because I didn't understand the Ye'kwana language and didn't speak Spanish, that was why I was afraid.' Nevertheless, this use of the term 'fear' should not necessarily be interpreted only as a sense of apprehension, dread or suspicion, but instead adheres more closely to the concept of fear-shame that defines affinal relationships (see Chapter 6). In a sense, then, there is a degree to which this relationship could be deemed analogous to potential affinity (Viveiros de Castro 2001), and could indeed be an interesting contribution to our understanding the concept of potential affinity and its relationship to dependence on others. However, real affinity with the Ye'kwana is never fully realised (and indeed outwardly rejected). Instead, fear-shame is a temporary affective register utilised in order to procure goods rather than wives.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the majority of the Sanema settlements throughout Venezuela are associated with a Ye'kwana community, and have been called 'satellite' communities by Colchester (1982: 107, 347-9). As Colchester observed in the late 1970s, the Ye'kwana set 'chores' for their affiliated Sanema settlements, which included collecting thatch, constructing houses, felling gardens and the portage of goods on long journeys. But methods of recompense, from Colchester's perspective, often seemed unjust:

The Yekuana are fully aware of the exploitative nature of this relationship and were very reluctant to permit me to discuss the subject or interact with the Sanema themselves. The Yekuana claimed that they paid the Sanema 10 Bolivars daily<sup>39</sup> for their labour but in fact they make no financial payments to the Sanema at all, paying for the labour exclusively in goods (Colchester 1982: 348-9).

We shall question in a moment whether the Sanema perceive payment in goods as unjust, but it is certainly noteworthy that Colchester portrays the Ye'kwana as attempting to conceal the real remuneration for Sanema labour.

Some have argued that antagonism and mutual distrust between the Sanema and the Ye'kwana was reinforced by the Ye'kwana belief in their own superior civilised status in relation to the Sanema whom, according to Ramos (1979: 20), they treat as sub-human (see also Colchester 1982: 106; Guss 1989: 15; and the Ye'kwana Myth of the Sanema in Appendix 8). And yet, the Sanema are not entirely impartial in their

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<sup>39</sup> During this time (1979), 10 Bolívar's would have been approximately £1.

estimation of Ye'kwana moral behaviour, scorning their consumption of dangerous beings such as large worms (*Sa. jolia mökökö*), their irritability, and their improper customs; as one woman revealed to me:

The Ye'kwana are different [*Sa. tikotö*], their culture is apart. The Ye'kwana woman, when she menstruates, she does it in a different way to the Sanema. What the Sanema do is better. The Ye'kwana bathe in the water and if the snake eats her blood she will become his wife. The man [the snake] comes where the woman is and then she gets ill. That's what happens to Ye'kwana women.

Colchester noted that the Sanema's feelings toward the Ye'kwana were a mixture of disdain and admiration: 'The Sanema despise the Yekuana for their overbearing, unsympathetic, humourless character yet they contradictorily endow the Yekuana with great respect: a respect which though based on the Yekuana's physical dominance, is extended into the realms of knowledge also' (Colchester 1982: 104-5). Ramos also mentions that the Sanema judge the Ye'kwana 'as being pompous and presumptuous, incest lovers and *caxiri* [manioc beer] drinkers, who exploit them and bother their women' (Ramos 1979: 6).

The Ye'kwana's attitude towards the Sanema's 'uncivilised' status involved more than mere disdain from afar, and strategies of familial assimilation—the temporary fostering of Sanema children—reveal an association between the two groups that is more convivial than that between patron and client. Significant in this association was the fact that the Ye'kwana took an active role in 'civilising' the Sanema, an undertaking that stemmed from their desire to increase Sanema political cohesiveness and thereby organise them into a more effective and reliable workforce (Colchester 1982: 106). The Ye'kwana saw this as an opportunity to obtain household help in the short term but also as a long-term strategy of raising a generation of Sanema who learn and disseminate Ye'kwana ideologies and interests. Neither approach was successful, Colchester argues, because imposed roles were rarely accepted in Sanema communities (1982: 107).

Nevertheless, from the perspective of the Sanema, there were numerous advantages to establishing long-term associations with the Ye'kwana. Many Sanema saw the fostering of their children as opportunities for them to attend school and later

return to their Sanema communities with the knowledge and skills obtained.<sup>40</sup> These were chances to learn the ways and language of powerful others, as well as establish a life-long connection which may result in future benefits and access to precious goods. Narratives often placed the Ye'kwana in the role of a 'father' or 'father-figure' in descriptions of bestowal of gifts, the teaching of new skills, travelling together on long trips from a young age, and even stories of Ye'kwana adoptive fathers obliged to help Sanema later in life. Silverio's story of the founding of Maduaña describes how he took advantage of a prior relationship he had had with a Ye'kwana man in his youth, described in Appendix 3. In this case, Silverio entreats the Ye'kwana man by stating that 'you were like my father', and yet, this case demonstrates how the use of the term 'father' is also a strategy for evoking empathy, rather than necessarily an indication of perceived or fictive kinship relations.

The relationship cannot be viewed in simply paternalistic terms, particularly if we consider the degree of deference that the Sanema exhibit towards the Ye'kwana (which is not exhibited towards actual fathers). Often the Ye'kwana tended to place Sanema men in a feminised role, assigning activities associated with women such as collecting water, taking care of the children, harvesting and processing manioc, and cooking.<sup>41</sup> During an earlier trip to the Caura in 2008, in which I spent the majority of my time in Ye'kwana communities working on a basket-weaving project, my Ye'kwana host family had an elusive young teenager, Orlando, residing at the house whose relationship to the others at the time I could not place. He was often solitary, seemed more introverted than the others, and always hard at work doing chores of collecting water and firewood, and looking after the young children. He was ordered to do my cooking for me and carry my bags to and from the port. The few evenings he wasn't working, I would see him silently sitting with the Ye'kwana girls at the edges of the community, watching the boys play football.

It was only years later when I saw him again in a Sanema encampment in Maripa, now self-assured and talkative, that I realised he was in fact a Sanema youth and that he had been going to school in the Ye'kwana community while under the guardianship of the family with whom I had been staying. Cultural models of feminisation become embodied by the Sanema on a number of other levels too,

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<sup>40</sup> At the time, Ye'kwana communities were the only ones that had government schools.

<sup>41</sup> They are also treated as pets, made to sleep on the outside porches of houses where the dogs sleep (Colchester 1982: 251; see also Ramos 1995: 29).

because—like women—they speak less Spanish, are less politically active, are unfamiliar with the world of the *criollos*, and less formally educated than the Ye'kwana. This dynamic between the two groups was certainly not lost on my Sanema hosts. During a meeting in Ulinuwiña, Valentín emphasised his aggravation over the Ye'kwana's overbearing paternalism by stating that Sanema men are strong adult male humans, and should not be doing the work of women:

We are not children! We have to work hard like men, not in the work that the Ye'kwana assign to us. We're not old, we are strong! We have to make our own community. We have to live apart from the Ye'kwana. We are people too!

It is indeed this close proximity that defines the relationship between the two groups. At least three times during my fieldwork I saw that large Sanema encampments had all of a sudden appeared within Ye'kwana communities. According to the Ye'kwana, these Sanema had arrived unprompted, usually in order obtain goods. In two of the cases whole communities had migrated to Ye'kwana settlements because they had 'run out of manioc in their gardens', as it was described. Most of the people from whom I recorded life histories told stories of a life alongside the Ye'kwana, either in settlements within Ye'kwana communities or in satellite communities a short walk away. Many who had been inhabitants of satellite communities spoke of both affection and continued antagonism in their relations with the Ye'kwana. In some stories, Sanema individuals told me that they helped with the productive activities of the Ye'kwana community, but that they were often ordered to leave the area and establish a new settlement elsewhere. Outbursts of irritation on the part of the Ye'kwana were described as common occurrences, which I shall return to below.

Even though historical accounts indicate that the satellite community structure that followed the 'war' in the 1930s (see pages 55-56) was 'forced' upon the Sanema as a form of control, conversations with my Sanema associates revealed something quite different. Firstly, most of my interlocutors stated that they 'looked for' a Ye'kwana community where they could set up camp briefly, as Coromoto describes:

Our group used to travel wherever we wanted in the forest. One man went ahead one day and discovered a Ye'kwana community. When he returned he said 'there are Ye'kwana there' and so my parents responded 'let's go



there and see what they have.’ We thought they would be angry at first but they were friendly. We asked for land to make our house and we stayed there for three years.

Accounts vary greatly. Some described amiable and ‘family-like’ relations with the Ye’kwana, others stated they lived nearby but with little interaction, while others recounted that the Ye’kwana ordered them around, were always ‘angry’, beat them, or shouted at them. In all cases, however, the Sanema chose when to live there and, equally, when to move away. As Iskisioma described it when recounting her movements as a youth: ‘The Ye’kwana gave us a garden and a lot of yucca but because there were many of us, the yucca ran out quickly, so we said, “let’s leave now and return to where we were.”’

The stories of the Sanema’s willingness and desire to live near the Ye’kwana were often expressed in terms of opportunities, and most importantly, the chance to acquire resources and more often than not they were successful in their pursuit. In some accounts they obtained pots, hammocks, beads, clothes and machetes, while in other cases they were given only yucca to eat. Others emphasised their acquisition of important new skills such as weaving *sebućáns* (yucca straining baskets) or producing manioc beer. Juan illustrated the importance of goods procurement when I questioned why he decided to live near the Ye’kwana. With wide excited eyes and large hand gestures, he bellowed, ‘Oooh, they gave us soooo many things!’ On another occasion, a woman in Maduaña described how her family lived in a Ye’kwana household during a period of her childhood. She recounted how her father would describe them as ‘good people because they gave us pots, hammocks and clothes’ even though these same Ye’kwana would ‘beat them with poles’. When they decided they had had enough, however, they simply moved away.

The Sanema of Ulinuwiña, who seemed so acutely but inexplicably deferential toward the Ye’kwana in the opening vignette, also emphasised their desire to cultivate their close proximity to the Ye’kwana in order to access important resources. During one of their meetings they discussed the possibility of moving away and founding a different community independent of Ye’kwana influence, as described in the quote above. However, after a long discussion on the subject, the elders maintained that, ‘If we have our own community apart from the Ye’kwana we won’t have medicine, we won’t have pots, we wont have anything!’ And so it was concluded that they should stay where they were for the time being.

As we can see, then, Sanema contact with Ye'kwana throughout history has not always been premised on acts of coercion or 'capture' (on Amazonian capture and slavery see Santos-Granero 2009d). Quite the contrary, many Sanema life histories recount continual movement from place to place, often stopping at Ye'kwana communities for several months in order to obtain goods until they felt they had had enough, before moving on, often to another satellite community for a period. It is for this same reason that Jackson (1983) was hesitant with the term 'slavery' to describe the Makú submission to the Tukano, as she believed that they could not be coerced to stay in their positions when not willing. Recognising that they more often fit the role of 'day labourers' (Koch-Grünberg 1995 [1909]: 236), voluntarily spending some months working but disappearing at will during other times of the year, several authors described the relationship between the Makú and the Tukano as one of symbiosis (Goldman 1963: 5; Hugh-Jones 1988: 25; Jackson 1983; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976: 18).

I have been arguing thus far that the motivation for intimate but unequal relations with the Ye'kwana is driven by the Sanema desire for difficult to obtain, but essential, manufactured goods. Yet, the Sanema are not engaging in on-going systems of reciprocity or mutuality as one might expect, but rather seem to be 'extracting' resources. Until recently, they themselves did not possess any goods to offer in return. What the Ye'kwana obtained from them, if anything, was labour, and even the guarantee of this was dubious, as I shall demonstrate below. In this next section, we will see that this relationship of dependency and submission might be seen as premised on an absence of reciprocity.

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**Figure 15: Ye'kwana man sharing roasted frog with a Sanema man**

### **Nonreciprocal Relations**

One of my first introductions to a Sanema community was while in the company of a Ye'kwana woman back in 2008. After scolding a Sanema man for throwing a plastic bottle into the river, she brazenly walked me around the community to observe the Sanema going about their daily lives. 'You see what they are doing there', she gestured towards one household hard at work processing manioc. 'They learned that from us. They copy everything we do.' She continued, 'in the past they didn't have anything. Everything they have they got from us.' While she stressed that it was important to help these people, she also muttered that they always 'beg' her for things and continually request lifts to Maripa because they had no canoes or motors of their own. 'Do they give anything in return?' I asked. 'Nothing!' she replied with discernable surprise that I should even ask, 'They don't *have* anything!'<sup>42</sup>

In terms of goods, I can confidently say that rarely, if ever, have I seen the Sanema offering things to the Ye'kwana. At times the Ye'kwana might arrive in a Sanema settlement following a successful peccary hunt and demand a leg to take on

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<sup>42</sup> As one of my Sanema acquaintances later explained: the reason the Ye'kwana became so powerful was because 'they got everything, including all the jobs as nurses and teachers'. See also Chapter 3, pages 80-82.

their journey, which the Sanema cannot refuse; but gifts were never offered unprompted, nor in response to gifts given. The only thing Ye'kwana obtained from the Sanema was labour, and they did so only with a great deal of effort.

As suggested earlier, this inability to refuse requests and the lack of an expectation for return could be morally premised on the principle of demand sharing (see Bird-David 1990). Rival argues that demand sharing is the essence of autonomy, because giving and receiving within this system does not bind one to reciprocate at a later date. In this way, 'Nonreciprocal relations produce a collectivity ... in which givers never become creditors, nor receivers debtors' (2002: 104). If sharing amongst kin facilitates egalitarian principles in this way, then what of relations of long-term asymmetry with non-kin?

We know that exchange relations with non-kin are based on reciprocity (see page 77), which is thought to maintain equality between participants, but this raises questions about the role of labour. One might argue that the Sanema do provide a return for the objects they acquire from the Ye'kwana in the form of labour. However, from the perspective of the Sanema, the provision of labour was not as straightforward a return as is a gift because they cannot be actively coerced or made to commit to that labour. I say this because my observations of the labour relations between the Ye'kwana and the Sanema invariably seemed strained, as alluded to above. Many Ye'kwana described the Sanema as 'lazy', refusing to work, and sometimes disappearing or 'escaping' without a word before tasks had been completed. Often the Sanema even packed up camp and departed for good. I observed on a number of occasions the Sanema's reluctance to engage in labour with the Ye'kwana or *criollos*, often only deigning to shift after being barked at or with the direct delivery of a valued object as incentive. It seems that the Sanema do not feel obliged to work in return for a gift and in this way do not see such labour as a long-term strategy for continual reciprocity, mutuality or of some form of bondage. As was mentioned earlier, the Sanema could not be coerced by the Ye'kwana despite the latter's attempts at imposing strategies to improve cohesiveness (Colchester 1982: 107). Hence, the Sanema seemed far more difficult to control than previous authors had portrayed. They instead possessed a certain degree of power.

It has been argued in a number of sources that in Amerindian societies power over one's own labour is paramount to the autonomous self (Clastres 1987: 168-9; Overing 1983: 331; 2003: 307; Santos Granero 1986: 664). Labour can only be

compelled through leading by example or persuasion, never by coercion, as to do so is seen as highly distasteful (see Brown 1993). Certainly the autonomous self is integral to Sanema personhood too, emphasised in the closing phrase ‘I’m just like that’ (*Sa. ina sa kuaō*, Sp. *soy así*). People regularly tack this phrase to the end of personal stories or accounts to emphasise their individual personalities and perspectives, and the reasoning behind their choices. As we shall see in later chapters, certain personalities do foment conflicts more than others, and these individuals are the source of a great deal of gossip. Nevertheless, while such gossip helps to articulate moral principles about acceptable behaviour, it does not create coercive or restrictive rules. Rarely do people impose on others a particular way to behave; instead, when describing an individual’s flawed behaviour, many simply say that ‘he/she is just like that’. In this way, individuals can never be forced to do something or act in a particular way, and in fact regularly reject their obligations.

The regularity with which sons-in-law would eschew their bride service responsibilities, much to the frustration of their parents-in-law, led me to question the nature of indebtedness among the Sanema, particularly since the affinal role was portrayed in most literature as morally fixed and uncontested (e.g. Rivière 1984). In the same way, indebtedness and the obligation to remain at the service of others would not be an adequate account of Sanema relations with the Ye’kwana. The Sanema depart when they wish and usually partake in labour activities at their whim. Therefore, this often lamented bond of ‘slavery’ proclaimed by many outsiders seems to be a misinterpretation of the Ye’kwana/Sanema relationship. Indeed, on occasion I would discuss with Marco and my research assistants their relationship with the Ye’kwana, querying their apparent disinterest in ‘fairness’ and ‘equality’ in these cases. They responded with uncertain nods, but far from convincing ones, and actually with more an air of confusion at my rants. I was, I see now, blinded by my preoccupation with equal forms of exchange and its accompanying themes of self-determination and equal rights. The cases of dominance and subjection that I was witnessing in my field context, albeit against the grain for my sensibilities, were essential to the Sanema’s capacity to capture goods and reject reciprocity. This particular way of procuring goods, I would like to suggest, offers a new perspective on predation.

### **A New Perspective on Predation**

Writing on debt-peonage among the Ashéninka of Peru, Killick (2011) illustrates how relations of debt are pursued by those formerly seen to be oppressed and coerced by their *patrones* (traders). He shows us how Ashéninka willingly and enthusiastically enter into relations of debt in order to create an on-going dynamic of delayed and balanced exchange. He also notes that the Ashéninka demonstrate considerable power within the relationship because they threaten to ‘disappear’ without notice if the *patrones* do not instil sufficient trust (see also Killick 2008b: 320; Viveiros de Castro 2011: 5). Ultimately, then, while traders ‘gain power from their relative wealth and connections to the economic and social world beyond the river, ... indigenous people can, in turn, use their mobility, knowledge of the local environment, and ability to provide for their own subsistence needs to negotiate the economic, social, and moral terms of relationships’ (Killick 2011: 359). What we are seeing among the Sanema is similar, and yet while they seek similar relations of dependence, a delayed and balanced exchange is absent in their case. I argue that their submissive demeanour enables the mobility that Killick refers to because by being subservient they are not engaging as equals and hence are not ‘bound’ to the relationship in the same way. Their obligation to reciprocate as equals in delayed exchange is subverted.

On analysing the moral principles of economic relations, Graeber (2001: 219-221) notes that what is unique about reciprocity (as opposed to ‘communism’ or ‘hierarchy’, see also Graeber 2012: 94-113) is the fact that it can, in theory, be cancelled out or ‘closed off’. By this he means that one is able to negate on-going ties and maintain an element of freedom if one wishes to do so. Given that gift economies are continually creating shifting ‘inferiorities’, they are defined not by equality *per se*, but by a ‘*fragile, competitive equality between actors*’ (2001: 221, emphasis added). In the Sanema case, though, ‘inferiority’ is intentional and prior to the relationship of exchange, not the result of it. Indeed, it is their subordinate position that gives them freedom. Returning to the reconceptualization of freedom that authors such as Ferguson (2013) and Mahmood (2004) propose, the Sanema’s dependency on the Ye’kwana should not be understood as indifference to freedom but, on the contrary, as a desire for autonomy, and an independence from reciprocity, both of which are accomplished through voluntary subjection.

Some might assume that cases of inequality between groups in Amazonia are further examples of predation on the part of the domineering group (see for example,

Fausto 1999), but I believe that such an interpretation might be too simplified when considering that these relationships are deliberately pursued by the subordinate group, as often seems to be the case. Customary leadership practices in Sanema societies require that those in positions of power must redistribute their wealth in order to be seen as generous (see other examples in Clastres 1987: 207; Brightman 2010: 139). In this sense, the location of power, as expressed through wealth, is often inverted because Sanema society extracts resources from those with high status. It is not the possession of goods that bestows prestige, but the act of re-distributing and surrendering such goods. With this in mind, it might be the case that the Sanema expect goods from the powerful Ye'kwana, because it is seen as their duty to give away their belongings. Moreover, the extraction of goods through aggressive means has been observed by Colchester as composing an essential mode of exchange among the Sanema:

On the one hand the Sanema consider it virtuous to be very generous with their goods and it is manifestly considered the attribute of a good 'Kaikana' [community leader] to dispense freely of his possessions ..., while on the other hand the Sanema also see in an individual's ability to force a gift from another an expression of his dominance and fierceness ('waitili') (Colchester 1982: 359).

The Sanema's rejection of reciprocity or balanced exchange with the Ye'kwana, coupled with the value of autonomy, and the practice of 'forcing' a gift from another, leads one to question who the 'predators' really are in this case, and to re-think the concept of predation more broadly. In Descola's book *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), he presents the Amazonian cosmos as a 'meta-system' of finite and circulating substances and souls which must continually be balanced. Two of the primary ways to maintain this balance of vitality is through reciprocity or predation. He describes predation as a mode of relation premised on the deliberate rejection or negation of peaceful exchange with others (Descola 1992: 116). In other words, predation is a way of obtaining life-force without incurring the obligation of reciprocity, and includes phenomena such as the capture of slaves, hunting, and even 'the cunning warfare against the cannibalistic manioc' (Descola 2013: 343).<sup>43</sup> Given

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<sup>43</sup> In his book, however, Descola lays out six relational modes in two groups. One group includes exchange, predation and gift—characterised by 'reversible relations between terms that are similar'. The other group includes production, protection and

that Descola describes predation as ‘reversible’ (2013: 311), a ‘parasitic’ (see Serres 2007) extraction of goods such as the one presented here could thus be understood as a new modality that has not yet been described by Descola, namely the rejection of exchange through a non-reversible submissive countenance.<sup>44</sup>

What is important here is the notion that predation is an acute effort to incorporate the material possessions, substances and identities of others while at the same time rejecting customary modes of reciprocity and affinal obligations. However, not only has the perspective of the captured or ‘subordinate’ group been neglected from many accounts of predation, but often the captors are depicted as predators and the captured as powerless. It is clear from the descriptions above, however, that the Sanema are far from powerless in their interactions with the Ye’kwana. Not only do they possess agency in the relationship, but they also continue to maintain their social structure and kin ties. Hence, they are not ‘ripped from their context’ (Graeber 2012: 168), they do not undergo a ‘social death’ (Patterson 1990), nor do they relinquish any prior rights and obligations, as was the case with captured slaves in Amazonia (see Santos-Granero 2009d: Chapter 2). If we see deference as a way to capture goods, much like Descola’s descriptions of capturing persons and game animals, then it may also be a way for men to reassert their masculinity, given that their ability to ‘hunt’ goods from the Ye’kwana corresponds to hunting resources from the forest. Indeed, the genre of delightfully recounting successful hunts, listing the animals caught, and the prowess with which one was able to master the terrain was not dissimilar from the proudly narrated stories of inveigling goods from the Ye’kwana. Either mode of obtaining goods—through *waitili* (fearlessness) or through submission—equally bestows the receiver with status among peers, given that in both cases possessions are the ultimate reward, which can then be given to kin as gestures of compassion.

While the general presumption is that egalitarianism facilitates freedom and autonomy (see Overing 1989: 88-90), I would like to suggest that in the case of the Sanema, it is actually inequality or the act of wilful submission that enables freedom and autonomy. Seeking out subordinate relations assures that equal reciprocity is not a

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transmission—characterised by ‘univocal relations that are founded upon connections between un-equivalent terms’ (2013: 311).

<sup>44</sup> Predation is in fact similar to Sahlins’ notion of ‘negative reciprocity’ which ‘is an attempt to get something for nothing with impunity’ (1972: 195). The more distant the relatedness, he argues, the more likely one will engage in this mode of reciprocity.



continued duty, and as such one is absolved of long-term responsibilities of recurrent exchange. In other words, in such relationships the Sanema are able to take but are not obliged to give in return due to their subordinate position as (temporary) dependents. Their deference enabled them to disassociate themselves whenever they chose, as was often the case when the Sanema decided abruptly to leave a satellite community and abandon their labour obligations to the Ye'kwana. This would not be possible in relations of equality and reciprocity, as the desire to restore equilibrium in exchange acts bind one to long-term relations of reciprocity. Indeed, antagonisms are produced when cycles of equal reciprocity are broken, explaining why some Ye'kwana became frustrated when the Sanema did not uphold their role as labourers.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter situated the topic of material morality within a wider context of goods procurement through long-term trade relations with the neighbouring Ye'kwana. It also couched this context in terms of Sanema moral schemas of dependency and freedom, while striving to understand such notions in a new light. Historical relations between the two groups have continually been driven by the desire for goods on the part of the Sanema and the need for labour on the part of the Ye'kwana. Despite the current climate of peaceful co-existence, an underlying inequality exists. I have argued that this inequality is actively pursued on the part of the Sanema as a way of 'extracting' resources from their Ye'kwana neighbours while at the same time rejecting any long-term relations of reciprocity and equality. This relationship, I argued, can be seen as a new view on predation.

Consequently, when considering the 'spirit' of the gift—that is, the obligation to return (Mauss 1990)—it is important to ask what this 'spirit' consists of (see Descola 2012: 450-2). While this '*hau*' may exist in Polynesia, one could argue that the mechanisms that produce an obligation to reciprocate may not function in the same way in Amazonia. The emphasis on the autonomous self in this region may allow one to shun reciprocity if one chooses, to detach from a relationship at any point, or to decline some long-term responsibilities. The fact that the Sanema take on a position of apparent subordination ensures that this approach is successful: the 'strings' are established and controlled by the Sanema because, as Bonilla observes among the Paumari, 'By placing themselves in the weaker position [they] oblige their

interlocutors to assume the role of providers of material and symbolic goods' (Bonilla 2013: 247).

This case of extraction without reciprocity is compelling for the Amazonian context because it enables a view of predation without the underlying violence that has often been associated with it. Accordingly, predation in the modern context can be a peaceful and in some ways cooperative act. After the war with the Ye'kwana, raiding was no longer plausible. This, along with increased interaction with state entities which enforce a logic of multiculturalism, peace and cooperation, has forced the Sanema to adapt their predatory acts in a new and creative way, namely through a submissive demeanour. This new dynamic enabled them to continue extracting resources but now in a peaceful manner. Divergent in many ways, then, to our Western notion that equality generates autonomy and freedom, for the Sanema subordination and inequality secures freedom. In such relations, one is not bound by reciprocity and the obligation towards continual return—the 'strings' inherent in the gift. In sum, the procurement of goods is deeply intertwined with predatory notions of capture while at the same time maintaining autonomy and freedom. This case has demonstrated that the pursuit of material things is a highly creative and ethical enterprise.

**PART TWO:**  
**Four Valuable Things**

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Kin as Adornments to the Self:

#### Beads as Kinship

It was late in the day when I arrived at the port of Maduaña after a brief trip to Maripa, and the sun was embarking on its daily crimson descent. The usual noises of this hour—the sound of men playing football and women cheering them on—were strikingly, almost eerily, absent. I had arrived to a decidedly more hushed community, during a period in which many men were away, either in Maripa searching for petrol and buying supplies, or working long nights clandestinely portaging barrels to the top of the waterfall. Some women would accompany their husbands on such journeys, but the majority would remain in Maduaña, looking after the children and the gardens while the men were away. As I approached the house of my host family, I could see that all the women were there, draped in their hammocks and assiduously performing their beadwork, a familiar sight at this time of day. A household without young men was an unusual sight, but the women seemed relaxed and satisfied.

I had, upon request, again brought more glass beads (Sa. *masö lökö*) for them and, true to form, they called out *aitaikööö* (great!) in response. They held their new acquisitions against their former beads to check the compatibility in hue, deciding whether to add them to their meandering bead threads. In their contentment, they ordered me to repeat the phrase, ‘I am a woman, that’s why I bring beads’, and their satisfaction in my response was confirmed with a drawn out and throaty ‘*awaeeeeeei!*’ and ‘*pitölita!*’—‘Yes, that’s right!’

I watched the women in the fading light as they gently swayed in their hammocks, stringing their beads onto long strands. They laughed when I asked if they were sad that their men were not there, stressing that it was good because the money that they earned enabled them to buy the ‘things they want’ such as pots, clothes and more beads. The men who were working away endeavoured to procure the goods that their wives and families desired, and so increasingly spent time away engaging in wage labour and informal mining. The women assured me that they were happy eating the fish that they caught, and the occasional donation of meat that some of the remaining elder men would intermittently hunt. It was clear also that women had an

important role in this context, and incidentally it too related to beads. Beads were the quintessential *matitö* of women and were immensely desired by them, though not merely for personal aesthetic purposes, they were procured to protect and nurture kin. By adorning kin with the bead collars that they were threading, women created beautiful and ‘proper’ people.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, the concept of kinship among the Sanema is somewhat elusive, and thus requires an alternative lens from which to grasp its significance in everyday life. Overing has noted that, ‘our own very weak language of “kinship”’ (1985a: 23) can cause us to misunderstand indigenous theories and experiences of the concept. With this in mind, I shall follow Henare *et al*’s heuristic project of ‘thinking through things’ to examine beads as a way of exploring at times the reified and evasive concept of ‘kinship’ (see Schneider 1984).

Following on from the critique of the body-centric mode of analysis in Amazonia that was outlined in Chapter 1, I begin this chapter with the suggestion that bodies are placeholders that, without beads, become insignificant and indeed immoral. It is not the bodies themselves that are the objects with which one articulates kinship, but rather the extrinsic components of adornments that are bestowed by kin. Bodies serve chiefly as platforms on which to display material manifestations of moral actions. This alternative outlook on the body will enable me to explore what is particular about the characteristics of beads that grants them tremendous value—specifically their tiny size, vibrant colours and shininess—and what significance this holds for the Sanema. Drawing on Ewart’s notion that beads “‘materialise’ social relations’ (2012: 177, original emphasis), the idea that morality is realised through the material affordances of beads will become apparent.

In this way, the chapter illustrates that relatedness is manifest in daily exchanges and uses of beads, but also that the value of beads emerges from their properties, in particular their twofold material capacity to be both parts and whole. These tiny glass seed beads are repeatedly entered into processes of stringing and re-stringing as kin structures shift through time, a process that simultaneously indexes a nexus of powerful and caring people: kin, forefathers and primordial ancestors. In what follows, I will explore what it means to be beautiful and proper and what gives beauty its value beyond aesthetics; for beads, this relates specifically to their affordances, which enable a visual indexicality of kin. Many of these ideas are

embedded in non-discursive techniques rather than discursive practices, but as I will demonstrate, these concepts that emerge from the material world are tangible and salient lived realities.

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**Figure 16: Woman wearing beads**

### **Kinning the Absential Body**

Following on from my appeal to explore non-corporeal understandings of personhood and sociality, I shall here offer an alternative discussion on the nature and purposes of bodies that remain faithful to the exegeses of my interlocutors. I shall expound Sanema notions of bodiliness (Turner 2009), as well as critically reflect on the literature on corporeality that may shed further light on the matter.

Let us first recall the view that consubstantiality is the dominant mode of kinning,<sup>45</sup> or ‘intersubjectivity’ in Amazonia. In this approach it is argued that bodies are not givens, but are constructed through a lifetime of substance sharing and convivial acts (see, among others, Bonilla 2009; Conklin and Morgan 1996; Gow 1991, 2000; Grotti 2007; McCallum 1996; Santos-Granero 2009a; Seeger 1979; Stang 2009; Vilaça 2007; Vilaça and Wright 2009). In this way, bodies are socially

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<sup>45</sup> I use the term ‘kinning’ here in the more generic sense of the term coined by Howell (2006) that describes the self-consciously produced relations of kinship through idioms and actions.

produced through food sharing, exchange of bodily fluids, residence and rituals, so that anyone, even ‘others’ and enemies, may become kin through cohabitation and care (see e.g. Fausto 2002; Vilaça 2002). With this depiction, bodies are represented as mutable, malleable and permeable so that they will allow for this process of kinning. However, this malleability also makes them ‘chronically unstable’ (Vilaça 2005), which means they can be exposed to illness and harmful transformations. However, as I have already mentioned, the emphasis on transforming corporeal forms has tended to overshadow alternative perspectives on the Amazonian body and on relatedness.

According to Kenneth Taylor (1979: 213), the Sanema do have a term for transformation—*išwanižo*—which describes the primordial transformation from humanoid bodies to animals. It also refers to illness, which acts as a form of ‘penalty’ when one fails to observe food prohibitions (Sa. *waiu*). Transformations are also described as ‘becoming dehumanised’, tangled or ‘snarled’, as vengeful animal spirits force the victim to transform into their equivalent. For example, one might come out in a rash that resembles the animal’s piebald markings, or develop a ‘twisted wrist’ like that of a sloth. However, Taylor also proposes that ‘the *išwanižo* transformation is not just a matter of “turning into” an animal, but rather one of the undesirable loss of a preferred condition’ (1979: 213), specifically as a consequence of improper behaviour. He seems to be suggesting that inhumane behaviour causes an in-human plight, or that one becomes as much morally akin to animals as physically in such circumstances. This is a notion I shall return to in Chapter 8.

When my Sanema hosts described illness, they did so not precisely in terms of corporeal transformation, but with descriptions of animal spirits taking revenge according to their malicious whims, whether by standing on chests to cause shortness of breath, or exacting pain in the lower back, neither case being entirely analogous to transformation. Feliciano, for instance, warned me that cows are one of the most dangerous animals to consume, as their spirits can attack even healthy adults. His description, though, was not one of physicality, but a matter of verbalising the cow’s thoughts, as he put it, ‘crying and shouting just like a cow, ooooooaaaa!’ before promptly dying. Likewise, shamans, who are widely portrayed in Amazonian literature as being experts in metaphysical and physiological metamorphosis (see Praet 2009; Townsley 1993), convey something different among the Sanema. The

*jikula* spirit allies are said to take up residence in the shaman's chest, also referred to as the seat of thought. In this sense, the *jikula* inhabit the mind, but little is said of their transforming the flesh of the body.

If we were to pursue this tack—of transformation of the soul rather than the body—of course, we must bear in mind the common hypothesis that souls are constitutive of bodies, and that the two cannot be separated: a transformation of the soul concomitantly implies a transformation of the body. And yet, for the Sanema, this might too be an oversimplification. Each Sanema person has a soul that is entirely external to the self—a *nonosia* (shadow soul)—which is a discrete animal (often an eagle for men and a weasel for women) living their distinct but lateral lives far away in another part of the forest. Another spirit component of the self is the spirit of vengeance—*okola*—which, as Colchester (1982: 449) describes it, impels a movement outside of the body in order to avenge illusory sorcerers. Journeying through dreams is also understood as souls wandering ‘outside’ of the body. To say, then, that bodies and souls are inextricably linked might not do justice to the articulations and discursive style of the Sanema. So what is meant by the term commonly employed in the literature as ‘transformation’?

Understanding *išwanižo* (transformation/transgression) in context, I suggest, reveals that actual bodily transformation, as it occurred in the time of the mythological ancestors, no longer transpires in the present day. Consider a Yanomami man's reflection on the myth of ‘The Fall of the Sky’, presented as a commentary in Wilbert and Simoneau's collection of Yanoama mythology:

When Omamë did not yet exist and the world was not yet in order the people kept transforming into animals. After falling he became inspired and turned the chaos of the forest into order; he rearranged it ... When Omamë came into being and began to arrange the forest we stopped transforming, as can be seen. Omamë caused the people to become Yanomami; he made the world stop transforming; he put an end to the transformations. He made the Yanomam speak the way we speak today; he made the people stop becoming others. Afterwards he left, having finished creating us as Yanomam. The way you foreigners make photographs. When he was not yet there the people were very ignorant. The forest was unstable, and the people were constantly changing form (Wilbert and Simoneau 1990: 42-43).



This Yanomami individual explains how, in the myth, the culture hero Omamë (Sa. Omawö) put an end to continuous transformation by collapsing the sky and creating stabilisation among all life-force in the cosmos, a fixity equivalent to the photographs of the whites. The inception of humanity, culture and language relied on this moment of radical stasis.<sup>46</sup> The man narrating this passage was astutely distinguishing between the time of the mythical ancestors—a time of transformation, instability and chaos—and the present day, in which there is differentiation amidst stability.

As we shall see in more detail in the Chapter 6, human bodies are said to be ‘soft’ (Sa. *ipöti*), ‘like a banana, not a rock’, accounting for their vulnerable form and the reason that they ‘die quickly’ (see The Myth of the Origin of The Sanema in Appendix 6). While men’s knowledge of shamanism and hunting causes them to be ‘firm’, *amatosi* (Colchester 1982: 471), women are generally described as ‘soft’, as the pastor of Maduaña stated during one of his sermons: ‘Adam was hard and made of bones. He took a piece of his meat from between his ribs and made Eve, so this is why women are a little bit softer than men.’ The softness of women is also associated with their production of cassava gruel (Sa. *nasiakoi*) and manioc beer (Sa. *amitu*) both of which are considered to be liquid and soft. In this sense, vulnerability comes from a lack of density or ‘softness’ inherent in the human body, rather than a propensity to transmute into an alter being.

Many of my Sanema interlocutors might agree with the Yanomami statement above that ‘we stopped transforming, as you can see.’ While some men boasted of ‘making their children grow with the meat they hunt’, bodies were rarely discussed directly, and certainly not as transforming. The notion that bodies developed and changed over time was related to the idea of growth and maturity (Sa. *pala todisi*), or becoming ‘ripe’ (Sa. *tate*), ‘wary’ (Sa. *jadautö*, as in knowledgeable) or ‘true’ (Sa. *sai*). The concepts were related to the maturation of plants or fruits rather than voluntary metamorphosis or ‘shape-shifting’ (Praet 2005). The Sanema might state that someone had ‘developed fat skin’ if they spent a lot of time in the cities on bureaucratic errands, but they rarely spoke of bodies ‘becoming other’. Bodies were more often referred to in terms of the need to create and be beautiful (Sa. *toita*) persons, as markers of nurture. So integral was this concept that if bodies were not

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<sup>46</sup> This moral precedence of completeness, an end to continual transformation, is perhaps an important but underexplored sociocosmological phenomenon in Amazonia.

beautiful, then they were above all neglected forms, and in particular neglected by those who were duty-bound to care for them: their ‘similar’.

Chapter 3 introduced the concept that being ‘without things’—*pebalobai*—is concomitantly ‘to be poor’ or ‘to suffer’, and so compassion and empathy through the giving of gifts mitigates this suffering. Crucially, the most tangible form of kin benevolence is through the visibility of adornments or clothing on the body. As described in the myth of ‘The Origin of Modern Goods’ (see Appendix 5), there is a sense in which an entirely naked body (i.e. without any thread on the arms or waist, body paint, piercings in the ears, beads or clothing) is vulnerable, unprotected or ‘incomplete’ and only becomes truly human with the possession of ‘things’. In addition to marking negligent kin (described in Chapter 3), nakedness accompanies asocial personhood and liminal phases associated with erasure in rites of passage, such as menarche rites. During this ritual, girls enter a period of confinement in which they are ‘surrounded’ (Sa. *jokolomönase*) in a small shelter for a period of a week. The girl is stripped of all adornments, decorations and clothing, and will eat very little for the first few days. The nakedness is highly significant in this process as, without adornments, the girl becomes an asocial being, ceasing to exist as her previous self and becoming a null-person, as it were (Verswijver noted a similar phenomenon among un-painted Kayapó 1992: 204). Nakedness imposes a temporary ceasing of personhood and a cleansing that heightens the subsequent abundance of adornments that are displayed on the girl when she emerges from seclusion. After her emergence and adornment, she becomes hyper-real and visually indexed as hyper-kinned through her beads, a notion I shall turn to below.

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**Figure 17: Girl with beads following *jokölo* seclusion**

It is kin who clothe, adorn and paint their ‘similar’ (rather than individuals doing it to themselves, see also Gow 1995), so that those without any embellishments on the surface of their bodies must surely have no kin, analogous to a sorcerer or ‘demon’ (see Chapters 6 and 8). While men clothe bodies, women adorn with beads, and spend considerable time painting the faces and bodies of kin with intricate and colourful geometric designs. This too is where the bestowal of material items becomes a deeply moral endeavour, a symbol of generous and compassionate humanity much like the sharing of food. As such, it is only with adornments—beads

being the pinnacle of cultured and indexing enhancements—that bodies come to exist, since corporeal decoration indexes the social ties involved in their procurement and display. In this way, the concept that goods enable the Sanema to be full and completed humans is related to the idea that full personhood is only achieved when one is inserted into a network of kin.

Viewed in this way, the body in-and-of-itself might be seen as something of a nonentity, an absence, as it were. This is not to suggest that it has no meaning, but rather that it acts as a potentiality, a placeholder, or what Deacon terms an ‘absential phenomenon’ (Deacon 2013: 9-10).<sup>47</sup> Similar to the written word, a placeholder is ‘a pointer to a space in a network of meaning, each also pointing to one another and to potential features in the world. But a meaning is something virtual and potential’ (2013: 9; see also Kohn 2013: 35-8). In the same way, the body must be made to have meaning by pointing to other meaningful things. Put another way, a body must be ‘kinned’, to be ‘filled’ with relations rather than ‘empty’ (Sa. *poke*), as a body without *jikula* spirit allies is said to be. The body acts as an absential platform for displaying these beautiful and valuable goods that were given by kin, perhaps more comparable to Turner’s notion of transformation in which the ‘social skin’ (1980) is a surface adorned by kinfolk. While bodies are indeed entities of continuous making and are to some extent adaptable in this capacity, rather than being seen as a kind of modelling clay, among the Sanema they are better viewed as surfaces on which to place objects of value, props for adornments as it were. For if in Amazonia, as Brightman and Grotti state, one must ‘always look out for the “other” under the clothes of the familiar’ (2012: 169), the implication is that the body remains consistent ‘under’ the garments or ornamentations displayed on the surface.

This is where the value of beads comes to the fore. Given the importance of beads in indexing the compassion of kin, we might benefit from revisiting Henare *et al*’s (2007) approach in *Thinking Through Things* that was outlined in Chapter 1 (pages 27-28) in which concepts and things are seen as mutually constitutive. In this model, we are asked to rethink our common-sense notions of physical and abstract groupings in order to understand elusive categories. The example of power, as Holbraad (2007) describes it, is constitutive of material manifestations in the form of powder. In the case I describe in this chapter, beads and ‘kinship’ are mutually

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<sup>47</sup> Deacon’s neologism, *absential*, refers to ‘phenomena whose existence is determined with respect to an essential absence’ (2013: 3) in some as-yet-unspecified sense.

constitutive.

### **The Properties of Beads**

Glass beads have distinctive qualities that account for their elevated worth in the ongoing project of compassion and beauty. They are hard, minuscule, shiny and vibrant in shade. But what is most unique about them is that they seem to linger between categories of matter, as objects that might become substance if not processed by the human hand. That is, their tininess causes them to slip through the fingers and escape from one's grasp if not handled with great precision and care. Through the extended process of stringing, their weightless insignificance is transformed into the imposing heavy wholes of the collar necklaces that they become (see page 126).

But not all beads are considered to be of equivalent value in the region where I worked, and specifications were surprisingly fastidious. As far as the ones I could supply were concerned, it was essential that they were opaque, glossy, size 14, glass, Czech, seed beads.<sup>48</sup> I tried on several occasions to bring alternative beads that I expected my hosts to marvel over—shimmering translucent, galvanised, silver lined or rainbow beads. Sometimes I brought larger long bugle beads with multi-coloured patterns, and even jewellery made from metals that I thought they might desire for their similarity to *criollo* adornments. All of these, however, were subordinated to their beloved Czech seed beads, which were used exclusively for the collars described above. The inferior Chinese seed beads, which were predominantly obtained from the Ye'kwana (and that could be purchased in Caracas and even Ciudad Bolívar), were larger and less uniform in shape and colour, and were thus used to make a different kind of beadwork, often woven into ritual bead skirts (see Figure 17), and less commonly into necklaces and bracelets with animal motifs.

Appropriate colours of beads were also unusually specific. Dark blue (Sa. *ushi*), yellow (Sa. *aliashina*) and red (Sa. *jane*) were the favourites, but occasionally white and sky blue were also requested. Yet, people were rarely able to explain why these colours were preferred. When talking to women I often pointed to many colours on surrounding objects—purple, green, orange, brown, pink—asking if these were also good colours for beads. 'Yes, yes' they would assure me, but hastily offered a

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<sup>48</sup> These beads could only be purchased in the USA. The term 'seed bead' is the name of this specific type of small spherical beads, but are made from glass rather than seeds.

look of discernible disappointment if I ever offered them beads of one of these shades at a later date, asking after a long pause, ‘and the red?’ Even the shades themselves were highly specific so that if I inadvertently brought a slightly darker shade of red, they would again ask, ‘and the red?’

Visually, beads were particularly striking in their kaleidoscopic vibrancy. The effect of the glossy sheen, reflected light and ability to catch the eye, gave them great potency, as Howard also observed among the Waiwai of Northern Amazonia:

The glint of light reflected off shiny beads is considered pleasing to behold and makes the viewer ‘turn towards’ the wearer, creating a bond between them. To capture this quality of shininess, the Waiwai also apply Brazil nut oil to their hair, enhancing it with eagle down (which similarly reflects light) in preparation for public gathering when people catch each other’s eyes, even those of God, creating a collectivity of reciprocal gazes (2001: 272-273).

What is interesting in Howard’s observation is that brilliance catches the eye, resulting in a ‘collectivity of reciprocal gazes’. It is as though the refraction of gazes reflects that of the luminosity of beads, creating a mutual mirroring of perspectives. I will return to this point later on in the chapter.

But it was not just the glossy colours about which great scrutiny was exhibited when admiring such beads. The most important characteristic of the beads was their minute size, and was the feature most often referred to as the women howled with delight upon seeing or receiving them, exclaiming a high-pitched ‘*Oooooooooosowai!*’ (so tiny!) as they lightly touched the beads with their fingertips. The size they preferred was the smallest in manufacture (of those that vary in shades): size 14. The size number indicates ‘beads per inch’ so that the higher the number, the smaller the beads. These tiny beads, which measured about 1.4-1.6mm in diameter, were sold in ‘hanks’, a unit bundle of strands of seed beads with twelve 51cm looped threads.

Along with the colour and tininess, the quantity procured was also crucial, the best and most beautiful collars being large and imposing, engulfing the whole neck. Many women would build up their bead supply over a lifetime, often starting out with thin collars that gradually developed into large thick and heavy layers before then being picked apart and made into smaller strings with which to adorn their children (in fact, the Yanomami word for ‘share’ also means ‘pick apart’, see below). Just as increased numbers of children and shaman’s spirit allies (Sa. *jikula*) imbues the

genitor with advanced status, as we shall see in due course, so too does the accumulation of beads. The quality of one's beads also indicates wealth and prestige, and those with collars of large Chinese beads or of undesirable shades (brown, purple, green, orange) were often also those who were described as 'poor' (Sa. *pebalo*), predominantly because their husbands were not for one reason or another regularly engaging in wage labour or trade with the Ye'kwana.

Crucially, however, images of women during my fieldwork were not simply of women adorned, but of women 'processing' the beads too. Upon receiving the small hanks that I often supplied, the women would begin long processes of stringing and re-stringing, combining beads with previously owned collections of the same colour and size onto longer strands. This working of the beads usually occurred in the evening in the last lingering light of the day, with the sound of men playing football nearby. The women drape themselves in their hammocks and chatter as they string in unison, a repetitive rhythmic movement of the wrist as a needle is scraped through the sea of undulating loose pellets. Ewart (2012) has suggested that these shared moments of bead processing are salient moral actions among the Panará. She notes that, 'For Panará people, like for many Amazonian groups, working together, or working alongside one another on the same tasks evokes a sense of well-being and community, which is expressed in moral as well as aesthetic terms' (Ewart 2012: 181).

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**Figure 18: Woman threading beads**

The needle, connected to a cotton strand, picks up a few tiny beads as it passes through the bowl while the woman intermittently pulls them down the strand into a gradually growing long thin snake. This process may take several days and, the smaller the beads, the longer the threading will take. It is this time and effort invested that is an essential component of the value of certain beads over others, as the smaller ones require more time to complete this process, displaying to others the quantity and quality of beads in one's possession. When all the beads have been threaded, a woman will give one end of the long strand to one of her young children who will walk away from her until it is stretched out, often a surprising distance. With her direction they repeatedly double it up until it becomes a thick, layered skein, which is then twisted into a large collar that is placed around the neck along with others of different colours of three or four loops (see Figure 16).

The prolonged process of labour, integral to the procurement and processing of beads, indicates that although the beads themselves were not fabricated, the effort required to prepare the collars imbued them with a form of inalienability (see Weiner 1992) and as a consequence they were very rarely traded externally (only gifted internally), even when extraordinary prices were offered for them.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the durability of glass beads meant that this process could be repeated over and over again in, and even beyond, a woman's lifetime, as roles and kinship structures changed. This last point is crucial, as the firmness of beads gives them an especially long life span. The beads themselves never break, only the collars, which can easily be re-thread and put back together. This is why, although beads have a similar function to clothing in adorning the body, they are nevertheless quite unlike clothes, which are short-lived enhancements that perish surprisingly rapidly in everyday Amazonian life. Beads, on the other hand, could quite literally last forever.

### **The Source and Use of Beads**

The use of beads for adornment in Amazonia is widespread, as they have been a resource for exchange by explorers since the earliest times of contact (Gheerbrant 1953; Lévi-Strauss 1956; Vinci 1959). Notwithstanding some notable exceptions

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<sup>49</sup> Graeber (2012: 130) has also noted that some things such as beads act as 'social currencies,' not used to buy things but to rearrange social relationships.



(Ewart 2012; Lagrou 2009; Miller 2009), given their ubiquitous presence, surprisingly little has been written on this important artefact in Amazonia. Having been introduced by outsiders, it is reasonable to suggest that their value emerges from their connection to the powerful world of the ‘whites’. Ewart (2007: 44) notes that this is the case with clothing, which permits native Amazonians to comfortably operate within the non-indigenous world. Unlike clothing, though, beads among the Sanema are not associated with *criollos*, who do not wear beads. Rather, beads are said to have an origin prior to contact with the *criollo* world, and were almost certainly adopted from the Ye’kwana.

Like present-day Yanomami, Sanema in the past tended to utilise cotton threads wrapped around the upper arms and strung across the body, as well as fragrant flowers in the earlobes, large colourful feathers in armbands, feather down in the hair, annatto body paint, and fine poles in the lips and nasal septum (see de Barandiarán 1968). Ever since their more intimate contact with the Ye’kwana, beads have become increasingly pervasive as they were regularly obtained through trade, or upon settling in satellite communities in order to work in exchange for goods. There is certainly a degree to which the value of beads stems from their association with the powerful Ye’kwana, although the only definitive explanation I have obtained from my Sanema research associates as to why they wear beads other than ‘because they are beautiful’ was ‘because our ancestors (Sa. *patapō tōpō*) wore them’. This statement indicates that beads were associated with a prior time, rather than acknowledged as adopted from the Ye’kwana, who were thought to be simply the suppliers.<sup>50</sup>

All Sanema—women, children, men, educated youth and old shamans—used beads in most situations. The majority wore collars around the neck, as described above, but girls and women will also wear dark blue and white beads wrapped around their ankles and below the knees (see Figure 17). Children wore thin collars and men were given to wearing single strands, sometimes with a woven animal pattern pendant hanging in the centre in varying shades. Beads literally became an extension of the body and were in fact so rarely removed that when they were, they left behind a pale strip of skin where the beads had once been. While it was through men’s labour that

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<sup>50</sup> The Ye’kwana receive their Czech beads predominantly from NGO representatives who work among them. As far as I was aware, there were no NGOs working directly with the Sanema (due to their Ye’kwana gatekeepers). I was the only one outside of the Ye’kwana who was a source of Czech beads for the Sanema.

beads were initially obtained, they were subsequently controlled and distributed by women who strung, wove and cared for her immediate family's individual collars. Indeed, women's daily discourse is dominated by talk of beads, their desire to obtain them, the beauty that they bestow, and their power to index kin in opposition to 'immoral others' who have no beads or, at most, 'ugly beads'. I was told that only beads were not burned after the death of the owner because they are 'too valuable', and thus are 'grabbed' by kin.<sup>51</sup>

Since beads were so prized, they had to be carefully safeguarded to avoid theft by visitors or neighbours.<sup>52</sup> When not in use, they were carefully stored in concealed locations, often draped over a clothesline underneath some garments, or inside a pot stashed under other belongings. Anita, my host mother, would always leave any beads she was not wearing that day with her elderly husband René before going to the gardens, gently tucking them under his mosquito net next to his snoring head. Many women who had accumulated large stashes of beads over time (often stored up for their daughters *jokólomo* menarche rights, for which a large quantity are required) would bring them to the gardens while they worked. My host sister Lucia would do just this, and placed them gently on top of the peeled yucca in her back basket before returning to the community.

As well as their beauty, beads were valued for the enhanced agency and intentionality that they encode on their wearers. I noticed with interest a line in Sanema mythology that seemed to suggest that adornments impart intentionality, albeit with cotton adornments rather than beads. In this myth a *waitili* (fearless) man cautioned the woman he was pursuing with the following words: "When your husband gets angry tell him I've got these bands around my arms" he said and pointed to his cotton armbands' (Colchester 1981: 58). This statement seemed to suggest that, with adornments, a man has power and courage since they confer true and exteriorised personhood, as well as strength and intentionality. Joana Miller observed a similar phenomenon among the Nambikwara, who associated beads with human

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<sup>51</sup> This is not to say that beads are actively passed down as ceremonial heirloom jewellery as is the case among the Kayapó (see Graeber 2001: 73). This is why the verb 'grab' (Sp. *agarrar*) is used for post-mortem procurement rather than 'give' during rites of passage. I never deciphered what was done with beads after death, given that death in a sense breaks the unity, but I imagine they are picked apart again.

<sup>52</sup> However, they are not permanently stashed away as conduits of power akin to money as Graeber describes (1996: 5). Most commonly, the most valuable beads were worn or given as gifts to kin, and were in fact most safe when worn.

agency, bestowing bearers with ‘qualities that are equated with the spirit’ (2009: 64). In this case, it is clear to see how beads impart full humanity, since without them complete personhood is absent; or as the Nambikwara describe it, ‘we would not know where we are; we fail to recognise our kin and we become lost and sick’ (Miller 2009: 63). Overing also illustrates how beads among the Piaroa possess the power to ‘designate those forces that allow a person to breathe, to eat and to drink, to have sex, and in general to live a physical life of impulses and desires’ (Overing 2003: 303). For the Piaroa, though, the beads are said to be contained within the body—‘beads of life’—which obtain their potency from an all-powerful deity and enable the Piaroa to be conscious humans.

It is worth considering, though, that given that adornments are always placed on the body by one’s ‘similar’, the Sanema man’s statement above could also indicate that his cotton armbands index his kin who both care for and protect him (his ‘bodyguards’, see Chapter 6). Likewise, perhaps beads enable the Piaroa to be imparted with agency and the Nambikwara to recognise kin, because adornments and beads *are* kinship. Without kin you have no strength, indeed you have no agency of any kind, as it is kin who adorn the self.

### **Kin as Adornments to the Self<sup>53</sup>**

Beads were most often procured in order to give to family members: men would initially obtain them for their wives, who may then give them to their children, mothers or sisters. The tiny beads that I gifted were so distinguishable that I was able to identify when they had been given to another family member. Occasionally, I would see visitors wearing these special beads and immediately know that they were therefore kin. Perhaps appropriately, then, the Yanomami word for beads—*topë*—is also related to the term *topëmou* which means ‘to offer or give’. What’s more, *topë uku* is ‘the paint that *jikula* use to adorn their bodies with colourful drawings’ (Lizot 2004: 427). As such, these related terms give insight into the power of beads as adornments with a potency that is connected to the spirit world. They also highlight the relationship between beauty, kinship and sharing. As was indicated above, the painting and adorning of faces and bodies was indeed a gift to kin.

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<sup>53</sup> This term is adapted from Leach’s description of wealth as ‘adornment to the person’ (1970: 142) that become insignia of social identity.

Beads being kinship, though, is not merely a matter of indexing relationships through gifts. The properties of beads actually enable them to possess a metonymy with what kinship represents: parts that make up a whole. In many ways, kinfolk are seen as constituting the same ‘kind’, inherent in the notion of a shared personhood or ‘being’. This sameness is intimated in the Sanema word for family—*ipa aitö*—which literally means ‘my others’, but is generally translated as ‘my people’ or ‘my similars’. This literal term of ‘my others’, however, denotes that kin are other versions of you, that together you make a complete entity or whole (see also Kohn 2013: 64-8 for a similar case among the Runa of Ecuador). This notion is manifest when actions towards or between kin are considered equivalent, as when women breastfeed their sisters’ children and when vengeance is carried out against the brothers of a murderer.

A similar definition is evident in the Yanomami word *mashi*, meaning brothers and parallel cousins of the same sex, but also ‘to be of the same class or species, or one side of an object’ (Lizot 2004: 206). These elements that constitute a wider entity was in the past related to the co-residential *shabono* (circular house) that was a circle of interconnected kin who were linked by intermarriages and generalised reciprocity (see Albert 1985: 202). The term ‘whole’ that I am using here refers to multiplicities of identical components. Gow (2000) observes a similar logic among the Piro, who consider both humanity and kinship as multiplicities, evident in the noun root pluraliser for ‘man’, ‘woman’ and ‘person’. Moreover, selfhood exists in relation to other people, in a ‘multiplication of identical entities’:

It therefore refers to the grouping together of elements which are separately alike into a multiplicity of identical elements: ‘kinspeople’, ‘things’, ‘numbers’ (i.e. the digits of two hands). A kinsperson, *nomole*, ‘my kinsperson’, does not therefore refer to a special relationship between ego and alter, but to ego and alter’s common membership in a set with multiple members. Within this set, any given person is related in specific mode to any given other (as ‘son’, ‘father’, brother’ and so on), just as each element of a ‘heap of like things’ or the constituent integers of ‘ten’ stand in specific relations to each other (2000: 49).

This description resembles Deacon’s (2013) notion of an absential phenomenon, which is a placeholder that relies on other phenomenon to give it meaning. In a similar way, the Sanema concept of kin being ‘my others’ denotes that one can only become a true person when inserted into a network of relationships, and

so it makes sense to conceive of body ornaments as metonymically related to the ‘wider entity’; not just the self, but also the composition of relationships that constitute the self. As was demonstrated above, beads confer consciousness and strength, but they also protect the bearers by indexing their caring kin who adorn but who are also willing to protect them physically (see Chapter 6). Indeed, those with few or no children are considered incomplete persons, without a place in a wide network of kin and lacking protection in times of conflict.

In light of their role in imparting personhood in this way, beads are utilised as soon as life begins, enhancing strength to those most vulnerable. Before babies receive any other decoration, or even their name, women wrap threads of beads around their wrists and legs (see similar examples in Ewart 2012; Miller 2009). As the child is ‘soft’ (Sa. *ulua oshiati*) (see Appendix 9 for life stages), full identity is subdued until it is said to become ‘wary’—opening its eyes and interacting more with the world—and shows the first signs of possessing a spirit. Beads become an investment in the child’s identity and a protection against malevolent spirits, bequeathing agency to one who does not yet possess such capacities of their own. As a ‘soft’ child becomes a ‘true child’ (Sa. *ulua sai*), demonstrating greater awareness and intentionality, beads become used with greater frequency and care. Small collars are placed around the neck in single bands, which increase in size as a ‘true child’ (Sa. *ulua sai*) becomes a ‘big child’ (Sa. *ulua pada jadaudö*). Even the children of Maduaña who ‘do not like to wear clothes’ are at the very least adorned with beads and nothing else, as such adornments impart a ‘social skin’ that supersedes nakedness (see Turner 1980).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Before the introduction of beads among the Sanema, children were painted with annatto or adorned with thread, equivalent in its role of bodily embellishment and morality (see Verswijver 1992; Gow 1995, 2006; Lagrou 2009).

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**Figure 19: Children with beads**

Coming of age rites, particularly the menarche seclusion of girls (Sa. *jokölo*), are the most striking and discernible presentation of beads-as-kinship, with mothers and female ‘similar’ investing great effort in elaborately adorning the girl for the important ritual. This ceremonial moment requires so many beads that mothers often request other female kin to lend theirs in the hopes of embellishing the girl with as many beads as possible. This uniting of all the beads of female agnatic kin in this significant event of transition into adulthood, exemplifies beads as mutually constituting kinship relations. After the period of menarche seclusion, particularly in relation to her prior nakedness, the effect of layering ornamentations gives a sense of shimmering freshness and beauty. But with the beads also comes a new identity and strength. As the epitome of beauty, intentionality and rejuvenation, a woman

emerging from *jokölo* is now much desired by men. She is said to be ‘ready’, in particular for a husband and the reproductive phase.

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**Figure 20: Two girls with beads after *jokölo* seclusion**

During conjugal cohabitation, a young couple will build up a modest supply of beads procured through burgeoning relations of trade with external others and regular voyaging. But the supply is only modest because a newly married man must hand over a large proportion of his resources and time to his in-laws during bride service. This is a time in which a young woman will become responsible for her own beads, no longer safeguarded by her mother, but taken with her to the new conjugal home. At this time, a young man (Sa. *jisiatö*) may be seen adorned with a single strand of beads, a representation of his modest beginnings in independent adulthood and as the head of his own small unit. He gives the majority of his beads to his young wife in order to secure her affections and display his generosity as a husband (for a similar case among the Urarina see Walker 2013b). She may have a humble collar around her neck which she will unpick and re-assemble with the birth of every child, each one given their own threads that grow in time.

The husband is only committed to his bride service duties for approximately the first five years of marriage, when his bead supply and independence remain

limited. As his freedom slowly increases after this time, he is able to engage in wage labour, trade, mining activities or general ‘voyaging for knowledge’ (see Chapter 7), and consequently may obtain more beads for his wife and their nuclear unit. But it is important to remember that women control and share beads with kin (predominantly hers rather than his due to uxorilocal residence), and they regularly appeal to their men to obtain beads on their behalf. In this way, they gain power over their husband’s economic pursuits and the resultant *matitö* obtained. The women remain the conduits of family bead gifting, and it is only possible for an affine to establish himself in his resident community through gifting beads to his wife. At the same time that her supply of beads gradually grows, so too does her family, and with each new introduction of beads, the woman picks apart her collar and adds the new supply. In the same way, the arrival of each new child will prompt her to pick apart the collars and divide them to produce smaller ones for her offspring. This is where the unpicking and re-stringing of beads mirrors the growing and shifting relationships within the family unit.

At the ‘big’ (Sa. *patatö sai*) stage of a man’s social development, in which he is considered an ‘old man’ (Sa. *patasibi*), his personal adornments do not necessarily reflect his increased rank and power. They do, however, increase among his immediate kin. With age and status, a man’s beads become increasingly dispersed, signifying good leadership and generosity. An admirable leader, therefore, has few personal possessions but is surrounded by a well-adorned, happy and beautiful kin group. His power is represented through his beautiful and strong family unit, all adorned in many beads, just as through his name dispersed among kin in teknonyms.

It is clear in the above overview of life stages that beads are not simply adornments obtained for oneself; they are primarily obtained for kin and represent this network of compassionate action. In fact, it is through beads that kinship becomes realised and manifest, hence the beads-as-kinship trope. Accordingly, while it is suggested in some literature that body ornaments are constitutive parts of the person (see Conklin and Morgan 1996; Gow 1995), for the Sanema, beads represent more than just the self, but index the benefactor who supplied the beads. The beads I had given my host mother, for instance, seemed to become a manifestation of me that she carried daily around her neck. This was made clear by the fact that she would regularly clutch them when concerned about my well-being or when proclaiming how she will remember me when I’m gone, her voice quaking as she repeated “emi-wai!



emi-wai!” (Little Amy! Little Amy!). The display of beads, therefore, is also the display of the generosity and beauty (both highly valued moral characteristics) of the kin group as a whole.

Let us not forget the forefathers and mythical ancestors, though, who also constitute kin. As mentioned above, the Sanema often stated that ‘the ancestors wore beads’, in particular those mythical beings who were regularly described as beautifully adorned. The brightness of the primary colours desired for the beads were highly prized as indicators of this primordial power and efficacy. Unlike ‘dull’ humans, the spirits and mythical ancestors emit a resplendence of vivid vitality beyond the imagination (Viveiros de Castro 2007: 153), and so representation of this realm is highly esteemed. When referring to ancestors here, however, my hosts were not merely indicating the beings that represented the Sanema in mythological time, but also the forefathers who were often described as working hard for the neighbouring Ye’kwana and travelling long distances in order to procure beads for their children. Beads, therefore, signify one’s place in relation to ‘similar’, but also one’s relation to the mythical ancestors and hard-working forefathers. In this sense, beads have a two-fold capacity for personhood: they enable people to become completed persons through beauty and intentionality, as well as through indexing relationships with those that define the self.

### **The Moral Affordances of Beads**

The sophisticated and complex properties of the highly valued Czech seed beads require further unpacking in order to garner their saliency in constituting kinship, in addition to their affordances for morality. Howard’s comment above on the ‘collectivity of reciprocal gazes’ that the shininess of beads promote, inspires a novel view of beads’ capacity to be constitutive of kinship. Building on this notion of reflexive lustre, it is productive to consider Anne Christine Taylor’s description of the soul among the Jivaro, which is represented as a ‘matter of refraction: it takes its source in the sense one has of others’ perceptions of self’ (1996: 206).<sup>55</sup> This Jivaroan notion of the soul—*wakan*—refers to a reflected image, like the appearance of

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<sup>55</sup> Citing Hammel’s work on beads among the Iroquois, Graeber similarly notes that the properties of beads embody the ‘sense of brightness, clarity, expansiveness, of unhindered communication with the cosmos, whose social manifestation was peace and the unobstructed solidarity of human beings’ (2001: 131).

someone in a dream, and is analogous to the Sanema *nonosia*, an ‘essence echo’, ‘shadow’, ‘double’ or ‘copy’ which composes a reflected part of the self (*‘si’* means light, essence or energy). Vision, in this way, seems to be integral to the ‘view’ of one’s sense of being. As Willerslev remarks of Siberian Chukchi: ‘every being—humans, animals, inanimate objects, and spirits—is said to have a viewpoint of its own that stares back’ (2011: 511). Not only is one always both the subject and object of vision, but this ‘view from everywhere’ is embedded in all matter, a concept that Holbraad and Willerslev refer to as ‘transcendental perspectivism’ (2007). Beads seem to combine this notion of vision with the reflexivity and indexicality of relatedness.

The fastidious attention granted to the colour and shade of beads was remarkable and could be seen to resonate from a number of sources. I am not entirely clear of the value of the colour yellow in Sanema cosmology and history (apart from perhaps the mythical hummingbird), but black (dark blue beads as identified as ‘black’) and red have clear significance in body painting.<sup>56</sup> Black is the colour of warriorhood, courage and death (see Lizot 1994: 225), as vengeance raid groups paint their entire bodies with black charcoal before departing on their expeditions (Chagnon 1968; Lizot 1991). The value of *waitili* (fearlessness), as we shall see in Chapter 6, elucidates why this colour may be prized. The vibrant red recalls a significant potency associated with the blood of the ancient ones, as red animals (the curassow’s beak, deer, howler monkey) carry this shade from the blood of the mythical opossum (Pumutuma) who was killed when felling of the tree of life (see Appendix 10).<sup>57</sup>

The colours could also reflect an awareness of the increasing omnipresence of state colours and imagery that are making inroads into Sanema lives. The combination of colours used in bead collars is extraordinarily similar to the Venezuelan national flag, and of the powerful *criollo* world in general (see Figure 19). These are the colours of government buildings and schools (which have a blue trim), as well as the bright red of socialism that appears in propaganda, caps, t-shirts, subsidised food packaging, government funded transport, and so on. The Sanema of Madauña had a long history of contact with these images and colours through missionary influence,

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<sup>56</sup> Turner (1980) also recognises the importance of these two colours among the Kayapó, representing periphery and centre, the social and the natural.

<sup>57</sup> It may also represent the blood of the moon, symbolising procreation, warfare and violence (Lizot 1994: 228).

more frequent trips to the cities, and the regular appearance of government representatives, who have been on the periphery of Sanema lives for many decades.

This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 21: Sanema with Venezuelan flag**

**Photograph from Marco's personal collection, used with permission**

The size of the tiny beads enables them to effortlessly and powerfully become something beyond mere individuals. By this I mean that it is less easy, when glancing at them, to distinguish each individual one. Beads are both continuous (as a collar), and discrete (as individual beads). They can be united, divided, picked apart, separated, dispersed and re-joined. They are both stable and yet unstable, both objects and raw materials, differentiated and yet undifferentiated, complete and yet embodying the potential to transform. All of these capacities are made possible by their infinitesimal partibility (see also Graeber 1996: 13-4, 2001: 106). For, as mentioned earlier, this too is what kin represent—a whole made up of many parts. In much the same way as the Sanema term for family—*ipa aitö*, my similars/others—suggests kin being of the same kind, parts of a whole, it is only together that these tiny beads have meaning and power.

In a description that is evocative of the power of beads, Sahlins suggests that kinship is a 'mutuality of being' in which 'kinsmen are persons who belong to one

another, who are members of one another, who are co-present in each other, whose lives are joined and interdependent' (Sahlins 2011: 11). Rather than one being a 'composite site of the relationships that produced them' (Strathern 1988: 13), Sahlins inverts the approach by suggesting that the self is distributed among multiple others, believing that 'much is gained by privileging intersubjective being over the singular person as the composite site of multiple others' (2011: 14). In this way, he gives individuality continued weight in relatedness. Given that beads are dispersed among family members, Sahlins' theory of the 'mutuality of being' can be a useful way of conceiving the constitutive nature of kinship and beads. Indeed, correlating Sahlins' mutuality of being with the moral affordances of beads, there is certainly a degree to which autonomy with interdependency also exists with beads (like Overing's 'collectivity of singular similarities', 2003: 312).

Ultimately, though, individual beads are worthless. If one takes a close look at the ground of any Sanema community—the earth below hammocks or surrounding the hearth—tiny beads can be seen scattered everywhere, which had over time fallen from stashes of unpicked collars. I often wondered why no one had decided to simply pick up all the individual beads strewn across the community, as surely the quantity salvaged would amount to a very large collar. But these discrete beads have no value in their own right. They are insignificant individuals broken away from the whole and lost among other unconnected beads. Insofar as individual persons are constituted only through relationships (Sahlins 2011; Strathern 1988), individual beads—like unadorned bodies—are non-entities.

Tinness and luminosity were also precisely the two qualities that Viveiros de Castro (2007) recognised as integral to Amazonian spirits, eloquently depicted by the Yanomami shaman Kopenawa, who describes them as 'magnificent ... with bead armbands', 'as tiny as specks of dust' emitting 'dazzling light' (2007: 155).<sup>58</sup> The miniaturisation of the *xapiripë* spirits (Sa. *sapili* or *jikula*) is what gives them their potency, expressed as an infinitude of multiplicities (2007: 167). It is plausible that beads represent this infinitesimal spirit potency in the same way, referencing wearers as multiple-beings or as 'super-divided beings' (2007: 155) in much the same way as shamans harness the multiplicity of the spirit realm. Viveiros de Castro uses his

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<sup>58</sup> There is some indication that hallucinogenic visions in Amazonia, through the use of ayahuasca and viola snuff, produce bead-like images (see e.g. Siskind 1973: 135).

analysis of the unique characteristic of spirits to make a distinction between a pre-cosmological era in which vitality was infinite and internal, to a post-mythic time of speciation, ‘the celebrated transition from the “continuous” to the “discrete” which forms the conceptual core of structuralist cosmology’ (2007: 158; see also Kelly 2005 on ‘scaled self-similarity’ among the Yanomami). This statement evokes the Yanomami man’s description of The Myth of the Falling Sky above in which bodies ‘stopped transforming’. Like synecdoche, in which each part stands for the characteristic of the whole (Gell 1998: 165-8), bead necklaces reflect a whole unit that is made of many fine parts, a concept that also defines kinship. As mentioned in Chapter 2, my use of the term ‘whole’ here refers to a fluid and shifting unit of consanguineal and close affinal kin (pages 72-73).

Let us now return to the lived realities of the Sanema. We have seen that the presence and absence of beads on the body powerfully marks belonging to a kin group, and it is the processing and giving of beads, as well as their display, that imparts primacy to their value. In the contemporary context, a husband will work hard on *criollo* farms and at the mine to earn money so that he might purchase beads from any Ye’kwana or Sanema person willing to sell them. Thereafter, a woman will actively and continually process the beads in a similar expression of nurture. Ewart (2012) has noted a similar phenomenon of action inherent in the value of beads among Panará women, who prize their hardness and durability, but also their ‘raw’ form as a collection of individual beads. This unique property enables them to overcome a ‘fixity’ inherent in other objects (finished manufactured items in particular) and can thus continually be transformed into things of women’s creation. Crucially, beads maintain a ‘fluidity’ that ‘allows for the making and remaking of intersubjective relations’ (Ewart 2012: 177). This notion of shared creative acts through divisible things might also come about when breaking things apart into sections. Lizot explains that sharing among the Yanomami is inherently a matter of divisibility, and that the verb ‘to share’ also means ‘to break’, ‘to pick’ or ‘to take down’ (1994: 237, n. 24). In this way, the archetypal kin action of sharing (recall also that among the Yanomami, the word for beads also means ‘to give’) is also inherently a matter of dividing wholes into parts, just as the Sanema do with bead collars.

## Conclusion

Many theories on the body have highlighted that an adorned form exemplifies more than beauty, or they at least enable us to consider that the concept of beauty is imbued with far more complex cosmological connotations than mere attractiveness (see Stang 2009; Turner 1980; Verswijver 1992; Vidal 1992). Many of these descriptions have noted that the notion of beauty applies to something well-made, proper and complete, with profound social and moral implications. Adornments allow an expression of this moral dimension of aesthetics through the creation of a ‘social skin’ (Turner 1980) with a transcendental capacity to enhance an absential entity into a social and proper being. As Jose Kelly notes among the Yanomami, ‘everyday life involves a constant interplay of producing evidence of one’s affects on others’ (Kelly 2011: 71). In the case of the Sanema, beads exemplify this process.

With this in mind, the term ‘transform’ could refer to a change in bodily form, but it could also refer to a layering on top of a stable existing self, a process that defines the role of kinfolk to one another. Accordingly, kin can be constructed and continually produced through the sharing of substance, but also through the active beautifying of others with adornments and the giving of goods in general. In this way, you could say that people are not just the ‘product of making’ but that they are also ‘the product of adorning’. Beyond this, beads and kinship can be seen as mutually constitutive. Like the multiplicity of *jikula* spirits that inhabit shamans, beads not only embody or signify the multiplicity of kinship, but *are* kinship in their concretisation of the actions of relatedness. But beads are also kinship in the exemplification of what the concept entails: a concatenation of similars.

Most importantly, it is the properties of beads that enable this mutual constitution to be realised. In addition to the vibrant glossy qualities that evoke the power of the mythical ancestors, the iridescent glossiness catches the eye causing a reflexivity of perspectives. The minuteness enables an expression of kin nurture through the elaborate expenditure of creative energies when procuring, processing and displaying them. The smaller beads, and the additional work required to string them, are valued precisely because physically ‘working’ for kin in this way is more acutely reflected. But beads, like kinship, are also valued for their property of divisibility, a representation of valued multiplicities.

The idea of action integral to the value of beads is analogous to Turner’s theory of value, in which worth is estimated through human activity: through control

over productive labour in the domestic cycle, and the ‘media’ of public performance. For the Sanema, the action of procuring beads through exterior labour or trade, and the work invested in stringing the beads, is in accordance with such approaches to value. As noted earlier, Ewart illustrates a comparable notion of value among the Panará. She states that, ‘the sociability involved in sitting together and making things is a fundamentally important aspect of how and why certain material goods come to be particularly valued. Against this background, the immutable qualities of material goods as enduring objects in their own right recede in significance’ (Ewart 2012: 178). In addition to this, as was argued in Chapter 1, even if manufactured goods seem to be immutable, their material affordances allow for diverse ethical actions to emerge from their prefabricated value. The material qualities of beads—their vibrant colour, durability, glossy sheen and tiny size—are all properties unique to them as manufactured goods, and it is these characteristics that imbue them with both material and ethical value.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Sharp and the Flat:

#### The Machete as a Medium of Balance

Mauricio stopped in the middle of a sentence and sat bolt upright in his hammock. ‘Shush!’ he whispered and paused for a moment, intently listening to the sounds outside. My untrained ear could hear nothing beyond the soft distant yelps of children playing their daily afternoon games. ‘Someone is fighting’, he muttered before springing from his hammock, grabbing his machete and running out the door, leaving me alone and bewildered in his house. When it finally dawned on me what Mauricio had just said, I too jumped up and ran outside to join the flurry of other villagers, all with machetes in hand, dashing at top speed towards the distant sound of shouting.

I arrived at the site of the commotion to find a livid Alonzo-Patasibi (‘Old Alonzo’), a new arrival to the community—having recently married a local widow—striding around, raging and howling with blood trickling down his forehead. His body glistened with sweat and his face was red with anger and strain, as he bellowed, ‘*Sa kili mai ke!*’ (I’m not afraid!). He interspersed his shouts with loud clicks of the tongue and stomps of the feet, imitating a ferocious peccary. From within the large gathering of agitated onlookers, I could see that the thatch of one of the nearby houses was ablaze and a number of people were frantically beating the flames with their machetes in an attempt to extinguish it. In one hand Alonzo-Patasibi brandished the flaming piece of wood he had used to set fire to the roof, and in the other he too wielded a machete. He strode from house to house roaring, seeking out his assailant as the excited crowd trailed him, trying unsuccessfully to calm him and seize his weapons. Women were crying, old men got knocked over in the scuffle, nearby dogs barked frantically with the commotion, and the smell of alcohol lingered in the air. An onlooker explained that Alonzo had been trysting with another man’s wife, but had allegedly been discovered *en flagrante* by one of her other lovers, who proceeded to clout him over the head with a pole before ‘escaping’. ‘He is out of control’, the onlooker emphasised with a look of concern. ‘He is *waitili* (fearless) and wants revenge.’



As was mentioned in the Chapter 4, conflicts (Sa. *pösö paso*) were part of everyday Sanema life, and ranged from family squabbles—jealous husbands, protective parents or frustrated sisters—to more substantial retribution against affinal ‘others’ or visitors within the community, most often associated with philandering. Alonzo-Patasibi, however, provoked a response I had not seen during other fights. People seemed genuinely concerned or afraid of his rage, attempting to disarm him and running to repair the destruction he had left in his wake. ‘Out of control’, as the onlooker put it, was certainly what he seemed to be, and this turmoil clearly perturbed residents. Alonzo-Patasibi’s brandishing of a machete and the fact that all residents also had one in hand was a common and significant sight in this type of scenario. But Alonzo was described as displaying excessive fearlessness, while the other residents were using their machetes in order to maintain a degree of ‘fear’ (respect and humility).

In what follows, I offer a detailed analysis of the machete as a way to explore two of the most fundamental moral values in Sanema daily lives—fearlessness (Sa. *waitili*) and fear (Sa. *kili*)—and the importance of maintaining a balance between the two. The term ‘balance’ is used in this chapter in two ways: firstly to refer to a notion of ‘control’, and secondly in terms of a ‘return’ or ‘equalisation’, both of which will be unpacked throughout the chapter. As we shall see, the machete can be seen as a materialised accompaniment to both fearless and fearful actions, but also as a tool for maintaining a balance between the two affective registers. Above all, I shall demonstrate how the material affordances of machetes allow for the realisation of a ‘proper’ balanced existence through ethical processes of conflict resolution. In this way, the machete accompanies fear, empowers fearlessness, facilitates revenge and resolves conflict; and being present in all these processes, it emerges as more than a prosaic object, for its material affordances are utilised in moral life at every turn.

### **The Properties of Machetes**

The Sanema term for machete—*pöa*—refers to all steel blades, including knives, which are considered to be *pöa osowai*—little machetes.<sup>59</sup> The term originates from ‘*po gosh*’ (Colchester 1982: 85)—stone axes—that were employed prior to the introduction of machetes. The Yanomami term ‘*poo*’ refers to stone tools in general,

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<sup>59</sup> And thus I refer throughout this chapter to the term ‘machete’ only.

including those used as axe heads or employed in the grinding of hallucinogens. The fact that the Sanema use the same term for the machete according to its role might suggest that its material properties are secondary to the actions employed in its use; but in fact its material characteristics are what set it apart from tools of the past, and even comparable tools in the present.

The value of durable, tough metal (Sa. *sibalusö*) is incomparable to anything that preceded the machete. As was outlined in Chapter 1, the desire for steel tools was the reason for a surge in new internal alliances and clashes among Yanomami groups, all in order to obtain these special implements made from *sibalusö*. In fact, when Colchester (1984) conducted a study into the efficacy of metal goods, he found that the Sanema were ten times more productive in clearing land for gardens when using steel tools than with the stone or agouti tooth hatchets (Sa. *tomi nagi*) that were used previously (see also Carneiro 1979). The metal is exceptionally sharp, but can also maintain that edge over a long period of time through repeated filing, making it continually renewable, unlike stone or tooth axes.

Its powerful sharpness and versatile shape means that the machete can be used for a multitude of tasks: to cut down trees, trim grass, dig up and peel yucca, chop up firewood, gouge out the core of a tree to make a canoe, cut up meat, dig holes in the ground to search for worms or bury placenta, and flip cassava flour on the hot griddle. Similar metal tools are regularly used for many of these same tasks. The axe, for instance, is also used to cut down trees and chop up firewood. Shovels can be used to clear land of weeds, and an adze can be used to carve out the centre of a tree to make a canoe. But all of these tools are only ever seen on certain occasions. The rare or specialised use of axes, spades and adzes preclude their everyday use; being heavy, cumbersome and unwieldy, their shape limits their use to specialised and unique tasks. The machete, on the other hand, does not have an explicit niche, but is a versatile and holistic implement, in that it occupies all spheres and indeed accompanies almost all activities of daily life. The fact that the machete is used so frequently during the day delineates it as an intimate personal possession, carrying the sweat and grime of daily work. It is always referred to as ‘my machete’—*ipa pöa*—which one may request the use of, but which must ultimately return to its ‘owner’.<sup>60</sup> Machetes will be placed in the care of other (female) kin when their

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<sup>60</sup> Despite this fact, machetes are not heirlooms and do not seem to accumulate a biography.

owners temporarily leave for the cities, just as they might do with one of their own children.

While the machete can do all the things that axes, spades and adzes do—chop, dig, gouge—it can also do much more. Its lightweight, portable form makes it easy to carry around, while not foregoing the power to slice through things with ease and control. Its flatness and length is also significant, in that it can be used to gently scrape and rub things, reach for things at a distance, and lift or touch things too hot to handle. In many cases it becomes an extension of the arm, to stab into and thus grasp a piece of wood just out of reach, pull something down from the rafters, or pat down the flame on thatched roofs as the story above demonstrated. As we shall learn shortly, it is also used in displays of aggression, in fights, and in ritual slaps administered to diffuse tension.

Its sharpness and versatility is also significant for another reason. The vulnerability of humans, it is said, is not merely due to vengeful spirits penetrating bodies and causing illness from the ‘inside’. Humans are also susceptible to harm from the outside too, due specifically to the density of their flesh (Sp. *carne*). Human bodies are said to be ‘soft’ (Sp. *blando*), as Mauricio described it, ‘Like a banana, not a rock; illness can enter us and if you take a machete to us we cut easily.’ Indeed, the myth of the origin of the Sanema, described in Chapter 3, tells of Sanema bodies created from the ‘trash’ of weak and fragile wood (see Appendix 6). As Chapter 5 also illustrated, the origin of women (Adam’s flesh) and the nature of their work causes their bodies to manifest in even ‘softer’ forms than those of men. However, the easy laceration of flesh that yields to the gash of a metal edge is significant in the Sanema’s interpretation and use of the machete as a symbol of power and intimidation, and one that can be effortlessly wielded. Beyond a mere prosaic implement, it becomes rather more like an adornment, perhaps not unlike beads, and the ideal characters in mythology are often described as clean, fragrant, adorned with bright red loin-cloths, red annatto patterns on the skin, feathers in the ears, and a sharpened machete in hand (see Mattéi Muller 2007: 14-15). It is clear to see, then, that machetes have unique material properties that are utilised for a number of different purposes, not merely utilitarian ones. The following sections will explore further the important role of the machete in the central moral conducts of fear and fearlessness.

### Accompanying Fear

During fieldwork, I came to understand the notion of fear as something that pervades everyday Sanema life, with the morpheme *kili*—whose rudimentary translation is ‘fear’—being uttered frequently with diverse connotations. It can mean foreboding and apprehension in the most recognisable sense, such as the fear of sorcerers prevalent during my fieldwork period. It also encompasses terms such as embarrassment, shame, wariness, prudishness, modesty, timidity and cowardice.

One of the most significant semantic affiliates of the *kili* stem, however, is the concept of respect, vital to a number of kin relationships that are defined by compliance and humility. It took me a while to understand, for instance, why certain men would sit facing the wall in the corner of the room during large gatherings in my household, their bare backs a striking impasse to sociality while everyone around them chattered and laughed. I realised only after some time that my host mother, Anita, was their mother-in-law (Sa. *pisisisoma*) and so they were forbidden to even face in her direction. I had come across descriptions of this so-called ‘fear-shame’ before, but had no idea that it would reveal itself so strikingly in the physical response of so many men. In the process of ‘paying for the daughter’ through a period of bride service (Sa. *sujamo*) up until his second child is born, the son-in-law’s autonomy is restricted due to his obligations towards his in-laws during uxorilocal residence. Crucially, these men must exhibit extreme deference towards their parents-in-law during this time,<sup>61</sup> forbidden to address them or even to look at them, a physical presence (or indeed absence) described as ‘mother-in-law fear’ (Sa. *kamani pisisima na kilipa kamani pusapa kilibai*).<sup>62</sup>

In addition to this submissive conduct, it is principally through labour that a son-in-law is duty-bound to assist his affines, and in which this fear-shame, or respect, also manifests. A number of the bride service tasks that a son-in-law is pledged to carry out will involve the use of his machete. For many months of the year he will chop down large trees and hack away at the undergrowth to clear land for in-law gardens. Thereafter he will use his machete throughout the year to pry out the

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<sup>61</sup> Here I use the term ‘in-law’ specifically for the parents-in-law, and affines for other general members of the spouse’s family.

<sup>62</sup> For Sanema descriptions of this phenomenon, see the myth of Waso Osowai in Appendix 11 (see also Kopenawa and Albert 2013: 499, n. 47).

weeds from those gardens, to cut up the firewood that he then hauls back to his affinal household, to chop down and trim small trees and vines deployed in house construction, and shave off the sharp edges of reeds used in casaba production baskets. After hunting, the machete will cleave the meat into sections to share amongst his affines, to dig in the earth and search for worms so that he may return to the house with offers of fish, and so on. The machete is, in this manner, integral to his bride service and, in turn, to his role as a ‘fearful’—and thus highly regarded—son-in-law. Lazy (Sa. *moi*, which can also mean soft and lax) and ‘disrespectful’ sons-in-law do not regularly deploy their machetes; that is, they do not reliably engage in their bride service labour, choosing instead to purchase football boots and disappear for weeks at a time to the cities where a machete is redundant. Possession of a well-sharpened machete is thus a symbol of willingness to work (Sa. *ote*—hardworking), specifically for one’s in-laws.

Commitment to kin and spouse is furthermore couched in terms of fear-respect. My assistant Mauricio often scolded his sister for not ‘fearing’ their mother despite that fact that she was old and increasingly feeble. In another example, during a matrimonial fight in Ulinuwiña, a wife repeatedly asked her husband between sobs: ‘Why aren’t you afraid of me?’ (*wina pi kusalo kamisia na wa kili mi ipö?*), meaning ‘why don’t you respect me?’ These affective registers of consanguineal and conjugal respect are also reflected in the actions and interchanges of machetes, in the gift of a new metal file, or in the sharpening of other people’s machetes. A woman’s machete accompanies her almost everywhere in her role as producer of the casaba bread staple, a process that she performs daily with her most intimate female kin, and the results of which she regularly offers to her husband and their offspring. The machete is used to prepare the yucca cuttings, to weed the gardens, to pull up and peel the yucca roots, to cut the firewood used to roast the cassava, and to shape and flip the bread on the hot griddle. Indeed, employing machetes in these important tasks draws one into a social nexus, evident when I brought my own machete to the community for the first time. This act seemed to cement my relationship with the women in my family, as it marked my immersion into subsistence tasks as well as my link in networks of machete sharing and lending.

This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 22: Woman peeling yucca with a machete**

The linguistic terrain of *kili* is also bound up with important notions of dependence and subservience, as in the case of dogs who are often described as ‘*pebali kiliai*’ (lit. ‘poor little fearful one’) when they beg submissively. Furthermore, many describe their relationship with the neighbouring Ye’kwana with the term ‘fear’, which in this case manifests as a deferential demeanour. Fear in this context is as close as one can come to the concept of inequality in Sanema vernacular. As has so far been illustrated, though, this notion of fear is constituent of a wider moral code, and predicated upon the virtues of reverence and loyalty on the part of the submissive party, rather than on coercion on the part of the domineering group. In this sense of *kili*, it could be argued that the machete has manifestly made the Sanema who they are today; that is, in distinction to other Yanomami language groups. Decades of intimate contact with the Ye’kwana, a relationship that was outlined in Chapter 4, was integrally tied up with the machete, and more specifically, with the Sanema desire to obtain the machete. The mythology presented in Chapter 3 revealed that the Sanema forefathers received nothing while the Ye’kwana were bequeathed with abundant resources from the creator Omawö. Since as far back as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (see

Arvelo-Jiménez 1974: 15-27), the Ye'kwana have been (and remain so for many communities) the main source of steel tools for the Sanema, acting as mediators to *criollo* traders and missionaries, with whom they had a significantly longer history of relations.

Sanema life histories that were collected during fieldwork recount a period of perpetual fleeing from enemies, disease and sorcerer attacks (described as 'the great hunger', see below, see also Appendix 13) in the time of the fathers and grandfathers. These stories told of repeated resettlements, each of which required the gruelling undertaking of creating new gardens from scratch. This process took several months even with a machete, but when using only rudimentary tools many went hungry waiting for the first harvest. They either relied only on forest fruits to sustain themselves, or more recently were compelled to live temporarily with the Ye'kwana who supplied them with minimum food in exchange for labour.<sup>63</sup> Inter-community competition over even the smallest and worn-down knives was so rife among the Sanema in these times that an explorer named Vinci evocatively pondered the potential impact of his own supply of steel trade goods during an expedition to the region in the 1950s. He stated that, 'A store of goods like that would have set in motion every Shirian [Sanema] from the Caura to the Orinoco and enough battles would have been fought over it to destroy the entire race' (Vinci 1959: 186-87). Seen in this light, it is hardly surprising that the Sanema aligned themselves with the Ye'kwana and adapted their way of life as a result; all in order to access these highly valuable metal tools. Hence, this long-term and influential affiliation with the neighbouring group—a relationship defined by 'fear' (although in Chapter 4 I argue that this fear is a form of predation)—was motivated by an extreme urgency and eagerness for the machetes that radically enhanced their daily lives, well-being and even their basic survival.

The impression one undoubtedly gains from these descriptions of either placid faithfulness or submissive obedience may seem to be the converse to Alonzo-Patasibi's rage—and the way that he brandished his machete—in the opening vignette. In fact, fear is only one component to the complex moral repertoire of Sanema lived worlds. Indeed, while many anthropologists recount stories of their

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<sup>63</sup> See the story of the search for Maduaña (Appendix 3) in which, during the trip downstream, the Sanema were on several occasions dependent on Ye'kwana communities in the process of setting up their own new site.

gradual acceptance into their host communities through a mastery over the language or the regular sharing of food, my hosts would joke that I would not become truly Sanema until I had gotten into a fight. In reality, what I found often marked Sanema sociality was the incongruity between timorous anxiety and proclamations of courageous ferocity. Fear—*kili*—occupies a complex domain of interrelated values, of which fearlessness—*waitili*—is also a part. Thwarting fear became an important objective in many settings, accomplished specifically through radical expressions of fearlessness. In this, the machete also takes centre stage.

### **Empowering Fearlessness**

We have seen thus far how the machete is central to tasks, pursuits and emotive registers associated with respect and deference. I now turn to an exploration of the counter notion of fearlessness (Sa. *waitili*)—the term that was used to describe Alonzo-Patasibi during his outburst—and how it too is identified with the machete.

The period of *kili* that is associated with bride service paradoxically coincides with a time often described as an ‘ending of fear’ (Sa. *kili mapa soma*) in which transformative encounters usher the way into adulthood after the coming of age rites (Sa. *jokölo* for girls, and *manokosimo* for boys). The ‘ending of fear’ was often associated with the accumulation of experiences and knowledge ranging from the first sexual experiences to the first long trip to far-off regions (see Chapter 7), all of which marked crucial moments in the route to becoming self-reliant and valiant adults. Among men, as shall be demonstrated later in the chapter, the first machete slaps were also significant in their dissolution of youthful fear and their gradual maturation into brave experienced men. One’s diminishing fear additionally supplants the need for continual protection by parents, as Anita described when referring to her independent children: ‘Now all my children have grown. If people want to fight with them, they aren’t afraid now because they are already big.’ In the contemporary context, the quintessence of fearlessness was increasingly associated with regular encounters with the non-indigenous world, the knowledge of which bestows one with great prestige. It is said that young men who go to high school in Maripa are ‘not afraid’, because they ‘can talk to *criollos*’ and make many friends of many different ethnic groups who also reside there. Not only can one gradually ‘end’ their youthful



fear, but in so doing they can also become positively fearless—*waitili*—a concept often encapsulated with the machete.

To have a machete is to be armed, and to be armed implies one's willingness to fight. When talking of the risks involved in mining or portaging petrol over the waterfalls, Raul spoke of the need to have a machete. He told me: 'If you are walking in the forest with your gold, four men might come at you with machetes, so you have to flee. You cannot walk around without your machete.' During altercations, the assertion that 'I'm going to look for my machete' is a euphemism or threat to imply an intention to use one's machete to strike the other. To my horror and bewilderment, I even heard there was a rumour circulating that that I myself had fought the military with my machete when they passed through Maduaña one day, that I had shouted 'bring me my machete quickly!' With no further information to offer on the rumour, or why it had been circulating in the first place, the young man recounting the story simply concluded that '*criollos* are like that, they get angry, they are *waitili*.'

The equivalent Yanomami term—*waitheri*—was notoriously associated with their reputation as a violent people. The term was translated into 'fierce' by Napoleon Chagnon and utilised in the title of his controversial monograph *The Fierce People* (1968). Lizot, however, cautions that the term is far more complex than a one-dimensional concept of hostility. While it fundamentally characterises a desire for vengeance, this does not automatically infer that such processes are carried out in a spontaneously aggressive manner. Rather, *waitheri* should be understood as meaning 'courageous', 'gallant', 'bold', 'reckless', and 'stoic' (Lizot 1994: 857). In fact, for the Yanomami, the animal that embodies *waitheri* is not the deadly jaguar as one might expect, but the gentle sloth for being able to 'endure the greatest physical or psychological suffering' (Lizot 1994: 857).

The Sanema seemed to identify states of *waitili* as paradoxically both agreeable and abhorrent. This is because admirable traits of courage, resoluteness and power were to some extent impelled by distinctly unfavourable attributes such as aggression, unpredictability and recklessness. It was telling, for instance, that my assistant would habitually translate the term '*sa waitili*' (I'm fearless) into Spanish as '*soy mala gente*' (I'm a bad person), but with a curiously admiring tone. It seemed that *waitili* could be simultaneously bad and good (see also Cepek 2008: 346; Gow 2000: 135-40 for similar examples of competing notions in one concept).

To highlight this point further, I shall here take a brief interlude from the machete in order to gain a deeper understanding of this type of pluralism and competing rationales that emerge from the same concept. Not long after the incident with Alonzo-Patasibi, the riddle of *waitili* was brought home to me during a community gathering in which we were watching one of the immensely popular pay-back movies on Santiago's DVD player. Suddenly, a young woman near me shouted at the screen, 'Kill Chuck Norris, he's bad!' Even in the dim light emitting from the screen, I could see an intense irritation on her face, her brow furrowed in contempt for the protagonist of the movie. But she was not the only one to have an aversion towards Chuck Norris, as later another person chimed in through the darkness, 'Chuck Norris doesn't die! Why don't they shoot him properly so he dies?' and in a later scene another cried out, 'Look Chuck Norris, you have women dancing for you, so you don't always have to kill people!' Throughout the movie, people continued to offer their own comments about Chuck Norris and their desires to have him expire in all manner of ways.

Leading up to this point, I had become accustomed to the delight expressed in martial arts movies that pertains to a deep respect not only for the characters' great strength and skill in fighting (see also High 2010 for a similar case among the Waorani), but more significantly in their determination to gain vengeance for injustices enacted against their 'people', a common theme in such movies. Both pursuits are associated with the characteristic of *waitili* (fearlessness). So I was a little surprised on the evening described above that many in attendance seemed to despise Chuck Norris to such an impressive degree. This character judgement had not emerged from viewing a single movie, however, but had developed from an intricate assessment of his whole repertoire of movies, of which they had seen countless. In this instance, Chuck Norris was indeed gaining vengeance: as one viewer described it to me, 'He wanted to wage war so that he could bring his people back to his community', so I was unsure as to why the reaction against him was so unfavourable.

The following day I asked my assistant Mauricio about it and he explained that many people in Maduaña do not like Chuck Norris because, he told me, 'He never forgives people, he will always kill them. Some people don't like that, even though he is trying to protect his people and bring them back to his community.' Despite the fact that Chuck Norris was performing a highly valued action—gaining

vengeance—the general reaction suggested that he was not following through with it in entirely the correct manner. To a degree, Mauricio’s explanation highlights the tension between the values of vengeance and the missionary-introduced concept of forgiveness. Indeed, the Maduaña pastor often emphasised that God did not take revenge for the murder of his only son, and so why should the Sanema? However, what I will illustrate in this chapter is that ‘forgiveness’ could also be seen as a Sanema attempt to balance the two central ethical values of fearlessness and fear, and the processes of ‘equalisation’ (*noa kōa* or *mapa so ke*) that enable this balance.

Recall that the reaction to Alonzo-Patasibi was similar to that of Chuck Norris. While his rampage was to be expected on one level—as we shall see in a moment, vengeance is an expression of true humanity among the Sanema—the manner in which Alonzo-Patasibi was executing it—waving his machete about indiscriminately and threatening a number of people with it—was not considered acceptable to most. He was, most people stated, ‘too angry’ (Sa. *jōlapata*), or ‘got angry quickly’ (i.e. having uncontrolled anger). In fact, although Alonzo-Patasibi was known to be *waitili*, he was far from admired for this trait, and was instead mistrusted and at times simply avoided. This was not least due to his status as a new arrival in the community with no immediate kin connections, which itself often arouses suspicion. The other reason he was regarded with wariness was his unpredictability: while one minute he could be friendly and playful, the next he was enraged and uncontrollable, particularly when alcohol (Sa. *amitu*) was circulating. There was also a rumour that he had killed his first wife in a rage many years prior, and had fled his community before her family could satisfactorily gain vengeance.

The machete materialises in these stories of fearlessness most notably in historical accounts of unbridled *waitili*, which are the genre of narratives most often recounted as definitive moments in the history of a kin group. A number of people in my host family, for instance, told me ‘the story of Lapatishioma’, the ‘tall woman’, which highlights the machete’s role as facilitator in settings of fearlessness, and indeed of outright fierceness. This story took place when my now-ageing host parents, Anita and René, were a young couple with two young children, a time in which they regularly moved from place to place with ‘Anita’s father’s people’. This era was one often termed *ojipata*—‘the great hunger’—in which groups were continually on the move, ‘escaping’ disease and sorcerers, as alluded to earlier (see also Colchester

1982: 91-94).<sup>64</sup> One day the Walaitil people, known to be fierce, came to visit Anita's family after a period of great illness. All of the Walaitili women had died from disease and so the visitors wanted to take Lapatishioma, a widow from Anita's group. The people of the community refused to let her be taken and so a struggle ensued in which each party grabbed an arm of Lapatishioma and pulled with all their might in a cruel tug of war common in abduction scenes among the Yanomami and Sanema (see Valero 1970: 114-5). After several hours of pulling, the scuffle escalated into a full-blown fight with machetes. Anita tells the story:

The hairy one cut my father's head with a short machete, *CHANG!* 'Where is my machete?! My machete!' called my father. His head was full of blood. My husband passed him his machete and he also began to '*machetear*' [fight with machete]. My father's machete was much longer, thicker and sharper than the other man's. When my father swung at him [*whistles*], the hairy one moved his head out of the way and my father cut him from here to here [indicates a line from the back of the shoulder over the front and down diagonally to the chest]. A lot of blood came out and he eventually died.<sup>65</sup>

By the time the battle of that day finally ceased, two of the Walaitili were dead and two of Anita's people also died from injuries. Some members of Anita's family were so enraged that they vowed to pursue the enemy group and retaliate, but one woman reminded them of this opportunity to maintain equilibrium. 'The war is over' she said, 'two of theirs died, two of ours died, we are equal. I don't want more!' They finally agreed and instead decided to flee far from their enemies to a new place upstream, and they continued to 'move around like peccaries', as Anita put it.

Her story highlighted well the genre of unbridled hostility and bloodshed that prevailed in tales of times past. This violence occurred amidst the backdrop of wider national and economic factors, of colonial encroachment into Amazonian territory, evidenced in the epidemic that had brought the Walaitili there in the first place. Uncontrolled or 'quick' anger and the improper use of the machete were common themes in these tales of past fights, precarious equilibriums and moral anxieties. We have seen that these cases ultimately culminated not in continued fearlessness, but in

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<sup>64</sup> These groups were likely warring for several reasons that related to disease, such as the continual movement into enemy territory and the competition for steel tools as a result of repeatedly establishing new gardens.

<sup>65</sup> See a similar story of fighting with machetes in Colchester (1982: 190).

fear; that is, dependence on their powerful Ye'kwana neighbours as a way to procure the steel tools that facilitated their continual fleeing (in order to clear land for new gardens).

In her story, Anita's family preferred to decamp and move away rather than gain further vengeance as they were, as the old woman put it, 'equal, with the two deaths either side'. Yet, without this equalisation, revenge—*noa kōa*—is an expected outcome, because it is also a fundamental Sanema virtue. Alonzo-Patasibi's reaction to his assailant in the opening vignette was to some extent considered normal precisely on these grounds; he was, after all, merely seeking vengeance. Thus, despite condemnation of the unbridled *waitili* of the past, when utilised in processes of vengeance and return, it too becomes an essential moral virtue.

### **Facilitating Revenge**

Having unpacked the two multifaceted and interrelated terms of fear and fearlessness in an attempt to underscore how morality is expressed through the use of things, in this section I explore the contexts in which fear recedes to the background and fearlessness becomes key to processes of *noa kōa*—vengeance. It is in cases of return and retaliation that *kili* (fear) is considered abhorrent and becomes negatively associated with femininity and timorousness (see a similar case in Rival 2005).<sup>66</sup> Being fearful and weak in this way is considered particularly ill-suited to contexts in which revenge must prevail, and was articulated thus on several occasions. *Waitili*, on the other hand, is valued in these cases because its accompanying aggression generates virtuous vengeful acts. Indeed, Mattei defined the Yanomami term *waitheri* as 'a degree of aggressiveness associated with a sense of honour that can generate vengeful acts' (2007: 349). Acts of *noa kōa* were daily occurrences in my field site but were most often small-scale tit-for-tat, particularly noticeable between children because among them it is so intentionally and visibly played out. It was almost amusing to observe the series of steps children were put through in order to conscientiously act out *noa kōa*: the perpetrator is held still while the original victim retaliates with counter-blows, sometimes with their hands forced to hit. Children are ardently urged to perform retribution during squabbles from a very young age (see

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<sup>66</sup> Having said that, there are in fact many cases and proclamations of women's fearlessness.

Colchester 1982: 429-30; see also Lizot 1994: 230 for examples among the Yanomami), and similar processes continue throughout life.

Here again the machete looms large in its prototypical function as an instrument of physical strength and reprisal, as in the case above in which Alonzo-Patasibi brandished his machete to seek retaliation for the attack against him. In fact, despite historical accounts of the Sanema's attainment of steel tools from their Ye'kwana neighbours described above, the origin of machetes as recounted by the Sanema tells a different story, of its source in mythological time and its significance in processes of revenge. The most popular and frequently recounted myth during my fieldwork was that of the mythological ancestor Pumutuma—the foul-smelling opossum (see complete myth in Appendix 10). In an abridged version of the myth, Pumutuma fled his community after murdering his rival, but was pursued by the victim's vengeful family. The chase led to the huge tree of life, which Pumutuma scaled to escape his aggressors. Having no tools of their own, the family sought the assistance of the diverse forest birds to fell the tree with their machete-beaks. All the birds assembled in the vengeance 'raid' and started the task of hacking away at the gigantic tree, but it was such a gruelling undertaking that it left most of their beaks worn down to small blunt protrusions or thin strips. Only the toucan, who retains its large machete beak, did not participate in this felling due to his tardy appearance at the raid.

Machetes also appeared in the spirit realm and were in fact fundamental to the shaman's process of healing. Many shamans described their *jikula* spirit allies as needing tools to perform their healing, exemplified in the description offered to me by one shaman:

[My *jikula*] has white cotton thread on his arms, a bright red loincloth and a cap on his head. In his right hand he has a machete and in the left he has an arrow. When someone is ill, he cures the illness with the machete. Kle, kle, kle [cutting]! When a child is ill, the *jikula* uses the machete and the arrow to kill the animal that is making him ill. He always arrives like this.

In this context, the machete was used to protect kin in the slaying of spirits that caused sickness. This curing through the hacking of malicious spirits was also described as revenge for the injury inflicted upon the infirm (described as an ambush by Taylor 1979: 217).

The semantic field of *noa*—return—is the fundamental concept with which to understand vengeance as a moral compulsion. *Noa* can be understood in its elemental form as ‘exchange’, summarised by Colchester as ‘meaning “payment”, “revenge”, “consequence”, or “price” according to the context. In sum, the word implies inevitable consequence, a necessary follow up’ (Colchester 1982: 493). Similarly, Lizot (1994) recognised an affiliation between the Yanomami terms *yuo* ‘to take revenge’, and *kôãmai* ‘to reciprocate’, two terms that are ‘not perceived as antithetical but as similar expressions of exchange and reciprocity: nothing more than two modalities’ (1994: 232). These two terms are expressions of two dominant virtues in Yanomami life, as Lizot describes it: courage and generosity. Since an accomplished man must excel in reciprocity through both of these virtuous characteristics, he is at the same time both a respected giver of gifts (Yanomami: *shi ihite*—generous) and taker of revenge (Yanomami: *waitheri*—fierce).

The fact that ‘follow-up’ is ‘inevitable’, as Colchester states, suggests that it is somehow an inherent human drive. This was articulated on one occasion in Ulinuwĩña when a man hit his wife during a particularly inebriated party, but the woman had not retaliated. As she sobbed, her female companions pressed a machete into her hand while repeatedly goading her to take revenge, as was the honourable practice in such cases. One woman shouted: ‘You are afraid! You don’t hit your husband, you are not a person!’ When I recounted this story to one of my assistants at a later date he agreed, explaining that, ‘She is not Sanema (i.e. human) because she did not take revenge. If you hit a dog, the dog doesn’t hit back, so she is like a dog.’

Colchester noted that that the drive for retribution is in fact constituent of the human soul, a ‘spirit of revenge’ (Sa. *okola*) that is utilised by women in spells to take revenge on killers of the dead (1982: 449). Viveiros de Castro (2011) likewise contends in a discussion on the ‘inconsistency’ of indigenous Christian conversion, that vengeance was the unshakable core of humanity according to many Amerindians. The Tupinambá were willing to agree to all other terms of conversion by missionaries in 16<sup>th</sup> century Brazil, including renouncing cannibalism, polygamy and alcohol consumption. Vengeance against enemies, however, was something they were staunchly unwilling to forego, being the greatest honour a man can have because ‘warfare and vengeance were synonymous with being a proper man’ (2011: 53). In this way, and contrary to Christian ethics, it was the acts of violence that were the

indications of bravery and the means to peace in the hereafter. Here we see why Mauricio's statement that 'some people do not like Chuck Norris because he does not forgive' might not necessarily imply incommensurability between forgiveness and vengeance. Just as the Tupinambá believe that vengeance allows tranquillity in the afterlife, the Sanema encompass 'equalisation' into their notions of forgiveness. The ideas of cancelling out is central to this value of 'return'—*noa kōa*.

It is possible to see why *kili* (fear)—which immobilises these essential processes of vengeance—must at times be overcome, and accordingly why alcohol is so relished among many Sanema. Alcohol (Sa. *amitu*) has become essential in subjugating the profound restrictions brought about by '*kili*', liberating one from the constraints of social norms and taboos that govern moral behaviour. In many ways, Maduaña would become an entirely different community when alcohol was circulating. It would buzz with activity, laughter and singing. In defiance of everyday roles, people confidently visited houses they normally did not enter (for reasons of affinity or 'otherness'), unflinchingly touched those they would ordinarily barely approach, and even uttered the names of the dead. Men and women flirted and, as Alonzo-Patasibi's example above highlights, people regularly fought and strutted around shouting, '*Sa kili mai ke!*' (I'm not afraid!).

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, *waitili* and vengeance cannot be allowed to entirely consume *kili*, because in so doing, one risks 'forgetting' kin and becoming alarmingly anti-social. Those who are overcome by the desire for vengeance become 'kinless' because rage causes them to behave like dangerous and radical 'others'.<sup>67</sup> They are also said to be without kin because they may have to permanently flee their community after homicidal acts (as Alonzo-Patasibi is said to have done in his youth), or because those who have murdered must temporarily separate themselves from kin, a ritual known as *kanene*—'blood guilt'. During one fight, an old man named Victor spoke up amidst the chatter of the spectators on this very topic. He described how women no longer want to be with their husbands once they have killed a man, stressing that, 'those who become an assassin can't have sex with their wives and they can't eat with their children because it's dangerous. So if you kill a man you will become like a demon (Sa. *ai pupo*).'

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<sup>67</sup> Myers similarly describes vengeful Pintupi becoming 'crazy, deaf and losing their ideas' (1988: 598).



In this sense, while to some degree *waitili* is tolerated as an expression of autonomy, of asserting one's intentionality and differentiation beyond kin roles, it is nevertheless a threat for that very same reason. Sinister stories of unbridled revenge, in which people died horrific deaths from vengeance attacks, are recounted as testament to the volatility of such emotions. If *waitili* differentiates, then excessive *waitili* can cause one to become asocial or even inhuman—a demon, as Victor put it. Rival (2005) similarly illustrated the alterity that comes about as a result of homicidal rage among the Huaorani, an emotion that de-humanises and 'turns the killer into a being with no relatives' (2005: 296). Indeed, we saw from Alonzo-Patasibi's imitation of a peccary's furious tooth-clacking, that becoming *waitili* signals a 'transformation' into fierce animality.<sup>68</sup> In similar ways, other men are also said to roar like jaguars, or growl like angry roosters when enraged. And yet, such changes in character are crucial to certain Sanema activities—hunting and shamanising in particular—that simultaneously mark the actor as *waitili*. In these activities, a familiarity with danger, and an aptitude to combat it (see also Cepek 2008), become fundamental to the well-being and social reproduction of society. As such, reconciling fear and fearlessness becomes all the more vital.

When Victor talks of demons, he could also be referring to *oka töpö*, a mysterious people who are said to live for the purposes of irrational murder and indiscriminate retribution alone (see also Whitehead 2002 for similar phenomenon of 'kanaima'), also often referred to as 'demons'.<sup>69</sup> Although no one I spoke to ever confirmed to having seen *oka töpö*, several family members of each person I interviewed during fieldwork died from *oka töpö* attacks, and there were even those who were the sole survivors of their entire family (see Appendix 13 for Fabiana's story of escape from *oka töpö*). What is key, however, is that rumours inevitably emerged that the evasive *oka töpö* admit to having killed for vengeance.<sup>70</sup> When asked why *oka töpö* would want to kill the people in Maduaña, most simply stated that, '*oka töpö* love to kill Sanema', as though this defined their very existence. The

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<sup>68</sup> See chapter 5 (p. 127) in which I describe transformation as an undesirable state of the mind that results from immoral acts.

<sup>69</sup> Their name may also stem from the same semantic root as the term *okola* that Colchester describes as the spirit of revenge (1981: 449).

<sup>70</sup> I am not clear of the links of communication between the *oka töpö* and the Sanema such that rumours can travel back to the family of the deceased. It is most probably the nature of rumour itself that is important here. Although inaccurate and sensationalised, rumours are important forms of information dissemination, and markers of anxiety (see Ramos 1979).

*oka töpö* illustrate that unchecked *waitili* and the ensuing revenge can define one as inhuman, asocial, and even a ‘demon’.

### **Resolving Conflict**

As we have seen, *noa kōa* (vengeance) is a reflection of true humanity and a fundamental virtue, not merely because it concerns a compulsion to avenge oneself, but also because it is a demonstration of true commitment to kin, as one man described it to me: ‘If your brother is killed and you gain vengeance, this means that you loved your brother’. Not only is it the role of family members to take revenge for wrongs exacted upon kin, but it is also the duty of ‘your similars’ to ‘stand behind you in a fight’. Indeed, unlike the story of Lapatishioma and cases presented of Yanomami violence (e.g. Chagnon 1968: Chapter 5), most present-day cases of *noa kōa* among the Sanema tend to be internal disputes related to moral misdeeds rather than intercommunity revenge raids in response to deaths or murders. This is partly due to the fact that in the contemporary context communities tend to remain stable and continually grow, whereas in the past they were more likely to fission, with the resulting communities becoming enemies.

Being present during fights is essential and, as we saw in Alonzo-Patasibi’s case, if the familiar sound of shouting is heard, all activity will cease, machetes will be seized, and a flood of villagers will pelt in the direction of the noise or assembling crowd. No matter what the time, day or night, witnessing these arguments first-hand was vital, and running to observe them was a large part of my fieldwork experience. But what often struck me most vividly was the instinctual snatch of a machete, a reflex that guaranteed a powerful fortification of armed kin immediately ready for action, or who could swiftly pass a machete to the combatant if they were unarmed. Indeed, the term ‘*ipa aitö*’ (my family/my others) was at one point described to me by Marco as meaning ‘my bodyguards’ (Sp. *mis guardaespaldas*, also *ipa palowee töpö*) as they ‘stand behind you and protect you during a fight’. In this sense, kinship is not merely epitomised by compassion and the sharing of material things, as was demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 5, but also by the protection enabled through material things—in this case the machete. The importance of kin protection is perhaps most salient when withheld, as in the case of rape (Sa. *mamopolo*). From what I could gather, women were most often raped when their kin decided to punish them with

moments of inhibited protection, causing them to become ‘kin-less’ and vulnerable (see Ramos 1995: 109 on kin protection among the Sanema).

This primacy of protection is not to suggest that fights never occurred between kin, and indeed vexation at kin’s irritating or depraved behaviour was perhaps the most common source of arguments and fights in my field site. Nena, for instance, flew into a rage one day because her eldest daughter—who had long since married, built her own house and had several children—continued to cook at her mother’s hearth and cause much tension in the house with the incessant castigation of her own small children. Nena had threatened to strike her daughter with a machete on behalf of her grandchildren. In some cases, fights became more serious and choices had to be made as to whom one would side with. Anita’s five sons were in the process of schism during my fieldwork as the youngest had slept with the wife of the eldest. In this case, the brothers divided by age, with the older brothers unifying against the younger ones.

Crucially, however, these ‘bodyguards’ also attend disputes in order to act as a mediating and adjudicating presence in disagreements, a form of council where strict hierarchy is by and large absent. Arguments being public affairs, spectators had their say on the predicament, the incidents that led up to the disagreement, anecdotes of similar cases in the past, or suggestions of adequate forms of justice. Victor’s exhortative speech about blood-guilt above is one such case in which narratives offer euphemistic proposals for conflict resolution. In other fights, people interjected with statements—often of opposing views—such as ‘you have to fight, but once you fight, you must be friendly again. It must be like this’ or ‘if you fight with your sister, you cannot call her “sister” any more, you will be enemies.’ Witnessing fights is also vital for ensuring that justice, in the form of *noa kōa*, is appropriately observed, or to decide when the conflict has reached its completion.

Resolution or compensation may be sought in a number of ways in Sanema communities. In Maduaña, for instance, two primary forms of redress would be pursued, depending on the offence. The preferred form for community leaders, likely influenced by missionary and *criollo* forms of justice and lawfulness, would be trial-like meetings set up by the leader or schoolteacher in which each of the accused voiced their opinion, and closure was sought (see a similar example among the Urarina in Walker 2015: 53). However, most often community leaders would not be

present to adjudicate these meetings, as they regularly travelled to the cities to run errands (Sp. *diligencia*). Their absence often resulted in a default to the preferred form of justice for all other residents—machete slaps.

While machetes are brandished as a sign of fearlessness (*waitili*), unlike in the historical narratives presented above, they are currently rarely used with complete abandon during fights. Indeed, what made the cases of Chuck Norris and Alonzo Patasibi troublesome for some was that during most altercations within the community, the preferred form of resolution is highly controlled, and consisted of reciprocated and regulated counter-blows much like those mentioned earlier between children. This is where the machete comes in as a vital instrument of justice. The broad side of the machete is used in highly controlled ‘slaps’ on the offender’s back for an agreed number of times while an audience observes. If spectators believe that an argument between two people is level, for example, they might agree that each should receive two hits from the other in order to diffuse tensions and cause them to be ‘equal’ in processes of *noa kōa*. This reciprocated action, as alluded to earlier, is a Sanema variant of forgiveness. During one dispute in Maduaña, for instance, Victor, an old man known for being *waitili*, was intent on gaining justice on behalf of his brother, whose house was destroyed by a youth—Nelson—while he was away in the city. Victor charged over to Nelson’s house at dawn with machete in hand and a small crowd of residents trailing behind him. After much shouting and animated discussion in the presence of co-residents, it was decided that the contemptuous-looking Nelson should receive two machete slaps from Victor for his mischievous behaviour.<sup>71</sup>

Nelson crouched slightly, hugging his chest and squeezing his eyes shut while Victor held his machete aloft. There was a slight pause and Victor seemed to linger on his tiptoes for a moment. He then drew the machete towards Nelson with all his might and they both grunted as the flat side of the blade let out a loud clap against Nelson’s skin. Victor repeated this once more and then Nelson straightened up with eyes watering, before nonchalantly walking off through the chattering crowd. His back had two distinctive machete-shaped red marks that over the days blistered and eventually turned into scars (see Figure 22). Machete slaps, I would later be told, are important for ‘solving problems’ and are daily occurrences in larger communities where people

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<sup>71</sup> This process is not entirely specific to men. Women do give and receive machete slaps, but I was told that they most regularly carry out the same process with poles to the head.

live with many ‘others’—people from different lineages or ‘sibs’—as a way to maintain collective peace. Like the childhood retribution described above, these retaliatory slaps are part of a system of *noa kōa* and are said to end tensions and re-establish equilibrium, a conscious and creative diversion of the spiralling tit-for-tat that is widely considered detrimental to collective well-being. Equalisation processes such as these are important because *noa kōa* is a duty or compulsion for return that does not simply vanish, but must be acted upon.<sup>72</sup> In this sense, *noa kōa* might better be translated as ‘equalisation’ rather than revenge and demonstrated where the notion of forgiveness aligns with the processes in an analogous way.



**Figure 23: Nelson’s back with machete marks**

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<sup>72</sup> However, it is difficult to know to what extent true equivalence is important to contemporary processes of *noa kōa*. In some cases people say that a life must be paid for a life (‘homosubstitution’ Descola 2001: 110), a hit with a hit, and there was a case in which a woman had thrown water on her child and Anita had threatened to throw water on her in return. But in Alonzo-Patasibi’s story, a large and confusing network of ‘payments’ had occurred in which multiple things were exchanged to compensate for wrongdoings. I have also heard cases of headwater communities compensating murders with shotguns or cash rather than another life.

Many men had these machete scars on their backs and were proud of the symbol of bravery and *waitili* (fearlessness) that they displayed. But what these scars also epitomised was an ability to retain a degree of *kili* (fear), a demonstration of self-control and respect for systems of acceptable justice in order to preserve collective tranquillity. The reason that machete slaps were a preferred form of justice over meetings was because the notion that tensions will merely dissipate through talk is not one that the Sanema generally hold. Equalisation is a physical and materialised act.

### **The Machete's Moral Affordances**

We have thus far noted that machetes are used in ethical processes that are negotiated through the material world. The machete exemplifies respect because it is present in processes associated with 'fear'. To bring your well-sharpened machete to labour and production tasks associated with bride service and kin sustenance is to show your 'fear' of those you love and respect. Such connotations associated with its use are embedded within its material properties too. In Anita's story, for instance, fighting with machetes was described with the term *padima*, which my assistant later translated into Spanish as '*machetear*', a verb meaning to cut or strike with a machete. Though this verb is somewhat common among Spanish speakers, my Sanema friends only ever used it in contexts of fights. When describing labour with a machete, the Spanish verb *cortar* (cut/chop) was most regularly utilised. *Machetear*, on the other hand, was an action more often directed towards people, and striking with a machete was associated with uncontrolled—and thus improper—*waitili*. One friend told me that the 'war' (see pages 55-56) with the Ye'kwana was never discussed because if it were, the Ye'kwana would '*machetear*' the Sanema, as they were said to have done with one man in the past. He elaborated: 'The man went hunting with some Ye'kwana people one day and they started to ask him lots of questions about the war. As he didn't speak Ye'kwana or Spanish he just nodded and so they got angry and chopped him up with their machetes [Sp. *le machetearon*]. So, as a result, the Sanema don't like to tell the story of the war.'

It is clear that the machete's sharpness and capacity to easily cut flesh is utilised in acts of *waitili* and vengeance. However, the machete exhibits more nuanced moral affordances than this: in particular, the grip of the wooden or plastic handle and the

density of the metal. What's also important is the contrast between the sleek and flat surface (Sa. *poa patete*) on one side, complemented by the thin, sharp blade (Sa. *poa mamō*) on the other. When a machete is held, the weight of the metal requires symmetry in the grip, a balance that enables the swing of the blade to be accurate and the correct side to make contact with the thing one is aiming to strike. On a few occasions I was approached by young men seeking bandages for large machete wounds—a large gash on the wrist of one man and a cut on the foot of another—injuries sustained when slicing overgrown grass at the centre of the community. Co-residents would furtively mock such people for not adequately 'dominating' their machetes. The 'balance' required to swing appropriately so that the correct side of the machete's double aspect (the sharp and the flat) makes contact is a skill often possessed by calm and stoic people (see also Overing 1985b: 271 in which she describes the value of 'balanced' emotions among the Piaroa).

It is all the more vital that machetes are handled sufficiently steadily in both body and mind—that is, with a level demeanour—during machete slaps. People often say that a machete must be 'controlled/-dominated' in the correct manner in order to administer the slaps in the proper way, keeping the wrist loose so that it generates the distinctive 'slap' (Sp. *cachetada*) rather than a 'hit' (Sa. *siltō*, Sp. *golpe*). The weight and double aspect of the blade, if not correctly balanced, can become extremely dangerous, as Santiago's story demonstrates. He told me of the incident that led to his family's ultimate split from Sakuniña, and their move to their current territory further north where Maduaña is now situated. After discovering that he had been cuckolded, Santiago pursued *noa kōa* against his adversary:

I was so angry with José and we decided to fight—four slaps [Sp. *cachetadas*] each with the machete. When he hit me it hurt so much. When it was my turn, I must have been holding the handle wrong because when I went to hit him, I cut down the whole of his back. It was a huge wound and there was blood everywhere! He almost died but there happened to be a doctor in the community at the time and he stitched him up—50 stitches! These fights are supposed to solve problems but things got worse after that and they [his wife's family] took my woman away forever.

José was seriously injured but miraculously survived. Santiago admitted, however, that the incorrect grip of the handle occurred due to his emotion of 'pure aggression',

as he put it, and indeed perhaps an underlying desire to kill José. Santiago himself talked about the two ‘sides’ of the machete so that the term to ‘grab a machete badly’ became a euphemism for being overly aggressive and perhaps homicidal.

It was for this reason that the machete became a powerful object of justice and community unity. The danger of machete slaps—a danger that does not exist to nearly the same extent with poles, clubs or fists that were used in the past (see Chagnon 1968: 113-122)—is its double aspect, the unpredictability and potentiality that the steel might strike on its sharp side if not ‘dominated’ properly. Many admit to being terrified to receive machete slaps for this very reason, as one must have an immense trust in the one administering the slaps; not only in their strength, but also in the self-control and commitment to community peace and unity. Failure to maintain control over ‘pure aggression’ or a ‘badly grabbed machete’ may result in death and community fission. Santiago’s incident highlights a case in which the use of the machete did not suffice in diffusing tensions, as the aggression had become insurmountable. In cases such as these, if the machete is not efficacious, fission is the only form of conflict resolution at this stage. For Santiago, the un-managed grip marked the beginning of an on-going feud between his kin and those of his ex-wife and José that could not be resolved through the slap of a machete, and so they decided instead to move far away, northwards and towards *criollo* society.

The qualities of the machete—its double aspect of flat and benign on one side accompanied by sharp and dangerous on the other—and the composure and concentration required to maintain balance in blows facilitate ‘equalisation’ in fights. The machete is a powerful implement in these processes because its material properties demand one to be calm and ultimately forgiving, or else risk being injured. When considering the new sedentary and mutually distanced communities of mixed ‘others’ (see Chapter 2, pages 67-73) that are emerging among the Sanema, it is clear to see why these strategies are becoming more necessary than ever.

## **Conclusion**

Though the material properties of the machete might not be discursively foregrounded, its existence as a material ‘thing’ (*matitö*) provides a tangible doorway into everyday moral exigencies among the Sanema, in this case the balance between fear and fearlessness. As we have seen, the machete reflects ‘fear’—as in respect—in



its use in activities associated with bride service and conjugal tasks. It represents ‘fearlessness’ when wielded in expressions of bold autonomy and resoluteness. In spite of this, though, we saw in the reaction to both Chuck Norris and Alonzo-Patasibi that *waitili* can be taken beyond its acceptable limits. In the latter case, Alonzo-Patasibi’s uncontrolled rage caused him to go on the rampage, gaining haphazard revenge on a number of innocent individuals who he threatened with his machete. Similarly, Chuck Norris was despised by some for what they believed to be arbitrary slayings and excessive anger, despite that fact that he was gaining vengeance for his people. For most, Jackie Chan was far more popular than Chuck Norris because he possessed the perfect combination of the most valued characteristics associated with *waitili*—humour, physical strength and the most admirable form of morally appropriate acts of compensation. That is, he fights his enemies and wins but ultimately pardons them as they run off in fear. Senseless vengeance, as epitomised by the *oka töpö*, impedes this balance required for ethical practices of conviviality.

The value of the machete does not merely emanate from its utility and practicality, then, but is highly valued because its affordances allow for efficacious processes of balance and justice. The unique properties of the sharp and the flat—which no other things possess—are important physical attributes that enable convivial and ethical values to be realised. One could argue that the Sanema, through the machete, are attempting to maintain an Aristotelian mean between two extremes in order to sustain the good life. Crucially, the machete is integral to contemporary processes of justice in machete slaps because a balance is required to administer the correct type of blow, a balance between fearlessness and fear, and a balance between the expectation of revenge and the desire for equalisation and community well-being. Moreover, slaps of the machete are the preferred form of justice because it is a physical, tangible and powerful means through which to execute *noa kōa*. And so, through facilitating such processes of justice, the machete places morality quite literally in the palm of the hand.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Manoeuvring for Knowledge:

#### Experiencing Venezuelan Society with Paper

Marco carefully slid the contents of a large envelope out of its protective sleeve and onto the table in front of us as though it were an exceedingly precious object. Now he finally had in his possession what he had been striving to obtain for months—‘*la guía*’—precious documents necessary for his future enterprise of transporting and selling petrol to the gold mines upstream. On the table lay a stack of papers neatly held together with a paperclip. A small photocopy of an ID card on the top displayed a faded image of someone I did not recognise, and beneath it lay several stamped and signed layers of immaculately preserved forms, letters and receipts. ‘I finally have it!’ Marco beamed triumphantly. ‘Now I can peacefully pass the military with my petrol.’ He was clearly relieved by the newfound freedom that this paperwork facilitated, as it authorised him to transport petrol within the region and potentially sell it in the gold mines upstream. In fact, this *guía* powerfully indexed two pertinent new phenomena increasingly experienced in Amazonian life: bureaucracy and mobility.

This chapter follows a complex journey through the workings of Venezuelan politics that led Marco to this moment with the *guía*, an apprenticeship in paperwork that began with the arrival of the late Hugo Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution. I shall argue that manoeuvrability, both prompted and necessitated by the current political setting, is equally as important as literacy in navigating bureaucratic structures and accessing state resources. The term manoeuvrability is here used to encapsulate the extensive journeying that one must undertake, the bodily movements required to master daily bureaucratic techniques and the social mobility that emerges from increased participation in complex social networks and collaboration with politically powerful actors. A proclivity for manoeuvrability, however, has roots in a long-established moral endeavour associated with the pursuit of fertile exterior knowledge. As we shall see, a motile nature of approaching the world of the ‘other’ has deep roots in Sanema tradition and cosmology in which routes to ‘knowing’ (Sa. *taö*) involve a necessary manoeuvring towards and within the exterior, through both travelling and shamanising.

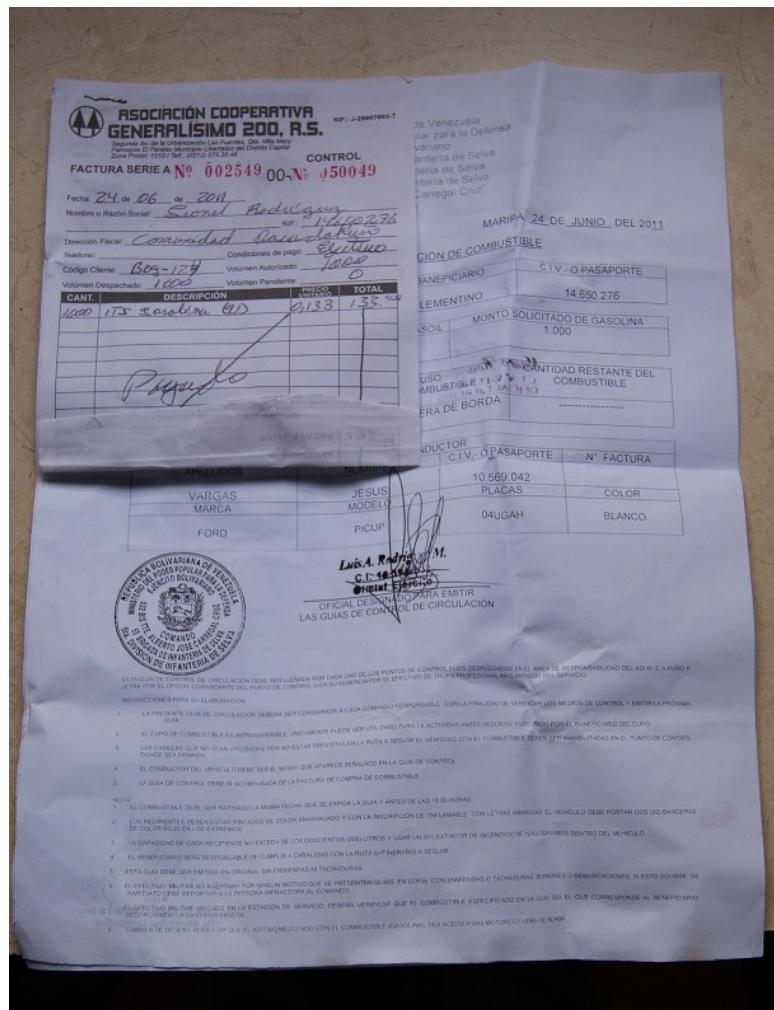


Figure 24: The *guía*

## Paper and the State

Alternative approaches to the study of the state have recently attempted to challenge conventional portrayals of an omnipotent, reified, and unitary entity; instead offering insights into the dispersed, heterogeneous, and opaque sets of everyday administrative practices that constitute what had hitherto been regarded as a self-evident phenomenon (Abrams 1988; Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001: 14; Das and Poole 2004). According to Sharma and Gupta, paperwork is the material medium through which ‘the state comes to be imagined, encountered, and reimagined by the population’ (2006: 12), and indeed the fact that systems of governance are substantiated in written records in this way has clear implications for such mechanisms not only in matters of control and ‘standardisation’ (Scott 1998), but also

in their potential permanence and ability to be manipulated. The efficacy of bureaucratic documents, Hull (2012) suggests, lies in their function as mediators of meaning, as well as their ability to index power, personhood and ideologies beyond their text or representations. As such, it may come as little surprise to discover that fetishism of certain documents such as the ID card seems to be a particular feature of indigenous peoples' experiences with bureaucracy and the state in Latin America (see Guzmán-Gallegos 2009). Gordillo (2006) has noted, for example, that among the Argentinian Chaco, certain documents generate a particular subjectivity in relation to the nation-state, and that their material qualities are thought to bestow a magical essence with the power to protect from violence and enable great wealth. As we shall see, in the case of the Sanema, the material affordances of paper also bring about corporeal experiences of routine administrative procedures and repetitive techniques of red tape, requiring a unique set of skills together with literacy and writing (Goody 1986).

Nonetheless, alongside a close examination of the use of official papers in modern nation-states comes the recognition that a new mobility is both required and fuelled by this material component of citizenship. As official documentation gradually became a pervasive phenomenon towards the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, for instance, it came to be associated with the mobility of persons within and between frontiers. Torpey has pointed out that through documentation, the state progressively encroached on everyday freedom to move across space, resulting in 'the possession of an "identity" from which [one] cannot escape and which may significantly shape ... access to various spaces' (1998: 239). Documents became the material manifestation of this regulation of movement, most discernably at borders and checkpoints (Kelly 2006), but also in more subtle actions that result from participation in everyday bureaucratic techniques and routine engagement in state-initiated processes. Indeed, when analysing bureaucracy, we come to see that the daily corporeal practices involved are as significant as the papers themselves, underscoring the power that documentation has to impress on intimate experiences of movement, passage and access within the state apparatus. Lund elegantly illustrates this type of corporeal experience of bureaucracy in Cuzco, Peru, where she describes the intricate bodily encounters of document processing that provides Peruvians 'with an embodied experience of the state that forms their subjective experience of the self' (2001: 20).

The incorporation of indigenous peoples into state-building objectives is often accompanied by a surge of movement towards centralised state entities. This increased mobility is most evident in accounts of indigenous activism—the archetypal indian-state encounter—that involves what Conklin and Graham describe as a mobilisation ‘of political actions across wide gulfs of distance, language, and culture’ (1995: 696). Descriptions of Amerindian political movements are brimming with tales of their astonishing acceleration of manoeuvrability in the political context: from migration to and regular demonstrations in the cities, to global speaking tours and even meetings with world-leaders and celebrities (Conklin 1997). The case presented here, however, is not one of a mobilisation in which indigenous organisations seek recognition or influence within the wider political setting, but rather one of the mobility that must be undertaken in order to participate in the fertile projects offered by the Venezuelan state.

The Bolivarian Revolution has played a central role in accelerating regular and extended mobility in Amazonia due to gifts of outboard motors, profuse political activities in the cities, grassroots development projects that require regular errands, and frequent paperwork submission. In this chapter I will be exploring the mobility that bureaucracy and state activities both impel and demand among the residents of both Maduaña and Ulinuwiña; and by couching the experiences as an apprenticeship it is possible to discern that, if mastered, papers can offer a wide range of opportunities peripheral to state patronage.

### **The Properties of Paper**

Paper (Sa. *wajeta tökö*) is a versatile and increasingly prominent ‘thing’ for residents of both Maduaña and Ulinuwiña, but had been relatively prevalent among those from Maduaña for many years due to the mission philosophy of literary education and bible studies. The Spanish term for page (*hoja*), which also means ‘leaf’, is actually a fitting impression of paper for the Sanema, as its physical uses often overlap with those of actual leaves. Both are used to store fishhooks and loose beads in their folds, as a scoop to pick up household debris when cleaning the house, and even at times as a form of toilet paper. Likewise, the organic and perishable property of paper was always evident in their flimsy and fragile capacity to tear and degrade in extreme conditions. Papers lay scattered on floors or patios of houses right alongside other

organic matter that would eventually disintegrate or wash away.<sup>73</sup> This delicate nature of paper required one to take special care if they were of considerable value, or required for future purposes (although the only paperwork I saw especially taken care of was the *guia*).

Papers are light and easy to transport, but can hold a wealth of information in an inconsequential surface. It can be copied (along with the information therein), folded and divided up. Despite its versatile properties, my perception of people's experience with paper during fieldwork was that it tended to cause considerable confusion, and that there was a propensity for misunderstandings and disorder to emerge from it. Santiago once remarked that, 'in the past things were more basic, when there were no papers. Now things are difficult. Paperwork, pure paperwork all the time!' The notion that papers codify the knowledge and power of the state was not lost on many of my Sanema research participants, and yet their delicate fiddly form tended to cut across that attempted orderliness. Paperwork required a comprehension of precisely the parameters that are being ordered so that one might pacify their potential disorder. It was striking to see how paper eluded even those whose job it was to facilitate others in attending to their bureaucratic endeavours, such as ministry promoters, as we shall see below, let alone those who were novices in paperwork.

On regular occasions I saw Sanema people in encampments in Maripa—evidently there to submit some government dossier—with papers spread about them in disordered piles, a chaos of similar but different loose leaves. The individual at the centre often looked lost in the plethora of potential meanings that surround them. This is because a particular kind of 'sight' was required to overcome the disarrangement. As one described it to me, you have to be able to 'see the papers' (Sp. *ver los papeles*) and if you are unable to 'see' them yourself, then you will have to find someone who will assist you in that 'vision', more often than not a Ye'kwana broker. This man was referring to the convoluted and detailed information included in the papers that makes each one so singular, despite appearances to the contrary, and for which a special knowledge is required.

In this way, papers cannot simply be handled aimlessly, but require a special kind of collation to overcome their potential to become physically disordered, which

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<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Hutchinson also noted that the Nuer aversion to paper money was due to its material qualities, they 'get burnt, blown away by the wind, eaten by white ants, dissolved by heavy rains and torn by rough usage' (1992: 299).

the Sanema describe with the terms ‘arrange the papers’ (Sp. *arreglar los papeles*) or ‘manage the papers’ (Sp. *gestionar los papeles*). Arranging the papers, however, required not only an ability to complete and organise the dossiers (to ‘see’ them), but also to master the abundance of other procedures essential to their ‘management’. When I asked one man what the ‘arrangement’ of papers actually involved, he described himself waiting in a queue, and then a man calling him over saying, ‘Look Andrés, sign here! Sign here! Sign here!’ Another described paper as a by-product of their consumption habits: ‘If you buy something, they give you a paper, and you have to keep this so that you can show it later on.’ He was, of course, referring to the receipt, a highly significant item of Venezuelan life that has specific information encoded within it and that can—and will, in the case of military checkpoints and Bolivarian projects—be referred to at a later date.

The most important feature of the qualities of paper was its transportability, but in this also its capacity to transport information within its weightless sheets. In the region where I worked, papers almost never stayed still. When in hand they impelled movement: to and from the cities, between institutions, stamped here, signed there, delivered elsewhere, photocopied somewhere else; so much so that they came to be a means for movements rather than the ends in and of themselves. Travelling to the cities was often described as prompted by an ‘arrangement of papers’, and for some this was indeed what the city epitomised, as one described it: ‘The missionary sent me to Bolívar to arrange the papers, nothing more.’ But furthermore, papers, as one put it to me, ‘enable you to move quickly’, particularly when ‘served’ (Sp. *entregar los papeles*) or delivered to powerful people such as military personnel at checkpoints along the river. In addition to this, the actions entered into during bureaucratic practices became described as *diligencia* (errands) and *haciendo los papeles* (doing the papers), a process of various skills, activities and corporeal movements required to succeed in bureaucratic endeavours. It is the manoeuvrability, which the properties of paper impel and facilitate, that will be explored in this chapter. Moreover, I will show that this manoeuvrability is a deeply moral endeavour as it has roots in the pursuit of fertile exterior knowledge.

### **Paper for Petrol**

The opening vignette comes at the end of the story, as it were, as the confidence and

skills necessary for Marco to procure the *guía* were a result of many years rehearsing the art of bureaucracy, a prerequisite of participation in Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution. I shall here continue briefly with the story of the *guía* in order to give a sense of the pervasiveness of bureaucracy in the everyday lives of the Sanema, and above all how it calls for extensive physical and social manoeuvrability.

Referred to locally as '*La guía*' (in full *La guía de control de circulación de combustible*: the 'guide to control of fuel circulation'), the paperwork that Marco was so impatient to get hold of was a state-conferred dossier of forms that confirm legal procurement and transit of goods—in this case, petrol. Officially, the papers prove that the barrels of petrol were purchased legitimately as part of a government authorised *cupo* (quota), which, in the case of indigenous peoples, is a bulk quantity obtained for use in communal outboard motors, generators, grass trimmers, chainsaws, and so on. However, in reality petrol is not used for communal purposes alone, and this specific paperwork was often also sought to facilitate the free passage of copious quantities of petrol upriver to be exchanged for gold in the mine. Supplying the mine with petrol was a potential source of immense income for many Sanema, as we shall discover in Chapter 8.

However, dreams of procuring these riches were not as easy to realise as they first appeared. Many communities had their monthly quota, and consequently also their rights to the *guía*, temporarily revoked when discovered by the military repeatedly transporting unaccounted-for quantities of petrol upstream. In the meantime, this new document, the *guía*, had been introduced to combat the intensifying mining activities in the region and, as a consequence, some communities were entitled neither to buy (without their quota) nor transport (without a *guía*) substantial quantities of the precious fluid. Even if they were able to purchase it on the black market, without the *guía* the mobility of petrol is hindered, since the increasingly number of military checkpoints lining the rivers now demand to see this paperwork from anyone travelling upstream. Without it, the barrels of petrol are at risk of being confiscated. For this reason, countless people spoke of the *guía* and of their eagerness to obtain one.

This is how I came to find myself accompanying Marco to Maripa in search of this much sought-after paperwork. I had joined him on this '*diligencia*'—an increasingly prevalent Spanish term used to describe administrative errands—only to



find that the days passed with agonising inactivity. ‘Paperwork, paperwork, so much paperwork’, Marco grumbled during one of our days of waiting; a statement that seemed rather odd given that he never had any papers in his possession during this particular *diligencia*. This time, he explained, he was looking for someone who had a *guía* that they would be willing to sell to him, having attempted all other avenues of persuasion and bribes. He spent many days walking around Maripa visiting contacts he had come to know through his frequent trips to the town, asking if they might be able to help. Some had directed to him to people they knew, and they had directed him on to others still. Several gave him some glimmer of hope but stated that they were waiting for some element of the paperwork to be completed. The delay was often due to an impasse in one of the steps in the bureaucratic process, be it in registration on the infamous ‘*lista*’ (the official list of indigenous communities entitled to a quota of petrol each month), in procuring a letter from the lieutenant of the *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard), or in the receipt of one in a number of official stamps.

On the rare days that Marco had a lead, or that some stage in the paperwork procedure seemed to be moving forward, he would appear at my hammock smartly dressed in what seemed like a freshly washed and pressed polo shirt, jeans and shoes. His new orderly appearance was accompanied by a stern sense of purpose, as he strode off to ‘meet with a man’, often a Ye’kwana or *criollo* acquaintance who might help him find a *guía* that he so desired.

Eventually, the waiting paid off, and a few weeks later he was able to buy the bulk of the documentation from a Ye’kwana man, Hernán, for a fee. The *guía* paperwork had been completed, stamped and photocopied, so that all Marco needed to do was purchase the petrol and compose a letter stating that he would be transporting it to the Ye’kwana community on Hernán’s behalf, which Hernán would then countersign. All things considered, this errand was relatively straightforward for Marco, as the forms were already completed. All that was required of him were contacts in the cities, funds to buy the *guía* from this Ye’kwana man, and patience. With the *guía* in hand, Marco’s mobility within the region was at last liberated. He would no longer have his petrol confiscated, no longer be viewed with suspicion by the checkpoint personnel, and would not have to anxiously conjure up an intricate story for the military as to his reasons for travelling with several large barrels of petrol.

Although Marco was not actually compiling the papers himself, this particular execution of bureaucracy through brokers, and—ironically perhaps—the days of waiting, were important aspects of his manoeuvrability within the new administrative regime, as I shall describe in more detail below. Crucially, however, and as alluded to above, this procurement of the *guía* was not the beginning of Marco’s experience with paperwork. On the contrary, he had over the years become quite confident in the workings of bureaucracy, and this latest quest was just one in a number of similar pursuits he had come to perform daily. His apprenticeship in bureaucracy had begun with the Bolivarian Revolution.

### **A Revolution of Goods**

“‘Revolution’ means lots of new things’, Marco exclaimed eagerly to me one day in response to a question I had put to him about the Bolivarian Revolution. He continued:

On the TV they say ‘thank you for the revolution!’ the women say. They have lots of cars and other things. New houses, lots of things. New things all the time! This is revolution. They create new things; new factories make things that we didn’t have before.

It struck me that Marco’s statement had emphasised the unceasing flow of industrial goods in his description of the Bolivarian Revolution. And yet, it also seemed quite logical that he might identify the current socialist epoch as one of increased merchandise, particularly for an indigenous people who, they themselves proclaim, had very little access to such things in the past. Most Sanema who discussed politics with me associated the Bolivarian government with the receipt of political gifts, and for many it was the ‘new things’ they acquired that defined the increasingly familiar terms ‘socialism’ and ‘revolution’. Even as Marco responded, he was squatting on the earth floor near his hearth eating an arepa (Venezuelan cornmeal flatbread) made with government-subsidised flour, wearing a red t-shirt with large white letters that read ‘*Si con Chavez!*’<sup>74</sup> and having recently returned from a trip to the city where he had collected a free manioc grating machine from the local representatives of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

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<sup>74</sup> ‘Yes with Chavez!’—denoting the yes vote for a referendum on changes to the constitution in 2009.

The Venezuelan State's interest in Amazonian territories began in the early 1970s with a plan to utilise the rich resources of southern regions—named the 'Conquest of the South' (Sp. *La conquista del sur*)—predominantly with the aim of building infrastructure that linked the Amazon regions to the rest of the country. Policies toward native Amazonians at this time were markedly assimilationist, and many were encouraged to participate in agrarian land reform schemes that parcelled out plots of land to indigenous peoples. During this time, many migrated northwards in order to engage in agricultural production for the market (Maybury-Lewis 1999: 878). This era of rural development and indigenous inclusion marked the beginning of a gradual shift whereby many native Amazonians would eventually come to engage in the processes of Venezuelan national society on a more regular basis (although not the Sanema until much later).

Chavez's regime, known as the Bolivarian Revolution, greatly accelerated this inclusion of indigenous people. After his election to power in 1998, his regime thereafter initiated an intensified integration of indigenous peoples into state mechanisms through a new ideology of participatory democracy, endogenous development, and its hallmark grassroots projects. The channelling of this so-called 'magical state's' (Coronil 1997) great oil wealth into social services that provide free healthcare, education, housing and subsidised food (see Smilde and Hellinger 2011) generated an immense following among the nation's most disenfranchised population, not least of whom were the all-but-forgotten indigenous peoples. For the first time in the country's history, the indigenous population gained recognition, most notably in changes to the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution which introduced a section devoted to native peoples; including clauses that espouse rights to collective land ownership, native education and health practices, and prior consultation for natural resource extraction in their territory. A ministry—*El Ministerio del Poder Popular para los Pueblos Indigenas* (The Ministry of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples)—was established to attend to these rights. Notwithstanding this multi-ethnic vision, however, Chavez simultaneously directed attention to indigenous people's history of exclusion and thus promoted their incorporation into *criollo*-standardised development initiatives, involvement in party politics, and their equal participation in the grassroots projects of Bolivarianism (see Caballero-Arias 2003: 353-4). Indeed, the rhetoric of modernity and progress has deep roots in Venezuelan history,

particularly since the rise of the petroleum era, and thus this more recent inclusion of indigenous Venezuelans has been similarly couched in terms of social inclusion and equality with *criollos* (see Kelly 2011: 26).

In everyday terms, gifts and the direct supply of funds for projects figure prominently in the Sanema's descriptions of their motivations for their more recent migration northwards, their regular trips to the cities, and their participation in political activities. My host brother described the delight with which the first donations were received: 'The first thing we got was a metal boat with a motor attached, and the people saw that and cried out with excitement, "Let's vote for Chavez because he gives us things!"' Given that the bestowal of goods is often associated with kinship obligations, as was illustrated in Chapter 3, many of my interlocutors described Chavez as their father (Sa. *ipa jawani*), not merely in the sense of the 'father of the revolution', but more specifically as a benefactor whose role it is to care for them in a material way. Indeed, the Sanema term used for Bolivarian projects was *pasila palai*—'help'—specifically associated with the alleviation of poverty and suffering (*pebalo*), and a crucial responsibility of devoted and compassionate kin.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See also Caballero-Arias (2003: 358) for a similar example among the Yanomami who describe Chavez as compassionate.

This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 25: Sanema man with election ink on finger**

As was described in Chapter 3, this ‘help’ is most often related to the bestowal of material things and indeed when I asked my interlocutors to elaborate on the help they received from Chavez, they often listed manufactured gifts. Chavez’s compassion for the Sanema was underscored by one woman who described him as ‘a rich man who lives in Caracas and who gives Sanema things that they need’. A number of Sanema also described Chavez’s ethnic heritage as indigenous, which was regarded as the reason why he felt a special compulsion to be *pendiente* (‘looks out’) for them. One man told me, ‘He is *indio*, his father was *indio*. When he grew up he remembered this. So now he loves *indios*.’<sup>76</sup>

It was with this enthusiasm and desire for manufactured goods that the Sanema embarked on an encounter with the state and its offer of ‘help’. The first stage of their apprenticeship in bureaucracy was the procurement of an ID card (Sp. *cedula*) and registration as voting citizens. This first document was also the first step towards a new rapid and regular mobility in which many frequently travelled to the

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<sup>76</sup> Chavez’s popularity, however, was certainly not universal, with stories of upstream Sanema being ‘angry’ with him for not supplying them with goods, as he had others.

cities in order to receive political gifts and participate in government-initiated activities, such as health workshops and meetings about bilingual education. On many occasions I accompanied the residents of Maduaña to receive political donations in Maripa. They would sit on plastic seats in the scorching town square with throngs of other indigenous peoples while the *chavista*<sup>77</sup> mayor of the town made long speeches over an extravagant sound system about helping indigenous communities to ‘advance’. After the political display, crowds of indigenous people would form a chaotic queue grasping their folders of paperwork and ID cards, ready to receive their donations. During one such event, astonishingly large heaps of shiny new goods were waiting at the edges of the square—machetes, wheelbarrows, chainsaws, two-way radios, grass trimmers and outboard motors—each pile labelled with the name of the community to which they were allocated.

Despite the aim of Bolivarian grass-roots development to mark a move away from this type of clientelism—which had been characteristic of earlier Venezuelan governments—political donations to supporters at the local level continue to be deep-seated in the current regime. During the run-up to elections in particular, regular and ostentatious events of gift-giving take place, much like the one described above (see also Allard 2012; Lauer 2006; Rodríguez Aponte 2011). My Sanema hosts were well aware of this dynamic, which was encapsulated by Eduardo’s statement, ‘because we vote for the mayor, she gives us a motor’. Given that petrol is required to run the donated machinery but also to travel to the cities with petrol-guzzling outboard motors, one could argue that patronage such as this swiftly embeds indigenous peoples into a circulatory system of citizenship and dependency. Petrol is regularly procured but rapidly vaporised in the mere act of procurement and recurrent usage, which in turn generates further dependencies on the benefits that national society and political allegiances provide. As a potentially valuable voting constituent, their participation as citizens is crucial, and is indeed why indigenous people are supplied with a monthly quota of petrol, which they must continually travel to the cities to obtain. We can also see how such circular movements are self-perpetuating since they literally need petrol to get petrol.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> ‘Chavista’ is the term used for supporters of Chavez’s political party the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

<sup>78</sup> The extent to which indigenous peoples can extricate, or indeed want to extricate, themselves from such dependencies relates back to the discussion in chapter 4 in which

The ID card is not the only document required for this milieu of political participation, although it is the first and consequently opens the door to a world of patronage and the gifts that ensue. Procuring the ID card requires few skills; people need only turn up to one of the *cedulaciones* (pop-up ID operatives) that occasionally appear in the larger Amazonian communities, and a *cedula* will be issued. It is the other documents—the many forms, letters, application packs and dossiers—with which people must regularly engage that necessitate more nuanced skills in bureaucracy and manoeuvrability. Marco described to me how he slowly learned to master government paperwork after he established his settlement (Maduaña) further north and closer to national society in 2005. This move, he explained, enabled him to travel more regularly to Maripa, where he ultimately learned to ‘do the papers’, a skill he claimed to know nothing of before, despite a proficiency in reading and writing made possible through missionary education. He described himself and other such savvy maneuverers who similarly knew how to ‘do the papers’ as ‘civilizado’ (civilised) and ‘preparado’ (prepared), terms also associated with the frequently uttered Sanema phrase *setenapötö kua kua wina*—‘to be like a *criollo*’.<sup>79</sup> As these ‘civilised’ Sanema become gradually more politically active, they find themselves embroiled in the next important step in their bureaucratic apprenticeship and the workings of Bolivarian participatory democracy—the communal councils.

### **Communal Council Papers and *Diligencia***

The continued encompassment of indigenous peoples into state mechanisms has been intensified by on-going Bolivarian projects that all Venezuelan communities are encouraged to set up: the communal councils (Sp. *consejos comunales*, CCs). As the trademark of Bolivarian endogenous development, communal councils are grass-roots projects that give decision-making powers to local citizens who set up and oversee local development projects in their communities. CCs are established through regular meetings (citizens’ assemblies) that elect an executive body, which then prepares and submits proposals for projects they wish to implement. Once accepted and certified, the CCs start to receive sizeable funds deposited directly into community bank

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dependencies were described as regularly pursued in Amazonia as a means to secure a consistent flow of goods (see e.g. Bonilla 2005; Killick 2011).

<sup>79</sup> See also Kelly 2011, Chapter 4 for a similar example among the Yanomami.

accounts and used under the direction of the executive body. heralding a move towards self-governance, communal councils work with the expertise of community members who carry out and manage the projects themselves, rather than relying on private companies or government entities (see Ellner 2009; Wilde forthcoming). Since the passing of the Law of the Communal Councils in 2006, an increasing number of indigenous communities in southern Venezuela have been setting up their own communal councils in order to receive funds to build schools and clinics, establish and run cash crop initiatives, and purchase collectively held machinery. The initial deposits for the first three projects carried out in Maduaña—a school, a canteen, and a water purification system—amounted to 1,136,000 Bs.F (approx. US\$ 142,000) in total—a sum that reveals why many are eager to register their own CCs despite the initial outlay required for *diligencia* (taxes, photocopies and food).

Significantly, these projects ensure that administrative processes are a fundamental component of indigenous peoples' experiences of the state, as outlined by Ignazio, Marco's brother-in-law, when talking about his first experience with communal councils:

I didn't know what a 'project' was, what a communal council was, what it meant to 'organise' the community. Before I could work on the CC, I had to go to the *alcaldía* [municipal government] so that they could explain how to fill out the papers and how to do the *diligencia* [errands]—where to take the papers. I helped to form the CC, fill out the forms, and deliver them to the *alcaldía* in Maripa.

Ignazio's account emphasises that bureaucracy does not involve the filling out of forms alone, but is a physical activity encompassed by the much-utilised term '*diligencia*' (errands), in which one must encounter the paper regime in a system of learned movements. Much like Lund's account in Cuzco (2001), the complicated *diligencia* performed when preparing and submitting the communal council application pack necessitated judicious manoeuvring within *criollo* cities, wearing smart clothing, cutting the hair short, clipping a mobile phone to the belt, and confidently marching around with a legal folder in hand. A prospective errand-runner must learn to navigate the towns, traversing one side to the other in taxis or buses, and searching out official stamps from various governmental institutions, each with their own cryptic names or convoluted acronyms. Numerous hours will be spent in queues,



speaking Spanish, reciting ID numbers, signing names and leaving fingerprints in the correct box. Often, movements such as these were distinct from the rapid trips to and from the cities with outboard motors, dominated instead by hours of inactivity, dawdling in waiting rooms and shuffling in slow-moving queues.

This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 26: Sanema man with paperwork**

I was not able to witness Marco or Ignazio completing Maduaña's communal council *diligencia*, as they had begun the procedure long before I arrived to begin fieldwork, but I was able to follow the process in Ulinuwiña, who were in the early stages of setting up a communal council when I visited them briefly in late 2009. I had arrived at the community in the wake of a Ye'kwana *promotor* (promoter) from the Ministry for Indigenous Peoples, who had travelled to the region from the state capital to visit local communities and disseminate the Bolivarian ideology. Ulinuwiña had no outboard motor, and was located three weeks upstream from Venezuelan national society, so until then they had thought very little about state politics or projects. The *promotor* had arrived unsolicited and called a meeting in which he

emphasised their need to ‘organise’ through the formation of a communal council. He fleetingly presented them with the paperwork required to set one up, before promptly departing to continue his evangelising ventures further upstream. The inhabitants of Ulinuwiña had heard tales of these *pasila palai*—the unprecedented floods of resources never before known and the origins of which were mysterious. They had even seen the results of some of these so-called ‘projects’ in their neighbouring Ye’kwana communities—breezeblock buildings, generators, rapid outboard motors, and in some cases even tractors used for the cattle ranching cooperatives that had been set up in the savannahs. Naturally, they were eager to get involved.

I arrived to find the residents of Ulinuwiña attempting to make sense of the sea of papers they had been left with. Whenever I entered the communal house, I could see the only literate man in the community, Valentín the schoolteacher, sitting at a table in a murky corner slowly scrutinising each paper with a countenance to match the gloom of his surroundings. Over a number of days he gradually assembled the forms, often attracting inquisitive crowds who stood agape, giggling or clearly unsure as to what he was doing. He took several days to slowly write over and over the list of community residents, their dates of birth and their ID numbers, which were required on 10 different forms and a staggering 31 pieces of paper. Next to their name on each form, residents were also required to leave a fingerprint, the stamp of the illiterate. This was, however, a ritual that many had learned to perform when obtaining their identity cards in a temporary ID operative (Sp. *cedulación*) that had appeared in a nearby community a year earlier, so were somewhat versed in thumb-pressing action that would inevitably become ever-more mechanical in the years to come. I noticed that Valentín did not seem to be calling any meetings or discussing the formation of a committee, only silently filling out forms, as though the projects would materialise, as it were, through their physical manifestation alone—paper.

I met Valentín again a month later in the state capital, Puerto Ayacucho, where he had travelled two weeks downstream in a Ye’kwana canoe to present the CC paperwork to the appropriate institution. I had arranged to meet him on the final few days of his *diligencia* in which he would be seeking out several signatures and stamps before submitting the registration pack. It was raining heavily when Valentín and his brother-in-law ran to meet me under the shelter of a supermarket awning. In contrast to his appearance in Ulinuwiña, where he would usually walk around in no more than

a pair of torn jeans, Valentín now had a buzz cut and sported a brand new orange shirt. I could see, however, that this was as far as his meagre funds would stretch, and the bright shirt seemed to draw attention to his tattered trousers and lack of shoes.

Once out of the rain, Valentín proudly extracted the bulging file from beneath his shirt where he had been keeping it dry. His CC registration was a thick stack of chaotic papers loosely contained within a dusty legal folder. As I leafed through I could see the complexity of what had been compiled: scores of papers requiring lists, narratives, and categories often unfamiliar or opaque to indigenous peoples. Just as I was noting the esoteric and legal parlance of many of the forms, Valentín uttered that he had been unable to decipher the language, and had had to seek assistance from a Ye'kwana acquaintance, Luis, whom he knew from a community near Ulinuwíña, and who happened to be in Puerto Ayacucho at the time. Luis had agreed to help in exchange for a quantity of the CC funds when they came through. In addition to the impenetrable language, though, Valentín had encountered a number of other obstacles, just one of which was a recent and considerable adjustment to CC structure and application procedures, now requiring not one but three representatives from his community to be present in the city to process the documents. Valentín had travelled with only one other companion, his brother-in-law, who stood beside him now silent and subdued. He explained with relief that his Ye'kwana acquaintance had also agreed to pose as the third member of Ulinuwíña so that he could finally complete the *diligencia* with just enough time to spare before the deadline.

As soon as the rain subsided, I flagged down a taxi to take us to our first destination of the day, only to discover that Valentín had been to Puerto Ayacucho only twice previously and had no idea where we were supposed to be going. He borrowed my mobile phone to again seek Luis' assistance, who instructed him to come to the offices of the *FUNDACOMUNAL* (the National Fund for Communal Councils) to 'get certified'. On the entrance to the *FUNDACOMUNAL* offices was pinned a stern announcement outlining a list of additional paperwork—originals and copies—now required for the application, which Valentín seemed not to notice. Luis was inside waiting for us, immaculately dressed with a smart leather conference folder in hand. He casually leaned against the edge of a table chatting in fluent Spanish with one of the employees of the office; he was self-assured and undaunted by the official environment. Luis formed a stark contrast to my two timid and hesitant

Sanema companions who, now in the presence of Luis, became more passive, speaking little for the remainder of the day, and taking a back seat in the proceedings. At times I wondered if they were aware of what was being discussed between Luis and the bureaucrats, as Valentín was often excluded from the conversations and had previously lamented to me his inexperience in the ‘ways of the *criollos*’.

After a few hours of waiting amidst a cluster of similarly fidgeting indigenous peoples, the three men were called into a side room. Luis seemed to know the man who was to ‘certify’ the paperwork and shook his hand while murmuring something into his ear. The bureaucrat shot a glance at Valentín’s bare feet. They emerged only minutes later with a look of relief and one stamped document satisfactorily attained. But the respite was only brief, as they suddenly realised that it was already 5.30pm and we still had to ‘register’ the paperwork at the *Taquilla Unica* (Office for Paperwork Production) on the other side of the city.

We rushed there in a taxi, relieved to find it still open, only to come face to face with a frosty administrator who was in no hurry to help any one of the hopelessly expectant applicants lingering in a stagnant queue nearby. His disinterested movements and body language were so deliberately unhurried that he picked up each paper in what seemed like slow motion. The minutes agonisingly slipped away, speedily approaching closing time, when Luis approached the counter with conviction, asking for a list of the application requirements. He was haughtily passed a sheet of paper, which stated that two copies of the application pack were required. I felt all hope deflate with this unexpected news as there was only one day remaining before the deadline—a day notorious in the city for being unbearably hectic and congested due to a deluge of indigenous peoples arriving from all corners to submit their paperwork. Ulinuwiña’s chances of registering their CC now seemed slim. Luis took it all in his stride, however, and we soon found ourselves in another taxi on our way to the photocopy shop. Squashed together in the backseat, Luis announced his plan for the following day. He explained that he had a friend who worked at the *Taquilla Unica*, so would arrive first thing in the morning to pass the application straight to this contact and avoid the final day’s crowds. ‘I know how these things work’, he stated with authority, ‘It’s important to know people who can help.’ The last I saw of Valentín a few days later he reported that Luis had submitted the registration pack, and that as far as he knew it was being processed according to plan.

### **Voyaging for Knowledge**

Valentín's case highlights that just as significant as the documents themselves are the movements required to become proficient in bureaucratic techniques: regular visits to the cities, daily *diligencia*, and 'friends' who can expedite the process. However, manoeuvring is not a new phenomenon, as frequent voyages in lowland South America are common and have historically been pursued in one form or another as a way to enhance prestige and personhood (see examples in Butt Colson 1985; Carneiro da Cunha 1998; Grotti 2013; Hugh-Jones 1992: 67). Among the Sanema, journeying out beyond the community on a regular basis has always been of great importance, particularly among males. Upon marriage and uxori-local residence—in which the husband is the in-comer to his wife's community—male manoeuvrability and 'attachments' remain fluid (see Rival 2005 for an example among the Huaorani). In the past, this meant that men tended to have distributed social networks and voyaged frequently, particularly between affiliate communities that were clustered at walking distance from one another (see Lizot 1994: 216). During my fieldwork, men of all ages recounted a significant moment in their coming of age—in addition to their seclusion period (Sa. *manokosimo*)—being their first voyage to a distant Ye'kwana community, or even in some cases to the *criollo* frontier towns in the north.

In contrast to the permanent relocations of the past in which family groups would flee (Sa. *wasimo*) from disease, sorcerers or raiders (Sa. *oka töpö*), individual and temporary voyaging for knowledge (Sa. *pö taöpo piasalo a jama juköle*, 'travelling to know') was a voluntary activity of great honour. Such voyaging—often for the purposes of trading, but equally to 'visit' (Sa. *nojimo*) or 'see' (Sa. *mö*)—was substantially connected to essential processes of 'knowing' (Sa. *taö*) and developing valued wisdom.<sup>80</sup> Voyaging is often articulated as a way to combat fear of other people and places, as during the pursuit of knowledge 'the fear ends' (Sa. *kilipa mapa soma*). In both Maduaña and Ulinuwiña, a man returning from a trip often animated great excitement in the community, barraged with questions about places visited, eagerly requested to present newly procured goods, or implored to give news of far-off kin. In much the same format as an evening of myth-telling, the act of recounting

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<sup>80</sup> In fact, seeing (*mö*) has strong associations with knowing (*taö*) (see also Ewart 2008).

voyages—*wöoti*—attracts a large and animated gathering that can last several hours, during which the audience howls with delight at the stories of distant, and often unknown, regions. As such, a man who ‘knows how to travel’ becomes regarded as fearless (Sa. *waitili*) and also often assumes the position of well-respected community leader (Colchester 1982: 177; see also Santos Granero 2007: 11).

Not only was the powerful mythological creator, Omaö, a great traveller who ventured to ‘where the waters reach the heavens’ (Colchester 1981: 36), but likewise, shamans—men of great authority and wisdom—were said to journey out into the forest or fly to other communities when in a trance, as their spirit allies (Sa. *jikula*) ‘show’ them distant places. Such hallucinogenic voyaging enables both the shaman and the *jikula* to gain intellect and potency from their shared adventures. Shamans often intersperse their songs with wide, sweeping arm gestures and growling expressions of *iiiamökö* (over theeere!) or *baibarrrrram* (faaaar away!), which emphasise the great distances they must travel in order to encounter powerful beings who inhabit worlds somehow further than the imagination could stretch. Indeed, if shamanism is what Townsley describes as a ‘technique for knowing’ (1993: 452), then what augments this knowledge is their ability to encounter and translate distant exterior worlds: a manoeuvring *par excellence*. An equivalent portal to the world of mythological ancestors is that of dreaming, and the pleasure of recounting one’s dreams also derives from a delight in the distant explorations that the soul is said to take during the night (see also Lima 1999: 125).

This value attributed to voyaging for knowledge emerges from a principle of alterity in which things of the exterior are as equally desired as they are feared. Whereas people outside the co-residential group in Amazonia are to some extent viewed with suspicion, they are also identified as ‘potential affines’ (Viveiros de Castro 2001), and the exterior domain as a source of social reproduction and knowledge (Fausto 1999; Taylor 2001; Viveiros de Castro 2012). Indeed, the incorporation of exterior fertility is a moral and aesthetic endeavour that is fundamental to the creation of proper human beings. Consequently, voyaging is an essential means to discover and integrate productive exterior knowledge and is in turn crucial to the development of true personhood, independence and creativity.

In this sense, to say that the proclivity for mobility is impelled by a desire for goods, as was stated above, might be only part of the story. It could be argued, as

Ewart does, that ‘avidity for things is principally about establishing enduring social relationships’ (2013a: 46). Moreover, novel associations brought about through trading in many ways empower through the autonomy that they engender (see Killick 2009, 2010). Nevertheless, an eagerness for goods in and of themselves should equally not be overlooked as a motivation for voyaging (see also Allard 2010: 49; Brightman 2010: 151). In fact, goods and relationships should be seen as mutually constituting one another, just as I have been arguing throughout the thesis. What is evident is that, where the Sanema are concerned, voyaging for knowledge brings about new social relationships that generate access to goods, and that in the current context papers play an important role in this process. The notion that social relationships and affiliations are manifest in documentation was noted by Hetherington to be a salient experience among *campesinos* in Paraguay. Rather than taking an interest in the legal data or maps included in their land titling paperwork, the *campesinos* pointed to the signatures and seals that ‘traced networks of relations on the page’ (Hetherington 2008: 52). It was the relationships that ‘spoke their reality’ above and beyond the abstractions of the documents themselves. Like the Paraguayan *campesinos*, the Sanema subordinate inscriptions to the social networks involved, and in fact require those networks before the documents can be procured.

The notoriously labyrinthine nature of Bolivarian bureaucracy often resulted in failures in ‘doing the papers’, but a lack of contacts also contributed to the problem. Many people illustrated the frustrations inherent in paperwork completion by recounting the story of Diego. Despite recently establishing a new community close to Maripa in order to access state resources, Diego had attempted to fill out the communal council registration paperwork several times without success. The tale tells of his humorous and slightly intoxicated rant at the papers that ended in him tearing them up in a frustrated rage while calling out to the sky, ‘Chavez! Chavez! Help me with my paperwork!’ He was right in thinking that he needed help with these forms, but as a recent arrival to the area, his lack of acquaintances in Maripa or bureaucratic ‘friends’ in the system put him at a disadvantage. Diego would certainly have benefitted from contact with one of the local Sanema *promotores* of the Ministry for Indigenous Peoples who are specifically employed to aid indigenous communities in completing their paperwork.

Milton was one such *promotor* whom I often saw sitting outside his hut in the town huddled together with Sanema leaders to fill out their forms. Still, this ‘service’

was not as equally available as it professes to be, often only attainable through kinship ties with Milton, or, failing that, gradually established acts of reciprocity. Regular rumours of imminent sorcery attacks or threats of murders and raids were often directed at Milton from upstream settlements, purportedly due to his selectivity in offering his services with communal council paperwork.<sup>81</sup> Diego might also have benefitted from closer affiliation with a Ye'kwana broker, like Luis, who helped prepare Ulinuwiña's paperwork in exchange for a proportion of the funds received. Although these relationships are marked by dependencies and power inequalities, many of my Sanema interlocutors often described them as 'friendships'—alliances that were cultivated for the material opportunities they provided, and perhaps an emerging dynamic in the relationship with the Ye'kwana that was described in Chapter 4.

Both of these potential contacts could have been established through regular 'voyaging for knowledge', a deep-rooted process, but which in the current context is facilitated by the prevalent political gift of the outboard motor. In the contemporary context of state patronage, voyaging has shifted configuration. The visiting (*Sa. nojimo*) of nearby and affiliated communities on foot has now become a rapid to and fro to the cities, perhaps stopping to visit other communities along the way, with esteem now arising from a knowledge of the 'world of the *criollos*'. This new voyaging, predominantly experienced by young men (*Sa. jisia töpö*), is often propelled by state incentives and activities: education in the cities, football tournaments, workshops and political events. By first participating in political patronage and Bolivarian projects, people are able to procure an outboard motor, engage in more rapid and extended travel, and thereafter more frequent interaction with the fertile world of the 'other'.

As such, while voyaging in the past was a capacity available to all, it is now determined by access to an outboard motor, which rapidly enhances the power to be mobile and thus take part in state activities and *diligencia*. In light of the fact that community leaders—who perhaps gained their role because they already 'know how to travel'—oversaw and safeguarded communal possessions (see Chapter 3; see also similar examples in Walker 2013a: 121; Brightman 2010: 138), it is easy to see why

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<sup>81</sup> Milton's father, who died in 2006, was also said to have been a victim of sorcery because he ripped up someone's CC paperwork.



certain disparities in opportunities were developing within communities. These leaders became ever more powerful in their manoeuvrability; they regularly and rapidly travelled to and from the cities, and became enmeshed in a network of relations with people from afar. Women and community residents described as ‘poor’ (Sa. *pebalo*) travelled far less frequently and often shorter distances. They journeyed infrequently to the cities (although women often accompanied their husbands), seldom spoke of doing *diligencia* and tended to have fewer contacts outside of their kin or residential groups.<sup>82</sup>

As we can see, then, there is a new interaction with valued alterity emerging, one which is accelerated in the current political context.<sup>83</sup> Along with this physical mobility comes a social mobility that reinforces people’s authority and status. Thus, not only do physical and social mobility become one and the same thing, but the proclivity for mobility in the modern political context exists precisely because it conforms to traditional values of voyaging and the prestige that it augments.

### **Paper’s Moral Affordances**

The weightlessness and transportability of paper not only enabled, but also propelled, physical manoeuvrability in the heightened political context of Venezuela. The information they hold on their surfaces pertains to the strength and wealth of the state and the freedom of movement that such information can facilitate. We gain a sense, in the Sanema case, that the characteristics of durability and formalisation were not what conferred power, which were the properties most valued among the Argentinian Chaco (Gordillo 2006). I was often startled to find books and documents abandoned in the dust within Sanema communities. Folded bible pages were used to store fish hooks, the plastic casings of ID cards were split apart, and photographs were scratched and worn beyond recognition. Papers did not seem to be cherished or

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<sup>82</sup> That some Sanema were able to intensify their manoeuvrability over others is a result of a number of factors, and seems to be a matter of chance in many cases. However, the role of mediators is important—and, most significantly missionaries or Ye’kwana. Money, although not essential, may also facilitate mobility in the current context due to costs of food, transport and clothing in the cities. Although *diligencia* is as yet not an entirely pervasive phenomenon among the Sanema, it does seem to be predominantly government-salaried schoolteachers who take on this duty, perhaps due in part to the small wage they receive, which they travel to the cities to collect (i.e. they are already somewhat mobile).

<sup>83</sup> Intensive mobility as a result of the Bolivarian Revolution has brought some Sanema as far as Cuba for workshops in agriculture, which were specifically designed for ‘indigenous warriors’.

safeguarded, but were left to disintegrate as though they were discarded leaves or castoff cassava bread. It seemed to be the bureaucratic techniques that became paramount, the ‘being like a *criollo*’, the presentation of a particular ensemble of clothing, the bodily performance of *diligencia*, and the friends with whom one could shake hands. The powerful yet transportable properties of paper facilitated these movements. Furthermore, valued papers would seem to appear from nowhere: they were not deliberated over, not read aloud and not meticulously typed.<sup>84</sup> These documents had been procured through zealously established networks of powerful new allies, the most apparent in the cases above being the Ye’kwana brokers who were involved in both Valentín’s and Marco’s *diligencia*. What papers facilitated was a manoeuvring for the knowledge and status that has always been a critical moral drive for social reproduction.

To underscore this point, let me return to the cases of the communal councils. Sadly, neither Maduaña’s nor Ulinuwiña’s communal councils turned out well. Initially, the residents of Maduaña were able to buy numerous supplies, but they struggled to fulfil their plan of building a school, a canteen and a water purification system with the money that their communal council supplied. As the residents described it, an external review (Sp. *rendición de cuenta*) was conducted one year into each project, after which they were deemed inadequately managed and funds were ‘frozen’ before the projects could be completed. One Sanema reported how difficult it was to manage a project and to budget expenditures with no previous knowledge of such things: ‘we spent a lot of the money on other things. We didn’t know about the quantities and we didn’t know how to make a school. It’s not easy.’

For years, and even at the time of writing this, the buildings lay half-finished and collapsing in the harsh forest climate. I also later heard rumours that Ulinuwiña’s communal council had never received any resources due to their difficulties in opening and accessing a bank account, a factor that Valentín had not taken into consideration. People in Maduaña grew increasingly disillusioned with Bolivarian projects, complaining that those elected to run them never ‘complete’ or ‘fulfil’ (*kōa*) tasks and promises—both central concepts in the Sanema cosmic and moral order, akin to the notion of ‘equalisation’ that was introduced in Chapter 6 (see also Lizot 1994). Despite disappointments, however, by this point many in Maduaña had grown

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<sup>84</sup> Kelly (2011: 80-1), however, has noted that Yanomami place emphasis on literacy in order to procure state resources.

accustomed to the goods that such government funds could supply, and it was for this reason that Marco and many others decided to attempt the less mainstream but highly profitable enterprise of selling petrol in the mine. The *guía* was the material manifestation of their new lucrative endeavours, the papers necessary to move within the region and ultimately continue to procure goods with the money obtained.

Whereas the people of Maduaña were able to transcend the failures of their initial bureaucratic endeavours, it is unclear to what extent those of Ulinuwiña were able to do the same. It could be argued that literacy is the primary factor determining the ability to master such administrative ventures. It was certainly true that Marco was able to make sense of the documentation regime due to his upbringing in an evangelical mission community, which spatially and ideologically organised itself around two institutions that fetishized paper—the school and the church. However, while Valentín’s experiences with bureaucracy and *diligencia* in Puerto Ayacucho were undoubtedly a struggle, he was certainly not illiterate, since he too attended school in a Ye’kwana community as a child. The multifarious and opaque nature of government documents was a challenge encountered by both Valentín and Marco, and thus the difference between the two was more than a disparity in ability to decipher the terminology of such forms. Gupta likewise argued against an overemphasis on literacy as the sole route from which to access political spheres, as the illiterate poor may have other means to sidestep circumscribed bureaucratic structures by procuring counterfeit documentation. To do so, however, one must have personal connections, thus highlighting how ‘symbolic capital, money capital, and social capital in the form of connections and kinship were all tightly linked together’ (Gupta 2012: 228).

These examples demonstrate that paper and manoeuvrability are intimately linked. Paper is weightless and portable, so it enables an unhindered movement to the cities. But the information held within its pages is in some ways weighty—confusing, convoluted, boundless—so that it requires a social mobility when in the urban centres. This manoeuvrability within bureaucratic spheres involves varied and convoluted tasks that stretch across the entire city, and that motivate particular bodily movements within state apparatus. The powerful information contained within the documents also requires one to foster new social relationships that can smooth the way for these movements.

## Conclusion

The case described in this chapter demonstrates that while documents such as ID cards offer proof of identity as citizens of a nation, they also shape individuals as mobile subjects by permitting them to become visible and participating actors within the state apparatus. In southern Venezuela, this mobility has become more recurrent and rapid as the proliferation of outboard motors and endogenous development projects draw the Sanema closer and more regularly towards Venezuelan national society. The Bolivarian Revolution also provided them with an apprenticeship in bureaucracy, which predominantly involved physical and social manoeuvrings, so that they were able to take advantage of opportunities both inside and outside the workings of the state. The mastering and manipulation of bureaucracy, in this sense, was an unanticipated but pertinent illustration of the Sanema's experiences of Venezuelan citizenship.

The difference between Marco's and Valentín's experiences with bureaucracy, as I understand it, was in their manoeuvrability: regular trips to (and familiarity with) the cities, experience in printing and making photocopies, dressing immaculately, using public transport, and perhaps most important of all, maintaining affable contact with bureaucrats who can push an applicant's papers through the system. When younger, Marco had travelled extensively to many *criollo* cities, including cosmopolitan centres in the north where the church headquarters were based. As outlined above, however, he learned to 'do the papers' only after moving closer to Maripa and thereafter establishing networks of contacts within the bureaucratic systems. His manoeuvrability was both facilitated and propelled by papers, and what's more, they widened his sphere of 'friends' through the activities involved in *diligencia*, which in turn enhanced his manoeuvrability. Valentín struggled to accomplish many of the sophisticated *diligencia* tasks on his own partly due to his meagre prospects for mobility: his community had no motor and was located far from the cities, resulting in unfamiliarity with the 'world of the *criollos*' and a dearth of reliable 'friends' in the system. Nevertheless, his community's close association with Ye'kwana settlements enabled him to find a broker willing to help with the documents, so that although he struggled, he nevertheless managed to succeed where Diego did not. It is clear, then, that power emerges from the manoeuvrability that paper propels and enables.

‘Voyaging for knowledge’ has always been an important process of fertility and social reproduction among the Sanema, which in the past impelled many to travel and visit different regions. In the contemporary context, paper is the new material medium that instigates this moral movement, but at a much wider scale. The moral affordances of paper—its lightweight form, ease of transportability, but also the information contained within its sheets—are what make it a unique and powerful ‘thing’ in this context. It is the abundance of knowledge contained within paper that requires decoding and ‘doing’ in the cities, which propels a movement towards the bureaucratic and administrative locales. These combined affordances that make it portable and powerful, and indeed potentially profitable, bestow it with a special role in social and physical manoeuvrability. The *guia* that was introduced at the beginning of this chapter epitomises these characteristics, as it not only required a movement to and within the cities in order to acquire one, but it was also literally required in order to move around. Even though it is petrol and the outboard motor that directly facilitate this mobility, the fact that paperwork is required to engage with, procure and travel with motors and petrol emphasises the fact that paperwork and bureaucracy are integral to a new mobile Amazonia. Moreover, paper is a new material manifestation of the pursuit of fertile knowledge and is indeed why bureaucratic processes were embraced, albeit with frustration. Paper enables the Sanema to extend a moral manoeuvrability that has always been prized.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **Between Animism and a Petro-State: Petrol and Moral Relationality**

In Maduaña, petrol quite literally permeated everyday life. It was handled, inhaled, siphoned, poured, lugged and spilled several times a day; and it had become so intricately interwoven into my hosts' lives that existence without it was increasingly considered unthinkable. Travelling in canoes for fishing trips, grating manioc, trimming grass, felling trees, recharging torches, playing music and watching movies all rely on petrol because the fluid feeds progressively abundant machinery that enable these tasks. But it was also used to rid the house of ants and cockroaches, to heal skin ailments, to become intoxicated, and to gain revenge on enemies through incendiary spells. In fact, siphoning too was fast becoming the germane skill of the youth, a skill that was emerging in parallel with a dwindling knowledge of hunting practices. One might go so far as to say that the contemporary icon of this region of Amazonia was not the feather headdress, but the continually and rapidly advancing canoe with its Suzuki 40-horsepower outboard motor suspended from the rear, a prevailing sight along many of the regional rivers.

The abundance of petrol in this context was associated with the Venezuelan petro-state, a political milieu that was introduced in Chapter 7. Coronil's analysis of Venezuelan oil wealth in his book *The Magical State* (1997) illustrated that, since its birth in 1908, the oil industry has been central to Venezuelan democracy. In fact, Coronil argued that the creation of the country's public sphere was founded on the relationship between natural resources and the people; or the social body and the natural body as he described it. This dynamic is upheld by the illusion, performed by state leaders, of oil's power to manufacture 'dazzling development projects that engender collective fantasies of progress' (1997: 5). In such a way, national imaginaries and subject formation are intimately bound up with the substance, a phenomenon he encapsulates with the term 'magical state'. Currently in Venezuela, the new socialist regime has also been bolstered by this same magic. It is evident, for instance, in its endeavour to weave the 1930s Venezuelan motto of '*sembrar el petróleo*' (sow the oil)—which describes the use of oil wealth for productive

agricultural and industrial investments—with the new revolutionary slogan ‘*Venezuela ahora es de todos*’ (now Venezuela belongs to everyone). The Bolivarian Revolution, as described in the previous chapter, is a movement that seeks to channel the nation’s oil wealth into endogenous grass-roots projects, free education and healthcare, and subsidised food. Petroleum in its distilled form—petrol—is also a tangible substance of this equal dispensation of oil wealth. Thanks to highly subsidised petrol prices, the state has made oil quite literally available to everyone.

For the nation’s indigenous people too, petrol is a lived reality, and not least so for the Sanema. For my hosts, the dual nature (the natural and social body) of the petro-state is experienced every day both in their direct interaction with petrol, but also in the social programmes and political processes that Bolivarian redistribution policies embody. Petrol was woven into every aspect of their lives, on both a practical and a moral level. I was to learn, in particular, that it became interwoven in moral evaluations due to its material properties. Sanema experiences with petrol, then, were not merely political or utilitarian.

This chapter will explore how ideas about the enigmatic source and unique affordances of petrol feed into uncertainties about its ontological emplacement. In what follows, I show how the various ways in which the Sanema talk about, use and experience petrol provide insights into their contemporary realities; specifically, the ways in which they make sense of a life between animism and a petro-state. I will explore the processes through which petrol becomes placed within an animist ontology. This process, though, is somewhat of an awkward one because petrol seems to exist in an indefinable domain between nature and the ‘other’, and between natural substance and manufactured item. Petrol’s material properties give rise to numerous incidences in which it is far from benign, and in some cases it even seems to have intentionality in response to moral misdeeds. In this way, the moral affordances of petrol have permitted its entanglement within the morally impelled cosmos because its causal relationship to humans parallels that of other animist beings. In other words, its affinity to the beings of the malicious and morally impelled animist cosmos endows it with something analogous to a spirit.

This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 27: Children swimming with barrels of petrol**

**A Substance that Doesn't Fit**

According to Descola, animism can be understood as the 'attribution by humans to nonhumans of an interiority identical to their own' (2013: 129). This interiority is defined as intentionality, subjectivity, reflexivity and the aptitude to dream, enabling both human and non-human beings to establish relationships with one another (Descola 1992: 114; see also Bird-David 1999). It is widely accepted that this shared interiority relates predominantly to things of the natural world such as animals and plants, but also to some stones, rivers and even the sun. But in such accounts of animism, two features remain somewhat opaque, or at the very least under-analysed. The first concerns what governs membership into animism. Why is it that some things in the animist cosmos are attributed with souls while others are not? For example, why do large trees—such as giant ceiba trees—possess spirits, but smaller species do not? Similarly, how is it that some inert things such as rocks have spirits, while bait worms do not? The second question regards the animacy of things that do not hail from the 'natural world'. Do plastic plates have spirits, and if not, why not?

Relationality, for some, seems to partially address these questions. Writing on the animacy of rolling and speaking stones among the Ojibwa, for instance, Ingold



states that ‘animacy ... is a property not of stones as such, but of their positioning within a relational field that includes persons as foci of power’ (2004: 36). Along equivalent lines, on pondering the subjectification of objects in animist societies, Viveiros de Castro points out that some inanimate things can become subjectified so that they ‘necessarily point to a subject; as congealed actions, they are material embodiments of nonmaterial intentionality’ (2004: 471). And yet, among the Sanema, small species of bait worms known as *kolishi* are evidently positioned within a relational field, but are said not to have spirits unlike their larger counterparts—the *jolia mökoko*—who are imbued with strong intentionality and will bring misfortune upon those who use them for fishing. Many other objects are deeply entrenched within relational networks—hammocks, baskets, clothing and machetes to name but a few—but most of these things are not attributed with any form of animacy that would suggest they possess an interiority (mind) or intentionality. It seems that relationality alone, as Ingold and Viveiros de Castro would have it, is not enough to confer animacy to things, or at least not for the Sanema.

And then there is petrol. This is a substance that does not precisely hail from ‘the natural world’ as do animals, trees and rivers, but rather from *criollo* manufacture. And yet it is bestowed a form of unique vitality akin to animacy and even, as we shall discover, intentionality.<sup>85</sup> This chapter will endeavour to uncover why this is so. The first part will build on the context laid out in Chapter 7 by describing the petrol-infused political context in which the Sanema find themselves, particularly in relation to Hugo Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution, clientelism and gold mining. After describing how the material properties of petrol are understood and utilised by the Sanema, I will then turn to petrol’s emplacement within the animist cosmos. By directing attention to a phenomenon that is out of place, that does not fit neatly into an ontological modality, we are faced with an opportunity to explore the discrepancies that unfold from its awkward placement. The remainder of the chapter, then, will demonstrate that what has been underexplored in theorisations of animism in the past is the importance of morality in shaping the cosmos and defining membership into it. We learn, through a focus on petrol, that some foreign things can

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<sup>85</sup> I have chosen to use the word ‘animacy’ to describe the ‘agentive-force’ of petrol throughout this chapter, rather than other terms such as vitality or vibrancy. I believe that the term ‘animacy’ better captures the intentionality that I am aiming to illustrate, particularly in an animist context, within which the place of petrol alongside other animist beings is being explored.

also possess a form of animacy through their entanglement within this morally impelled setting. In this way, I suggest that what gives petrol animacy is its engagement within a network of moral relationality, the same engagement that gives animist beings a spirit.

### **The Material Manifestation of the Petro-state**

The back-story to the proliferation of petrol into Venezuelan Amazonia has its roots in a long history of political patronage and the flow of petro-dollars into Venezuelan public life. The process of becoming permeated with petrol is related to the continued co-option of indigenous peoples into state processes, allowing them to enjoy the material benefits that petro-state citizenship facilitates. Most recently this has involved participation in the socialist projects forged by the late President Hugo Chavez. Indeed, as mentioned above, the ideological platform of Chavez's socialism was bound up with the ethical enterprise of transforming petroleum into a social substance; that is, a substance that benefits and enhances the lives of the entire Venezuelan population. As was outlined in Chapter 7, for the indigenous population of the country, inclusion into this Bolivarian Revolution was largely motivated by the receipt of resources that appeared upon participation in party politics and the establishment of the lucrative communal councils. This process of inclusion most notably resulted in a new form of rapid and regular mobility, which concomitantly relied on regular supplies of petrol. Petrol was not only used to run the donated machinery, but also to travel to the cities with petrol-guzzling outboard motors, so that indigenous people find themselves returning to the cities to replenish supplies sooner than they expect. The bountiful presence of this evanescent fluid in Venezuelan Amazonia thus arose from indigenous people's budding apprenticeship in political patronage and the increased mobility that results.

Regardless of this discernable political milieu, I was nevertheless astonished to see the quantity of petrol being procured on a daily basis by the native Amazonians of the Caura. Maripa, being the frontier town where indigenous peoples of the region travel to collect their fuel at the local petrol station, was strewn with abundant orange-painted oil drums which covered community encampment lawns. Everywhere you turned, an oil drum was in view. The sheer volume of petrol being procured was in part due to its extremely low price, the result of a petrol subsidy introduced in the

1940s when Venezuela was emerging as one of the world's main suppliers of oil (currently costing approximately US\$0.02 per litre, and US\$5 for a 200-litre barrel).<sup>86</sup> But this landscape of oil drums was also a result of the inclusionary ideology of Bolivarianism, which entitles all indigenous communities to purchase a bulk quantity of petrol monthly—*un cupo* (a quota)—in order to sustain their dependence on petrol-run machinery, which impels them to regularly travel to the cities in order to procure the quota.

But there was altogether a more distinct objective for petrol here, one that was consuming all indigenous people in the region: the need for petrol in the gold mines upstream. The gold mining that was taking place in the Caura region, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was just one in a number of increasingly widespread wildcat mines—illegal invasions of independent prospectors rather than organised industries with employers—that are currently proliferating in many regions of South America. The gold mine that I refer to here, located at the headwaters of the Caura basin, was a legendary place at the forefront of the minds of all residents of the region, indigenous and non-indigenous alike. Very few of these people, however, were troubled by the environmental degradation or violent incursions that such illegal prospecting threatened, which has been a cause for great concern in accounts of gold mining on Yanomami lands further south (see Kopenawa 2013: Chapter 16; Ramos 1995: Chapter 11; Rocha 1999). The current story in the Caura is quite the opposite: many Sanema now see the mine as a place to make astronomical riches. Indeed, my host brother Santiago jokingly described it as, 'like the central bank of Venezuela', adding that, 'I am poor at the moment but when I go to the mine I will come back rich!'

Although I myself never travelled to the mine, it was regularly discussed so that its existence was barely clandestine despite its illegal activities. I was told that it was several days boat-ride from the nearest *criollo* town, a hard trek up a steep incline to pass the huge Salto Grande waterfall; a further day by boat and then several hours walk through the forest. In spite of this difficult access, some estimate that it attracts up to 5,000 prospectors at a time, arriving from as far as Colombia and Brazil to try their bidding in exploiting the riches. The Sanema have more recently been drawn into this 'gold rush' for similar reasons: the opportunities to 'return rich' as Santiago

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<sup>86</sup> Today most Venezuelans consider cheap petrol a birth-right and when attempts were made in 1989 to raise prices, riots and deaths ensued, an insurrection followed by violent military action known as *El Caracazo*.

put it. A permanent distraction for all people in my field site, many men were involved in mining-related activities in one way or another, whether by regularly working to portage (Sp. *caletear*) petrol over the large waterfalls, or by selling food or petrol directly in the mine site itself. Most do not mine for gold directly but instead spend only brief moments at the mine site, arriving specifically to supply petrol to the mine ‘bosses’ and receive gold in exchange. In this sense, the ‘gold rush’, from the perspective of the Sanema, can better be understood as a ‘flurry for petrol’, which saw many attempting any means possible to acquire large quantities of the fluid, with some even residing permanently in Maripa for this very purpose.

The reason the mine consumed so much petrol was due to the open cast nature of accessing the gold. Great petrol-powered water cannons (Sp. *bombas*) blast off the topsoil to create large cavities of slurry, which is then passed over a crude carpet-lined sluice box that separates the heavier sediment with the use of mercury.<sup>87</sup> The nature of wildcat prospecting means that anyone with the wealth and means can run their own water cannon at the site, and become known as a ‘machine boss’ (Sp. *dueños*). Indeed, reports were emerging that there were up to a thousand cannons at work at any given time, and while it was difficult to confirm these numbers, it was certainly true that the demand for petrol at the mine was extremely high.

Furnishing the mine with these quantities of petrol, though, necessitated laborious processes of acquisition and bureaucratic procedures in the cities (see Chapter 7), not to mention a hazardous and strenuous journey to transport the fluid miles upstream. It was the combination of these factors that made the price paid for petrol at the mine site so inflated. By some (perhaps exaggerated) accounts, a good day could potentially see a trader walking away from the mine with 10,000 Bs.F (Bolivars fuerte) worth of gold for each 200-litre barrel exchanged. This was equivalent to about US\$1,250 at the time, an incredible profit on the US\$5 it costs to fill one of these 200-litre barrels at the petrol station. Given that in one trip a canoe may even manage to haul up to 10 barrels at a time, weighed down by the hefty load, the result is wealth of unprecedented proportions—a potential US\$12,500—which for a people who previously had little or no access to money, is extraordinary.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> While ‘*minería artesanal*’ (gold panning) is legal in Venezuela, mining with high-pressure water hoses is illegal, as it is far more destructive to the environment.

<sup>88</sup> Although it seems that a lot of this money goes towards payment for bribes, paperwork, portage, and other costs along the way.

Even though these were activities peripheral to those of the petro-state, the influx of subsidised petrol into the area inadvertently assisted the smooth functioning of the mine and its hydraulic cannons. Moreover, the petro-state's manner of co-opting the local indigenous population has made them essential actors in mining activities, as they have a unique access to the *cupos* (quotas) that allow them to purchase petrol in vast quantities and subsequently transport it within indigenous territory. *Criollos* travelling in these territories with large volumes of petrol are highly suspicious and likely to have the fuel confiscated at one of the military checkpoints that now line the river. This is particularly the case if the petrol lacks its accompanying paperwork (Sp. *la guia*), which is also usually only administered to native peoples. As such, these indigenous actors are taking on a new role in relation to the state; specifically they have become mediators between the petro-state and illegal prospecting.

Notwithstanding this bustle of movement and activities related to the state and economic activities (albeit illegal), once petrol enters the community and circulates among residents, its unusual characteristics and uncertain origins became magnified. It is here that I shall describe the exceptional material properties of petrol and how these are interpreted and utilised by the Sanema.

### **The Properties of Petrol**

For the Sanema, perceptions of petrol's material properties are far more intimate than abstractions of its mystical powers (see Behrends, Reyna & Schlee 2011; Coronil 1997; Sawyer 2004; Valdivia 2008; Vásquez 2014). Many of my Sanema friends characterised petrol as an unconventional fluid. A few stated with some uncertainty that they had 'heard it comes from the ground', but most declared that it 'comes from the *criollos*', or that the '*criollos* make it'. Emanating from the non-indigenous domain in this way defines it as a *matitö* (see page 85), which as we learned in Chapter 3, defined it as a substance 'made by man' and that consequently has no spirits or 'spirit carers'. Yet, petrol was rarely described as an entirely inert, utilitarian substance as were other industrial goods. It was said to have many 'friends', the machines to whom it gave a 'voice', allowing them to groan away when they are brought to life. This equipment was not said to 'speak' in the oratory sense, but rather to murmur or sing through the feeding of petrol. For humans, being *tökö*—'alive' and

in good health—is provided by the sustenance of meat and cassava gruel, and evidenced through the warmth and movement at the centre of the body (the location of the heart—*pila kocho möpö*). In the same way, the warmth, movement, and health of machinery depend on the nourishment offered by its special friend—petrol. As one described it: ‘Petrol is the friend of the motor. If you always use petrol the motor will always go. If water enters the motor, it will no longer sing.’

This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 28: A group of young Sanema men siphoning off petrol**

Being liquid, it is inherently partible—much like the beads in Chapter 5—but also easily spilled, doused, blended and vaporised, precluding its existence as a durable object—which is what also defined the value of beads. This fluid state was also significant in being conducive to sharing. Portions were siphoned off on a regular basis within a kin group, offering a palpable movement of substance between the closest of kin. But its fluidity was short-lived, as during use it evaporated rapidly, diffused into fumes, smoke, motion and noise when consumed by its machinery friends. Due to the huge quantities in which it was dispensed, petrol was transported and stored in its weighty 200-litre barrels, which require several people to roll down

the incline of a port, and then heave with audible strain into a precariously tilting canoe.

Yet, the most unique thing about petrol, which the Sanema often have to negotiate, is its volatile flammability. These properties have tangible, and even mysterious, effects. It was reportedly used to suffocate the overabundance of cockroaches that scuttle beneath belongings; or a trail of ants making their way towards a cassava stash. Its potency would also regularly be harnessed for medicinal purposes: to stifle the itch of scabies, to douse feet riddled with jiggers, or even to pour over the hair to rid one of lice. I was also shocked to hear that a young man had drenched a deep machete wound on his wrist with petrol to, as he said, ‘help it heal’. The vaporous and volatile nature of petrol gave it something of a reputation for being what the Sanema describe as fierce (Sa. *waitili*); not entirely aggressive, but rather strong, reckless and bold (see Chapter 6). It was seen as dynamic and unpredictable matter, described as spontaneously ‘exploding’ when left unattended for long periods in the sun, jumping out of barrels in a jet, squirting into the eyes, resisting being capped, and burning the skin when moved. It misbehaves and needs taming with engine oil, as my Sanema friends described it (Sp. *ligando*), without which it was likely to break machinery. I began to notice too that numerous stories of death and disaster had petrol as the lead figure: it dragged people over waterfalls with its immense weight, unexpectedly blew up ascending bi-planes when leaving Sanema communities, and burned people to death in revenge attacks, stories to which I shall return at the end of this chapter.

Petrol was also increasingly being used for sorcery spells (Sa. *alawalia*), in particular the throwing of reactive substances on the cremation fire, a widespread ritual among the Sanema in response to unexplained fatalities. These spells are said to bring about the death of unidentified or distant murderers—usually enemy ‘others’ or sorcerers—and in the process ameliorate the rage of grief. Chillies added to the fire are described as causing the assassin’s skin to heat up and blister, and sand to explode and trigger the prompt fracture of the killer’s bones. Increasingly incorporated into these systems of retribution (Sa. *noa kōa*), petrol was now also poured over the body to intensify the fire, and thus to accelerate the agonising feverish demise of the elusive enemy.

We can already see from these descriptions that, for the Sanema, petrol is an enigmatic substance with something akin to agency or animacy. This does not perhaps require such a stretch of the imagination, given that petrol has tangible chemical potency: it is a combustible, vaporous fluid and produces very real energy. In fact, this is precisely what makes it an interesting substance to study in my field context. Being a powerful volatile fluid rather than an inert object, such as a plastic plate, allows for an analysis of something that somehow manifests the confluence of animate and inactive matter, and offers insight into what constitutes vitality beyond animism.

### **Moral Animism**

As mentioned earlier, for the Sanema, to be alive is evidenced through warmth and movement at the centre of the body, and the term ‘alive’—*tökö*—refers to the heartbeat—*tökö tökömo*. And yet phenomena and things without warmth or heartbeats such as large trees, raging rapids, monumental rock formations, strong gusts of wind, and dark swollen clouds, are also endowed with spirits. I would like to suggest, though, that unlike the relationality described by Ingold and Viveiros de Castro earlier, it is not merely action that gives life in the Sanema animist system, it is also origin. What all these powerful beings have in common is their shared presence in mythological time. In other words, all beings that today have spirits share the same primordial origins in which they were once part of an undifferentiated whole.<sup>89</sup> Petrol was not part of this mythological history.

But there is another important point about animism that needs to be elucidated; the nuances of which have hitherto been largely neglected in accounts of lowland South America, namely the importance of morality. The descriptions of animism presented at the beginning of this chapter conveyed a system of similarities, as it were. That is, a belief in the shared humanity, or what Descola refers to as

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<sup>89</sup> The role of manufactured goods in Sanema mythology is fleeting and rather complex (see The Myth of Origin of Modern Goods in Appendix 5), because none are thought to subsequently emerge as forest beings with spirits, but rather objects ‘made by men’ in the present day. I believe that this might be due to the fact that manufactured goods are not independent characters in mythology but rather instruments or bodily characteristics that then became components of animal corporealities (see also Santos-Granero 2009b: 4-8). The fact that they never transformed is also telling, because it further shows that they were not living beings. It is also important to note that Sanema mythological beings never transformed into present-day artifacts.



interiority, of all living things. And yet, the principle tenet of Amazonian animism is in fact the estimation of difference, the theory of alterity. Descola himself points out that despite a universal humanity, it is through differences in bodily form that ‘animism finds signs of otherness’ (2013: 287). He goes on to state that although all beings share human souls, they are nevertheless ‘human[s] of particular type[s]’ (2013: 288). It stands to reason, then, that this scrutiny of difference would be inherently ethical, and it indeed stems from the understanding that the post-mythical ‘true’ or ‘proper’ humanity emerged in distinction to dangerous, yet fertile, ‘otherness’ (as described in Chapter 7; see also Descola 1996: 222; Santos-Granero 2009b: 43; Viveiros de Castro 1998: 474-7).<sup>90</sup>

Interpretations of moral differentiation, though, are not only directed towards other humans, but are also often asserted through the actions of nonhuman animist beings. Londoño Sulkin (2005), for instance, found that the perspectival narratives of the Colombian Muinane were framed around moral divergences within the cosmos, with animals being intrinsically wicked and lacking in compassion. In this way, cosmological perspectivism becomes salient most notably as a moral marker of selfhood. He states that: ‘The profound moral inequality between humans and animals features centrally in Muinane people’s everyday, articulate interpretations of what they deem to be admirable, desirable, acceptable, or despicable, in their own and other’s actions and thoughts/emotions’ (2005: 23).

Among the Sanema, causality in the cosmos is likewise premised specifically on moral action. The notion of behavioural propriety is a common mytheme, and often the key moment of character transformation in mythology is immediately preceded by incorrect behaviour. In this sense, differentiation is precipitated by immorality rather than by a whimsical impulse to transform. The alligator man (Yarama), for instance, transformed due to his stinginess with fire (see Appendix 12), the opossum transformed after killing his rival (see Appendix 10), and his pursuers transformed because they did not cremate the body (see Taylor 1979: 214-5). As is common in myths, underlying themes often include taboo-breaking, stinginess,

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<sup>90</sup> Descola does use the word ‘morality’ in *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013: Chapter 12), but only in relation to corporeal forms in Amazonia and how one must negotiate the consumption of other ‘human’ beings. His ‘modes of relations’ do to some extent attempt to make sense of cosmological aetiology, but with reference to the modes that relate to Amazonia, he predominantly couches it in terms of the balancing of finite vitality within the metasytem (see Chapter 13 and 14), rather than explicitly as morality or responses to moral actions.

deception, insults, disobedience, neglect and unchecked anger. To this day, the spirits of these mythical beings continue to inhabit the forest and, in fact, still bring about transformation, but this time in the form of illness among the Sanema, as described in Chapter 3. Significantly, though, animal spirits do not attack and cause illness haphazardly. Rather, they only do so in response to moral transgressions such as dietary infringements during menstruation and pregnancy, sexual intercourse between parents during the first two years of a child's life, as well as overhunting, bathing during menstruation, infidelity, or the incorrect performance of puberty rites.

Although far removed regionally from Amazonia, the Chewong of Peninsular Malaysia present a strikingly similar case of moral animism, and Howell (2012) specifically describes the direct causal relationship between behaviour and inauspicious events such as hurricanes and illness. Like the Sanema, the Chewong relate infringements of what Howell terms 'cosmo-rules' (or 'codes of conduct') with undesirable events triggered by spirit beings. The agency of these non-human beings is 'activated in the wake of a human transgression' (2012: 136). All undesirable occurrences are thus the result of the intentionality of animist beings who are responding to moral action, a pertinent reminder of the interwoven lives of humans and their forest associates. All this points to the fact that animism is driven by moral activity whereby one is continually estimating ones conduct in negotiation with, and relation to, the actions of other beings within the cosmos. I shall call this moral relationality, a dynamic that constitutes and defines the Sanema animist cosmos. Fundamentally, the possession of an interiority or soul in this context is not simply a state in and of itself, but one that develops from moral behaviour, and that also governs it.

## The Absence and Presence of a Spirit

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### Figure 29: Gold

Petrol's close ties with gold offers an opportunity to further explore the idea of the moral relationality of animism. Petrol and gold are in many ways analogous, but it is their fundamental difference—that they are thought to hail from distinct realms—that determines their possession of a spirit, or more precisely, a 'spirit carer'. Gold was described as *silimo*, speedy (Sp. *apurado*); promoting a rapid movement due to people's eagerness to bring it back to the commercial centres and obtain their long awaited riches. But it is also speedy because it is innately evil. In the Caura region in general, as much among *criollos* as among the Ye'kwana and Sanema, there circulated numerous rumours of what became known as 'the curse of gold'. This curse relates to the speedy squandering of gold wealth that forces prospectors to immediately return to the mine to yet again toil away for their treasures (see similar cases of cursed gold in Biersack 1999; High 2013; Shipton 1989). The splurging of gold wealth became palpable when a group of miners returned from upstream and passed through the typically sleepy town of Maripa. All of a sudden, the town was

transformed into a raucous centre of weeklong merrymaking, thunderous all-night parties and intoxicated people passed out on the streets in broad daylight. In fact, the movement to and from the mine in many ways mirrored the cyclical sequence of requiring petrol to procure petrol that was likewise entrenched in a dependency on rapidly vaporising resources.

But the speediness of gold for the Sanema had an altogether more menacing undertone, and in fact the rapid expenditure of their money was the least of their worries. For the Sanema, the danger of gold emerged directly from the pernicious ‘spirit carers’ of gold, the *orotil tōpō* (lit. gold people), also referred to as ‘*demonios*’ (demons), who ‘look after’ the gold and enact revenge upon those who remove it from their land. Once removed from the earth, gold was said to ‘have poison’, referring to the potency of the spirits that linger and travel with it, so that even entering the community with gold in one’s pocket can cause grave illness among nearby children. This too explains why it was speedy: as one man described it to me in a hushed voice, ‘When you have gold you must leave the community as quickly as possible. It is only when you take it to a trader in Maripa that you are truly safe.’

Indeed, when a whooping cough epidemic acutely afflicted most of the children in Maduaña, the women blamed the gold. ‘Why do they stop here, why do they linger!’ my host mother shouted in frustration one day in response to her son’s *ilotō wasu*.<sup>91</sup> ‘It is the gold that has done this!’ She continued, ‘They must leave the community quickly and not stay!’ Another man also told me the story of his father’s close call with death when he had gold in his possession for too long:

I won’t go to the mine because my father used to go to a different mine in the past. He worked for some Ye’kwana men there and they gave him a little bit of gold in payment and he almost died because he brought it to the house and left it there.

Part of the malevolent force of gold stems from its source beneath the earth, a place of multiple layers which Lizot described as infused with ‘rotteness, inhabited by grotesque, giant worms’ (Lizot 2007: 271-76, quoted in Kelly 2011: 235, n. 4). The Yanomami activist Davi Kopenawa describes gold as ‘fragments of the sky, moon, sun, and stars, which fell down in the beginning of time’ (2013: 283). He goes

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<sup>91</sup> ‘Howler monkey poison’, which refers to the strikingly similar sound of a howler monkey’s call to the rasping cough.

on to explain, though, that it was intentionally placed under the earth by the mythical hero Omama (Sa. Omawö) because such minerals are ‘evil and dangerous things, saturated with coughs and fevers’ (2013: 282). For my Sanema hosts, the underworld was indeed a portentous place, the location of expelled illness in shaman incantation, regularly made evident during my host fathers healing sessions in which he gestured a scooping and throwing movement from sick patients while chanting, ‘*lute, lute, masitali, masitali!*’ (It smells bad, it smells bad, in the earth, in the earth!). The evil subterranean world is most notoriously the home of malicious dwarf cannibal beings known as ‘the hungry ones’ (Sa. *ojinamo töpö*), who emerge from their vile subterranean worlds and voraciously consume the Sanema if puberty rites are not strictly adhered to (see also Colchester 1981: 52-3; Taylor 1979: 217).<sup>92</sup>

We have already seen that petrol is associated with a subterranean origin—recall that some have ‘heard that it comes from the earth’—but we shall also shortly see that, like gold, petrol is linked to ‘*demonios*’ and has a poison that results in physical afflictions. Nevertheless, unlike gold, petrol was never described as having a ‘spirit carer’, because it is ‘made by men’, and ‘comes from the *criollos*’ (compare to Walker 2012b). The question of whether it might have emerged from the earth is eclipsed by its transmutation by non-indigenous people, a process that is seen to have tempered its potency. This notion comes in tandem with the understanding that it is far removed from the animist domain, instead deriving from the distinct purview of the *criollos*, where forest spirits (Sa. *salopö iki töpö*) do not reside, and where even gold loses its occult propensities.<sup>93</sup> But even without a ‘spirit carer’, petrol still retains a special kind of animacy. To demonstrate this, in the next section I shall give a case of petrol’s tangible effects on the Sanema, of how it comes to have *demonios* and poison like gold.

### **Petrol’s Poison**

One afternoon my assistant and I were interrupted during a conversation by the sound of screaming in the adjacent house, and as was the normal response, we grabbed our

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<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, Colchester (1981: 111, n. 124) notes that these ‘ohinani’ are by definition ‘crazy’ as *nani* means crazy. This notion is also associated with petrol, which I shall explain below.

<sup>93</sup> Howell (2012: 135) also describes cosmo-rules losing their potency when Chewong people move to different ontological domains.

machetes and ran towards the sound of the commotion. I had expected to see the familiar sight of an inebriated fight, but was alarmed by what I actually did see. A boy had been tied to a post and his father was repeatedly striking him with the flat side of his machete as the boy squirmed and screeched. His father emitted a bellowing, ‘You must not drink petrol!’ with each hit, and when he finally desisted with his punishment, he threw down the machete and thundered off. The sobbing and trembling boy was released from his constraints as his weeping female kin inspected the red welts that covered his body.

I had never before witnessed such severe castigation of this kind, particularly of pre-teens who are still granted a much-valued autonomy. It was evident that others also considered this punishment unduly grave by the fact that the boy’s grandmother sought revenge on his behalf, imparting ‘equal’ injury to the father, although with a rope rather than a machete. And yet, after the incident, rather than expressing continued disapproval at the father’s harsh reaction, many residents suggested that it was to be expected given that the boy had committed a serious misdemeanour by ‘drinking’, or rather inhaling or sniffing, petrol. ‘This never happened before’, one woman lamented, ‘This is now.’

Since learning of petrol’s narcotic effects, many young boys in Maduaña would surreptitiously siphon off small quantities from their parents stash to inhale, enabling them to ‘get drunk’, as it was described. Indeed, not two weeks prior to the chastisement that I witnessed, Mauricio and I had stumbled across a youth alone in the shadowy corner of one of the community houses, cradling a small bottle containing the distinctive ochre liquid. A faint smell of petrol hung in the air and the boy stared at us with a glazed look and bloodshot eyes, giggling faintly to himself. After we left, Mauricio confirmed that he was probably sniffing petrol, adding with a disconcerted mumble that he was already almost ‘mad’ with it.

I attributed his concern partly to the disapproval that some express towards giggling. The little boy of my household, Washai, was regularly hollered at by my host mother to ‘stop fooling around’ (Sa. *sapōko dia!*) if his excessive and mischievous tittering with his playmate were to crescendo to a perceptible pitch.<sup>94</sup> Playing and making jokes in the correct context and with the correct people (see for example de Vienne 2012) is one thing, but ‘fooling around’ without purpose or reason

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<sup>94</sup> See also Overing (1985b: 270) where she describes ‘wild laughter’ as improper among the Piaroa.

is the archetypal behaviour of evil mythical characters, particularly the much-reviled and widespread trickster figure. But the embodiment of evil is not merely a buffoon (see Overing 1985b); it is also a loner, as the Sanema myth of the child-eating ogre demonstrates. In this story an evil woman who lives alone in a large rock appears in a Sanema community and gobbles up all the children whilst laughing mockingly (Colchester 1981: 50). It was the living alone as much as the laughing that made this evil woman so sinister.

Indeed, unlike many Amazonian groups, such as the Ashéninka (Killick 2005), who intentionally live in dispersed individual households as a strategy to diffuse social tensions that arise when living in nucleated settlements, the Sanema of Maduaña do not abide ‘living apart’ in this way. Marco often refused to ‘allow’ residents to build houses a short walk away from Maduaña, as to do so would erode conviviality and causes an inevitable further rupture from the community core. As we saw in Chapter 6, the preferred method of diffusing tensions in Maduaña was through machete slaps. This is indeed why, far worse than simply giggling, to do so on one’s own is frightful. Doing anything alone is widely considered to be improper at best, and an indication of impending illness or madness at worst. Much concern, for example, is expressed over youth who spend considerable time alone in their hammocks. Kohn similarly notes the danger of an inability to see beyond oneself (soul blindness) among the Runa, describing it as ‘an isolating state of monadic solipsism’ (2013: 117).

The reasons given for the child’s severe punishment was that he had ‘let the devil inside’. Feliciano described the Sanema term for devil as ‘*ai pupo*’—one who is disguised (Sp. *disfrazado*). He explained that an *ai pupo* is a person who had ‘turned into a bad person, become a demon’. This term—letting the devil inside—was often used to describe excessive drunkenness, a state that indexes violent upstream others, and which precipitates unchecked fierceness, capricious behaviour and a general obstruction to community well-being. Many, although not all, residents of Maduaña outwardly described alcohol consumption as improper, in part because being drunk—*polemo* (literally meaning ‘to be like a dog’)—causes one to forget their kin and act unpredictably (just as do dogs). Alcohol consumption triggers one to name the dead, have numerous illicit affairs, act aggressively towards kin, and entice evil spirits (Sa. *sai töpö*) and raiders (Sa. *oka töpö*) to the community. Marco, the community

chief, regularly attributed fiendish forces and immoral behaviour to alcohol consumption, describing the fermentation of manioc beer as ‘growing a devil’ in the community. The entering of harmful essences in this way was analogous to descriptions of the onset of illness, in which vengeful animal spirits enter the body; although the difference here is that the spirit is intentionally granted entrance—*letting* the devil inside—rather than invading against one’s will.

Of course, the notion of the entering devil is also unmistakably influenced by the Christian concept of sin, but the Spanish terms ‘*diablo*’ and ‘*demonio*’, as well as the Sanema term *ai pupo*, were most often used to refer to isolated kinless beings who were the source of malicious unexplained or ominous incidences, as we saw in Chapter 6 (page 168).<sup>95</sup> Sorcerers (Sa. *oka töpö*) in particular, who roam the forest alone searching for a Sanema to kill, were often described as ‘*demonios*’, and were also a topic of much fretful discussion amongst the women of Maduaña, since they were considered to be the epitome of a-sociality and immorality. Death by *oka töpö* attack is the most feared demise as it is extremely ‘rapid’ and cannot be prevented or slowed through shamanism.

And yet when young boys drink alcohol (and sometimes even the hallucinogenic virola snuff) they are not punished. There was something altogether more menacing about petrol’s devilish potential. While extreme alcohol consumption and resulting rage can cause one to ‘forget kin’ in a similar way to petrol sniffing, this is only a temporary outcome, the result of extremes in highly *social* behaviour that the ‘joy’ of drunkenness often brings (most commonly related to philandering). Petrol sniffing was a solitary and secret endeavour, normally undertaken by boys alone, at most in pairs, hidden away in the dark corners of houses. What’s more, petrol was described as having a ‘poison’—*wasu*—that causes ‘permanent damage to the mind’, as my host brother described it; which is where, he added, ‘proper thinking is’. Impairment to this seat of moral thought affects not only one’s sense of propriety, but also the fragile balance of conviviality. But worse than that, the ‘permanent damage’ causes one to become deranged.

This is the madness that Mauricio described upon seeing the giggling boy sniffing petrol. This potential of petrol to cause insanity was well known because it

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<sup>95</sup> Note that these terms are different to those that relate to Christian devil, for which they use *satana* in Spanish and *sai ton* in Sanema.



was personified by a local man from the neighbouring Ye'kwana who was famous throughout the region for his regular 'consumption' of petrol that caused his inappropriate behaviour, gibberish talk, voluntary isolation and aggression. He was described as 'going around without a place, and without people', spending weeks at a time wandering the streets of Maripa, and then drifting from community to community with seemingly no awareness of the rules of kinship, importance of sharing, and social interdictions. He would inevitably be banished from each community and forced to hitch to another. As rumour had it, he was abandoned as a child and left on his own, causing him to 'drink' petrol in solace, which in turn resulted in his madness and the further intensification of his alienated and anomalous nature.

One interpretation of this scenario might be to foreground an emerging anxiety over the changing dynamics that result from what petrol represents: close and regular contact with the *criollo* realm, a flood of its powerful substances, and the alienation, greed, and breakdown of social ties that result. This is particularly evident when interlocutors state with concern that, 'this never happened before, this is now'. Indeed, the 'petrol man' seemed to epitomise for my Sanema friends the immoral behaviour of the *criollos*, who they often referred to as stingy, aggressive, and indifferent to the needs of their kin. The 'petrol man' could most often be found wandering the streets of Maripa among the *criollos* because, it was said, this was where he could be sure to find petrol. But, more than that, by drinking their fluid, it was as though he were becoming a *criollo* and, as a consequence, also becoming equally depraved. This notion that the use and consumption of *criollo* things could bring about *criollo* immoral behaviour resembles Ewart's (2013b) account of manufactured items among the Panará. In one case a woman had neglected her child when preoccupied with dancing to music blasted out from a stereo, and so another resident reacted by smashing it up. Ewart thus noted that, 'while *hipe* [white people] things are desirable, becoming like *hipe* in terms of social behaviour, neglecting one's children, and having sex with non-Panará, is regarded with deep disapproval and results in drastic measures against *hipe* objects, which in other contexts are highly valued' (2013b: 105).

Furthermore, the case of petrol sniffing undeniably brings to mind Taussig's (1980) account of peasants in the Cauca Valley of Colombia, who made a pact with the devil to increase their production in the sugar plantations, which, according to

Taussig, reflected a belief in the immorality of the capitalist economy. While Taussig's theory has been widely critiqued for portraying a false incompatibility between market economies and pre-capitalist forms of exchange, similar moral narratives do continue to emerge from descriptions of burgeoning encounters with wider society. To give a few examples, Hutchinson (1992) describes the 'money of shit' among the Nuer as contaminated wealth earned during labour in the cities, and Kirsch (2006) illustrates how the Yonggom of New Guinea use the discourse of illness and accident as a 'critique of the larger political economy into which they have become incorporated' (2006: 108; see also Shipton 1989: 50). One of the aims of this chapter, though, is to consider whether there might be a compatibility between native ontologies and wider national contexts; one not necessarily premised on transformation *per se*, but rather on mutualities in ways of being in the world. I shall consider this in greater detail towards the end of the chapter.

In the meantime, I would like to suggest that petrol's malevolent propensities are not entirely dissimilar to those of the spirits of the animist cosmos, who as we have seen, are never benign or benevolent, but predatory beings who impinge on others in negative ways. Furthermore, the case of the petrol sniffing illustrates that this fluid is tightly interwoven into the moral relationality of everyday life. But there is another story to be told here, one that in fact relates more profoundly with the animist surroundings than a mere causal impact on mind and morals. The next section will show that petrol can act as though with intentionality.

### **Petrol Responding**

Towards the end of my fieldwork period, during a time in which an increasing number of Sanema were participating in mining, I entered my host-family's house after my morning's bathe and immediately sensed that the atmosphere around the hearth was strained. The frustration in my host brother Wilfredo's face was palpable, as was the clipped tone in his voice. Santiago, his brother, was sitting opposite him with a similarly uncharacteristic demeanour, detached and taciturn. I had clearly arrived amidst a quarrel between the brothers, two of the five brothers of my host family who were known for their regular disputes. Luckily, they seemed to be either unaware or indifferent to my sudden and awkward appearance in the doorway, and continued their tense discussion. 'There are a lot of problems if we can't sell petrol',

Wilfredo snapped. ‘You sit here in the community waiting for your gold, behaving badly. But I cannot sell this petrol if you behave badly.’ Santiago’s gaze was fixed on the smoking embers of the fire in front of him, following the protocol of yielding to an account or diatribe before embarking on his own response. I tiptoed past them as discreetly as I could, but before I knew it Wilfredo had departed in frustration, leaving Santiago to sulk on his own. Seeing his obvious consternation, I asked him what had transpired. In his resentment, he blurted:

He says that the miners don’t want to buy our petrol; he says that this is because of me, because I behaved badly, but this is between him and his wife. She stayed at the foot of Para waterfalls with him and when he was transporting petrol upstream she had sex with another man there. If Wilfredo scolds me again, I will scold him back!

I was aware that Santiago and two of his other brothers, Wilfredo and Marco, had been pursuing the lucrative endeavour of exchanging petrol in the mine over the previous year. Marco was often occupied with the procurement of paperwork and petrol in Maripa (see Chapter 7), while Wilfredo, the eldest of the brothers, was assigned the task of transporting and exchanging the petrol in the mine. He had returned from a two-month trip to the mine the previous evening, but evidently not everything had gone to plan. What’s more, he had been suggesting that the successful exchange of petrol relied on the proper behaviour of kin back home.

A few days after the argument, I approached Wilfredo to ask what had happened during his trip. He told me that he always worked hard for his family and this is why he was attempting to sell the petrol. But, he added bitterly, he was unable to succeed due to their waywardness. After several failed attempts to transport the fuel to the mine without paperwork, Wilfredo and his brothers had managed to purchase the documentation from a Ye’kwana contact, and this time he passed the military checkpoints with ease. He described how he had buoyantly arrived at the mine with his several barrels to sell to the machine bosses, but when he delivered his petrol, they did not pay. Then some other smugglers arrived after him, passed over their petrol, and happily walked away with their payment of gold. Wilfredo waited for his share but received nothing, slowly suspecting that something unusual was occurring. In this moment, as he told it, he realised what was going on. ‘Aha’, he said to himself, ‘My brother, or my wife’s younger sister, they are behaving badly. This is why the petrol won’t exchange.’

At a later date I was discussing mining with another research participant and I brought up the argument between Santiago and Wilfredo. He elaborated on the issue:

People are like that. Wilfredo goes to sell petrol in the mine. He sells it but they don't pay well, or don't pay quickly. 'When are you going to pay?' you ask and they say 'the day after tomorrow' but this day passes and again you ask, and they say 'tomorrow' and again the day passes. This is because your family is misbehaving. Santiago slept with Milton's wife and so it was his fault. When you go to the mine to sell petrol, if your woman misbehaves with a man, despite your hard work they are not going to pay you anything, or they will pay badly. The petrol will not make a return.

He described this phenomenon as a case of immoral behaviour (*Sa. salia bai*) resulting in a 'bad return', and he offered a further example: if a man goes fishing and his family is misbehaving, then he will catch no fish. Here was a case in which petrol, ostensibly inorganic matter, seemed to be acting like a fish, an animist agent. Both were resisting a return. If we recall the account of causality among the Chewong in which all misfortune has intentional agents, we see here that the evasive fish and petrol might be seen to be wilfully causing hardship in response to immoral behaviour. But this was not the only case in which petrol seemed to cause misfortune in response to misconduct. Stories of disaster, in which petrol was in some ways implicated, were common.

In two such cases, the cumbersome weight of the large petrol barrels dragged people down to their demise. One man, Mario, lost his wife and three children when a heavy barrel of petrol had caused the canoe they were travelling in to topple over when passing through some strong rapids. The 'petrol had dragged them under' as one person described it. But the story was also accompanied by hushed suggestions that the accident was not spontaneous, but had instead been the result of their 'bad behaviour'. Both Mario and his wife, I was told, had been engaging in illicit affairs at the time. In another story, a Ye'kwana man who had been transporting many barrels of petrol to the mine had arrived above the waterfalls and eagerly boarded his canoe with several huge drums, despite the water threateningly licking the rim of the boat. The motor did not have sufficient power for such weight, and so had choked and failed. As the story goes, the Ye'kwana man had desperately pulled the starter cord over and over to no avail as his canoe slowly drifted towards the precipice. His hefty

petrol pulled him over the waterfall and down to his death. Talk of the incident was accompanied by the suggestion that he perished due to his greed.

The combustible proclivity of petrol was also vital to its role in people's demise. In one case, the long-term missionary of Sakuniña died in an exploding biplane as it was leaving the community. It was the petrol, they said, that had pulled the plane down and then caused it to explode. In another case, a man who was known for often becoming violently drunk and 'letting the devil inside' was doused and burned alive with petrol after an argument with another drunk man. The most important thing to keep in mind when considering these stories is the fact that the notion that death comes about through natural or accidental causes is absent among the Sanema. Mortality is generally thought to be the result of the agency and intentionality of harmful forces and intentional vengeful agents (see similar cases in Storrie 2006: 229; Taylor 1996: 202; Whitehead and Wright 2004). Recall also that petrol was used in revenge sorcery in the same way as *alawalia* spells, revealing its significance and similarity with animist things (which are made from spirit-endowed plants).

Returning to the intentionality of the fish and petrol, when attempting to locate the source of the 'agency' in these two cases, the approach offered by Ingold at the beginning of this chapter proves productive: agentive artefacts such as stones that roll and speak do so because they are placed within a relational field of human action, and 'depend on human intervention [in order] to become active' (Santos-Granero 2009b: 15). But why should only humans be the agents and the animals and artefacts merely the mediators of those moral actions? A number of anthropologists have undertaken to engage with this question, developing what has become known as a post-humanist approach, which attempts to move beyond the privileging of the human-oriented view of the world. Eduardo Kohn (2013), for instance, goes further than the 'subjectivity activated by human intervention' approach (see Gell 1998; Guzmán-Gallegos 2009; Santos-Granero 2009c) by advocating for what he terms 'an anthropology beyond the human'. In this, he asks that we begin to take seriously the intentionality and representational forms that other beings create, rather than project human representations upon them. Kohn's approach is motivated by how his Runa interlocutors reflect on an 'ecology of selves' which is composed of dogs dreaming

and forest beings thinking, as much as humans acting. ‘Forests are good to think’, Kohn asserts, ‘because they themselves think’ (2013: 22).<sup>96</sup>

In a similar way, the fish and the petrol in the Sanema context are not merely mediating human intentionality or being mediated by it, because they possess their own intentionality. Moral relationality is the relationality of *all* beings of the cosmos, not just humans. Most intriguingly, rather than merely conveying this intentionality through the possession of ‘spirit carers’, as did the gold and the fish; petrol, which was ‘made by men’, somehow ‘responded’ to human behaviour as though it too had a spirit.

### **Petrol’s Moral Affordances**

This chapter has demonstrated that petrol’s affordances enable a unique positioning within and between ontologies. As we have seen, petrol is not a substance of the animist realm because it did not descend from the primordial human totality, and thus does not share a cosmogonic antiquity from whence beings such as gold acquired their spirits. As a result, petrol is not in attendance in present-day mythology. Nevertheless, it clearly has unique properties that impact upon people and things. Petrol is a volatile, flammable and pungent fluid. Its fluidity makes it unlike other manufactured items, and is indeed indistinguishable from organic matter in its water-like substantial quality (although when merged with water it creates a kaleidoscopic appearance on the surface). Its rumoured origin beneath the earth also equates it with other animist beings such as ‘the gold people’.

The powers of petrol go far beyond this, though, as its energy and force become palpable when fed to machinery, which then miraculously acquire a voice and produce movement. Indeed, it is this power in feeding machinery that relates to its potential to produce great wealth, since it also feeds the hydraulic cannons at the mine, and so can be exchanged for gold. As such, it also has the capacity to enhance kin and community well-being through the purchase of vast quantities of ‘things’ (see Chapter 3).

The volatility of petrol can also permanently alter the mind when sniffed and consequently cause one to become an a-social being, what is often referred to as a

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<sup>96</sup> While I find Kohn’s work productive for my project, it ultimately departs from mine because he focuses on ‘living thoughts’, so that ‘selves, not things, qualify as agents’ (2013: 92).

demon. Its flammability also surfaces in stories of people's untimely and suspicious demise as well as in its use in assault sorcery. It is due to these properties that petrol becomes far more than an inert substance, and in fact becomes caught up in people's lives in very active and moral ways. Indeed, exploring how petrol's material properties are understood enables a more nuanced understanding of what propels the agency of the animist cosmos. I argue that when an object or substance is endowed with properties that afford an entanglement in the moral actions of the cosmos, then it can become in some sense an active agent in a similar way. As we see here, the material morality of petrol has caused it to be granted partial admittance into the animist realm.

To return to the questions set out at the start of this chapter, we can now see why the ceiba tree, certain stones and large *jolia mökkö* worms possess spirits, and why the smaller counterparts do not: because the large beings were characters in mythological time and the smaller ones were not. Plastic plates do not have spirits because they were 'made by men' and were also not present in primordial time. What is more, they are not implicated in the processes of moral relationality to the same degree as petrol (neither do its origins suggest potential organic earthly qualities). Plates are merely used to place food on, they are never used for sorcery, cannot enable great wealth, cannot get one drunk, are not implicated in numerous stories of death, and certainly do not impinge on people's moral expectations and actions in daily life. Indeed, plastic plates are often readily discarded at whim, trodden on, broken, left with disinterest to be covered with cockroaches at night, and they are certainly never spoken of with anywhere near as much frequency (and veiled anxiety) as petrol. This is why they are not integrated into the same type of moral relationality, as are other animist beings. The special characteristics of petrol, on the other hand, enable all these things that plastic plates are incapable of performing. As such, petrol is an agent in systems of moral relationality.

## **Conclusion**

The denunciation of petrol sniffing demonstrated that full relational humanity could only be achieved when one is inserted into a network of kin. Without this emplacement within relationality, one is no longer a cognizant and moral person, as was epitomised by the 'petrol man'. Similarly, in Wilfredo's story of the petrol that

resisted exchange, we also saw that people are not isolated units, but that their lives are mutually implicated, so that if one misbehaves, others suffer the consequences. But this also extends to other beings within the animist system, which—as we learned at the beginning of the chapter—is integrally relational. What I have attempted to show, however, is that animism bears specifically upon moral relationships, and not merely principles of interiority and physicality.

In this way, just as there is no such thing as an autonomous moral subject (see pages 28-29), there is likewise no autonomous moral animist, such that what also makes beings from mythological time animist is their moral relationality. Hence, those that do not emerge from the primordial body, but that are enmeshed in a web of morality, take on a type of pseudo- or quasi-animism. That is, they exist as if they had spirits. And yet, unlike other objects in Amazonia, petrol is not subjectified (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 468-471) through human action. This is in part because it is not a constant object that can accumulate a biography (Kopytoff 1986), but is a substance that is continually renewed. Secondly, I argue, it is not a subjectified thing because it does not rely on human action to possess intentionality, as is similarly the case with other animist beings of the cosmos. That is, it seems to respond to moral behaviour just as do other animist beings like fish, because they are independent intentional subjects. As we have seen, it was the affordances of petrol—its burdensome storage in weighty barrels, its capacity to produce energy in machinery, its intoxicating vapours, its rapid flammability—that imbued it with occult propensities. In turn, all the cases I presented showed petrol to be tightly bound up within contexts of moral relationality, more so even than other artefacts. This is how we can appreciate petrol's vitality, its ability to resist exchange and thus have intentionality: because its active effects cause it to be implicated in the animist cosmos.

With this in mind, where then do the Sanema locate themselves between animism and a petro-state? Petrol has provided a fitting lens from which to explore this notion, as it can itself be seen to dwell in both animism and a petro-state. Interestingly, a focus on morality can again help us to better consider this question. Ewart (2013b: 88-89) notes that Panará sociality and worldviews do not exhibit rapid transformations despite an influx of manufactured materiality, and the reason for this is their judgments about a morally lived existence. While the objects of the whites are desired, their social and moral codes are not, and so material changes do not



necessarily reflect social or ontological shifts. What one finds among the Panará, Ewart stresses, is not ‘social change but rather ... material change’ (2002: 43). Indeed, it is the historically consistent social interaction with the exterior that is valued above the objects themselves. In this way, we come to understand change as something that ‘does not simply hit but rather is actively engaged with’ (2002: 41). I believe that this certainly holds true for the Sanema; but then again, to suggest that no transformations are occurring here would be inaccurate. I would like to propose that mutualities are also arising due to the inherent moral configurations of Sanema lived worlds.

Costa and Fausto have critiqued existing models of animism for their tendency to present it as consonant with ‘the politics of Pierre Clastres—[as] a religion against the state’ (2010: 99). We have seen from the case of petrol that when resolving the riddle of animate things, this process is far from disconnected from the contemporary context; and in this case, from the petro-state. While it might seem that the moral ambiguities that emerge from experiences with petrol stem from a recent incorporation into state processes and the market economy, given that moral exigencies already define animism, then the two domains are not necessarily incommensurable or discrete. Indeed, if one’s propensity to be an animist actor arises from a relationality that is governed by a search for moral existence and meaning, then this is as much so in relation to wider national society as it is in relation to the forest realm. This is why contemporary Sanema animism can only be understood in relation to its emplacement within the broader political context and the substances and objects that emerge from that context. These *criollo* things constitute Sanema experiences of moral relationality, and indeed ‘material morality’, at every turn.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Conclusion:

#### Action Emerging from Value

During one of my final days in the community of Maduaña, I was sitting next to Alonzo-Patasibi at his hearth, enjoying a fresh evening breeze. He had recently returned from a hunt and a group of excited children squatted near the peccary deposited beside the house, chattering and prodding the dead animal. Alonzo-Patasibi was sharpening his machete, which was wedged tightly in an old tree stump as he slowly rasped his newly purchased file back and forth against the blade. On the spur of the moment I had a whimsical urge to find out more about the personalities of his spirit allies, his *jikula*. My host father, René, often described his *jikula* arguing with each other inside his chest. This compelling description inspired me to discover more about the individual characteristics of these mystifying beings. Alonzo-Patasibi, known for being wrathful himself at times, admitted that his *jikula* too get enraged. ‘Sometimes there is a Ye’kwana man passing by the community in his canoe and he has his outboard motor.’ He gestured a sweeping movement towards the river and continued, ‘If I am looking for a lift to Maripa and he responds angrily, “No, I’m not going to take you!”’, then my *jikula* will get angry too.’

He seemed to finish there and continued the rhythmic scrape of his file down the blade, the shiny edge gradually emerging through the grime of its continual use. My interest was certainly piqued, firstly because his statement had insinuated that the Ye’kwana were stingy (Sa. *umi ipö*), a sentiment rarely uttered by the Sanema due to a fear (Sa. *kili*) of their powerful neighbours. Secondly, the hypothetical scenario that was offered seemed unfinished, as it was well known that an angered *jikula* is a dangerous being indeed. ‘So, what does the *jikula* do to the Ye’kwana man?’ I ventured. Alonzo-Patasibi paused and rubbed his coarse thumb sideways across the blade of his machete. ‘He does nothing to the Ye’kwana man’, he responded casually, ‘He will break his outboard motor instead.’

\* \* \*

This thesis has attempted to gain a deeper understanding of how the Sanema make sense of the relationship between ‘what is’ (the material world) and ‘what ought to be’ (morality). To suggest, as Walker does, that foreign goods are ‘densely woven into the fabric of contemporary [Amazonian] social life’ (2012a: 146), is also to draw attention to the salient new materialities of this region. Sanema ideas of personhood and sociality are often channelled through manufactured items, which play an important role in practices of conviviality and sociality. Throughout the preceding chapters, this thesis has demonstrated that industrial goods are highly valued among the Sanema. In addition, each chapter has presented new ways of conceptualising value—both in its economic and ethical sense—in an Amazonian setting.

In the first half of the thesis, Chapters 2 to 4 gave an overview of the regional, historical and everyday context of the Sanema, and the central place of manufactured objects in this setting. The aim of part one was to offer a new take on Overing and Passes’ ‘moral economy of intimacy’ and ‘good life’ model, which has until now been centred on corporeal practices of kin making. Such processes, as we have seen, can also be seen to be centred on the sharing and use of artefacts.

By outlining the historical and regional context in Chapter 2, the primacy of trade goods came to the fore when describing the Sanema in contrast to other Yanomami groups. Goods also became a central theme in their mobility within the region, their relationship to their neighbouring Ye’kwana, and their contact with wider national society. A description of their community and daily life also revealed that everyday lived experience is infused with manufactured items.

Chapter 3 gave a more detailed description of the centrality of ‘*criollo* things’ within the community. The desire for ‘good things’—that is, things that come from the *criollos*—is fundamental to their model of ‘the good life’, and becomes central to notions of personhood and processes of kin making. Sanema narratives and mythology described industrial goods as integral to full humanity and well-being, but they also showed that the spontaneous giving of goods is an exemplification of conviviality and compassionate relatedness. In sum, this chapter demonstrated that industrial goods constitute the Sanema as moral human beings.

Chapter 4 stepped outside of the kin group and community to explore the wider context of trade and the procurement of goods from the neighbouring Carib-speaking group—the Ye’kwana. This relationship to some extent defines who the

Sanema are today, as they have historically aligned themselves territorially and socially with the Ye'kwana, and in turn diverged from other Yanomami groups. The affiliation with the Ye'kwana was motivated predominantly by the pursuit of manufactured things, access to which the Ye'kwana had historically monopolised. In order to access these goods, I have argued, the Sanema adopt a subservient countenance as a way of extracting resources without the concomitant indebtedness and on-going reciprocity that normally comes with trade relations. I argue that this extraction should be seen as a form of predation, thereby expanding existing definitions of predation.

The second part of the thesis examined in more detail four particular prefabricated things that are extremely valuable for the Sanema in a number of ways: beads, machetes, paper and petrol. Part two thus demonstrated that *criollo* 'things' are different to handcrafted and subjectified artefacts, not merely because they are alienable items, but because they present new material affordances that facilitate ethical practices.

Chapter 5, on beads, demonstrated that these adornments are constitutive of kinship through their properties of vibrant shade, glossy sheen, but most importantly through their tiny divisibility. In this way, actions of gifting, threading, picking-apart and re-threading of the many small parts give material form to kinship. These actions, afforded by the beads, demonstrate that the moral obligations of kinship are anchored in the material world. In this way, beads both enable people to become complete persons through beauty and intentionality, but they also constitute people through indexing relationships with those that define the self. In addition, Chapter 5 also demonstrates that paying attention only to mutable bodies occludes the centrality of the actual objects of adornments in the making of kinship.

In Chapter 6, the properties of the machete were featured as enabling a balance between fearlessness and fear. The machete appears alongside many social phenomena that are defined by the terms fearlessness and fear. Unlike beads, which were presented as mutually constitutive of kinship, the machete becomes a mediator of balanced acts. Nevertheless, it is not merely semiotically representative of justice, but its material properties—the contrast between the sharp and the flat—enable the enactment of moral processes of balance and justice.

Chapter 7 introduced a more recent ‘thing’ that was becoming increasingly prevalent in Sanema lives—paper. Paper’s properties enable weightless movement into exterior social worlds and new powerful affiliations. On the one hand paper is delicate and portable, but on the other it contains within it a wealth of power and knowledge so that it not only *impels* movement, it also *requires* a corporeal manoeuvrability to and within the cities. This, in turn, results in new social networks and allows for access to numerous resources from state-funded projects. The properties of paper and the resulting manoeuvrability also facilitate a moral incentive to ‘know’ the fertile exterior.

Chapter 8 explored petrol’s ubiquitous presence in the lives of the Sanema, a consequence of their rapid integration into national democratic processes and citizenship projects. Petrol’s affordances of weightiness, flammability and volatility are integral to its perceived vibrancy, and even to a belief in its agentive force. The effects of petrol can be understood in relation to the causality of the animist cosmos: that it can cause potential misfortune in morally charged contexts. This line of analysis offers an opportunity to investigate the morality of animism in greater depth, as well as explore how this moral functioning relates to the possession of a spirit.

In none of the preceding chapters did material things stand for or represent concepts as such; they *became* concepts through the very real actions their material affordances promoted. This is what I term ‘material morality’: the properties of material things allowing for certain moral concepts to be realised. By no means do I wish to imply that morality is ordinarily immaterial. Indeed, Chapter 1 highlighted the fact that objectification (Miller 2005a), instantiation of signs in things (Keane 2003), and the formation of composite entities (Verbeek 2011) offer new insights into the materiality of concepts. Concepts, representations and ideas come into existence through materialisation, action and objectification and morality is no exception. In thinking through such ideas, Verbeek (2011) expressly argues that humans are not the only locale for moral agency, suggesting that we conceive of such action as an amalgam of human and non-human agentive force.

It is highly likely that the same processes of ethical practice existed prior to the introduction of manufactured items among the Sanema, but in the current context, moral discourse and action is invariably related to the new and pervasive manufactured dimension of material life in Venezuelan Amazonia. The special

material affordances of manufactured items renders them more efficacious for the particular moral pursuits presented in this thesis.

What can this focus on affordances offer a theory of value? Theories of value have tended to focus primarily on the *outcome* of human action—that action somehow precedes value—and studies of Amazonian material and ethical value are no exception. As Overing and Passes' (2000a) model has highlighted, human beings are fabricated through virtuous action, which include processes of commensality, conviviality and nurture. Objects of value are likewise the product of human creativity and action that become 'ensouled' by their makers (Santos-Granero 2009b: 12). As Viveiros de Castro argued, Amerindian ontologies tend to personify and subjectify (2004: 468-471), so that even objects that are not handcrafted can become familiarised through similar processes of human action. To a degree I subscribe to Ewart's suggestion that there is a preference in Amazonia for 'processes of making, of becoming, and of fabrication over finished objects, fixed identities, and complete and stable bodies' (2012: 186). The cases of the beads and the generator, described in this thesis, demonstrate that some objects are never entirely fixed. However, the ethnography presented in this thesis might offer an alternative stance from which to understand both ethical and material value. I suggest that if things are not the result of creative action, then material affordances become highly significant.

The theory of value that I am expounding here is not antithetical to the Marxian theory of value, in which value emerges from labour and action (as also developed by Graeber and Lambek). My approach, as I see it, is complementary. It can be seen as a new way to understand how things that are not hand-crafted continue to be valued for their characteristics precisely because they are industrially produced. Petrol is a perfect example of this notion that value can be prior to human action. It is not through appropriation by humans and a subsequent encompassment into human fields of activity that petrol obtains its volatile flammability, but it is nonetheless valued for these characteristics upon introduction into Sanema society. Rather, the Sanema must make sense of these unique properties from the moment that they encounter them, and it is in this moment that value 'emerges' as it were. The Sanema did recognise that these *matitö* were fabricated through human action, but this fact did not seem to be of deeper significance. What they focused most attention and energy on was the value that emerged from the affordances, rather than the human action that

preceded or produced those values. In this sense, while there is a recursive element to this notion of action, namely that action creates value, which then creates further action, and so on, there is a break in this process imposed by the fact that these items are industrially manufactured. In other words, because the creation of these things is opaque, their prefabricated affordances become paramount to their value.

In sum, I am inviting an alternative approach to material and ethical value in Amazonia. In the first instance, the contemporary Amazonian context calls for a reconceptualisation of the virtue ethics and conviviality approach in the region that takes account of the artefacts and manufactured items that proliferate there. Secondly, being prefabricated items, value must be understood not as emerging from the creative process, but rather from the unique material properties offered by these new materialities. To put it another way: among the Sanema, ethical life draws on the affordances offered by these new material things.

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This photo has been removed for reasons of copyright.

**Figure 30: My Sanema family with some of their *matitö***

Alonzo-Patasibi's remark above about gaining revenge on the outboard motor and not directly on the person committing the offense often struck me as an intriguing case of objects and morality being intertwined. Revenge on one's material object, however, is

a different case than other moral exigencies presented in this thesis (although perhaps similar to the malign intentionality of petrol). This is another way to view material morality that is not entirely premised on ethical action emerging from value. It may even be more comparable with the Yanomami epidemic smoke, described in Chapter 1, in which white people's things seemed to be infused with their immoral deeds. In this case, it seemed to be that 'immorality' was intrinsic to the goods. I regret that I did not ask Alonzo-Patasibi to elaborate on his statement about the morality and the motor, and therefore was not able to garner the full logic behind it. However, his statement did prompt me to question the concept of material morality, and continues to inspire me to think more about where this concept could take me next.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I suggested that a post-human approach to material things can enable us to be more thoughtful about the features of materiality that do not emerge from human action. Petrol and fish, I argued, do not rely on the intentionality of humans to possess their own. This same principle can be extended to my thesis as a whole, and when broadening the theory of value. My ethnography has forced me to rethink ideas about value because in many cases the value, in the form of prefabricated material affordances, was prior to ethical actions. This is a particularly significant point to make for the Amazonian context, because previous models of ethical and material value have suggested that nothing of value exists prior to human action, and that value requires fabrication or subjectification. Human bodies and baskets are fabricated, stones and shoes are subjectified. In many ways I have been suggesting that value is *intrinsic* to the objects that are introduced and appropriated, and that value in some cases can be seen as prior to human action, hence the notion of 'intrinsic'. Lambek notes that an inquiry into value might enable us to better overcome certain dualisms, including the material and the ideal, and even 'the earthly and the transcendent' (2013: 142). I argue that material things are inherently moral because ethics and the material world are linked by the concept of value. A deeper interrogation of the notion of value might be one way to overcome the dichotomies inherent in a material-concept inquiry, as was discussed in the Chapter 1. Considering the nature of material-moral compounds, such as those described throughout the thesis, we might benefit from developing an approach that could merge the fields of material culture and morality, to produce a theory of material morality.



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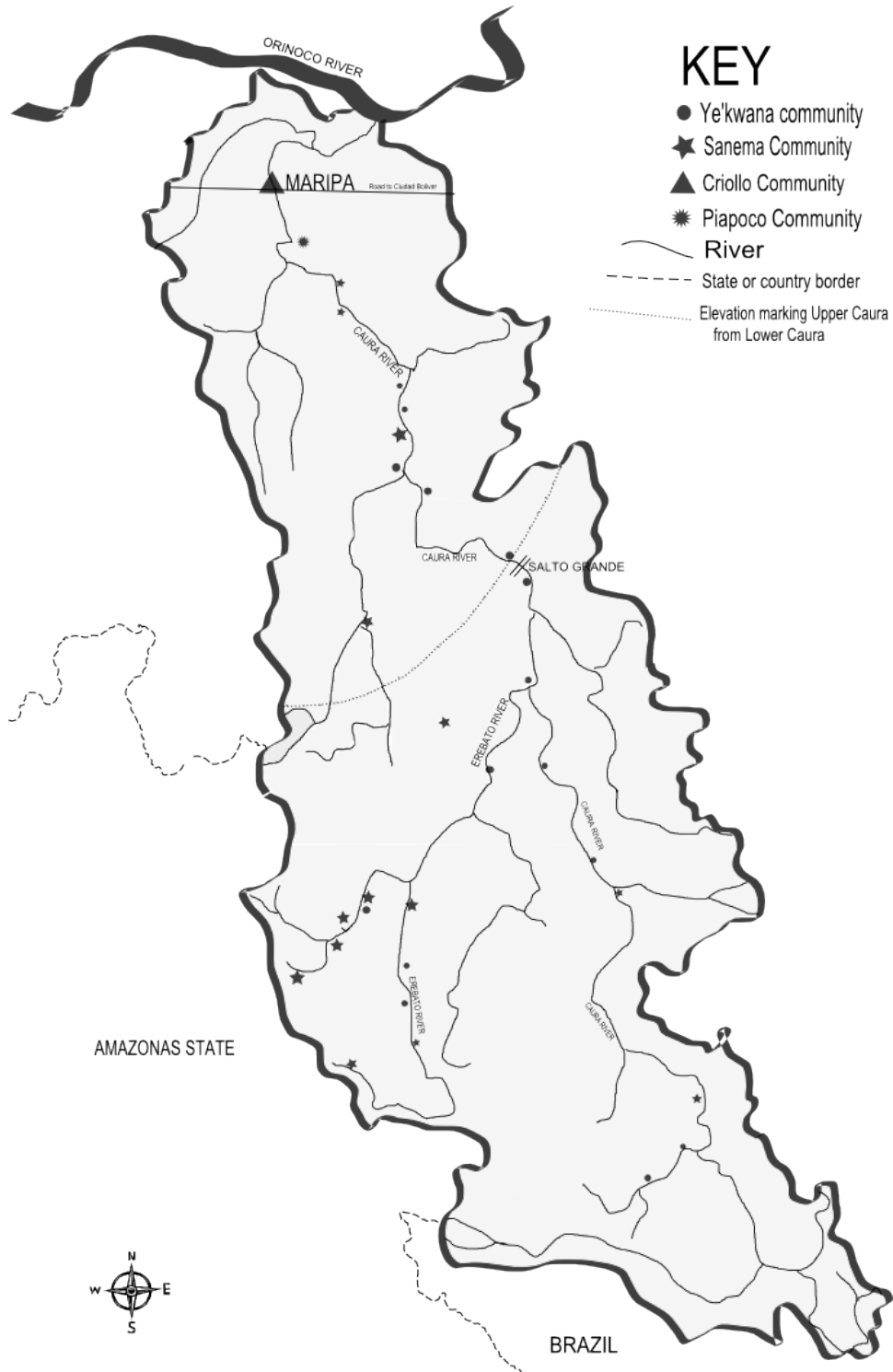
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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Map of the Caura Basin



**Figure 31: Map of the Caura basin showing locations of communities (names of communities have been removed for reasons of anonymity)**

## Appendix 2: Caura Communities

Community	Region	Ethnicity
Adanawaña	Alto Caura	Sanema
Alawaña	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
Anadekeña	Alto Eretrato	Ye'kwana
Ayawaña	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
Bejuquero	Bajo Caura	Sanema
Cafeña	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
Chajuraña	Alto Eretrato	Ye'kwana
Colonial	Bajo Caura	Piapoco
Comunidad	Sector	Etnia
Cuchiti	Alto Caura	Sanema
Dakudakuña	Alto Eretrato	Ye'kwana
Dariña	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
El Palmar	Bajo Caura	Sanema
El Pescado	Bajo Caura	Ye'kwana
El Playon	Bajo Caura	Ye'kwana
Entrerio	Medio Caura	Ye'kwana
Erebatuña	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
Fedekuniña	Alto Caura	Ye'kwana
La Fortuna	Bajo Caura	Ye'kwana
Ikutu	Bajo Caura	Sanema
Jiyakwaña	Alto Caura	Ye'kwana
Kanadansakaduña	Alto Caura	Ye'kwana
Kanaracuni	Alto Caura	Ye'kwana
Karana	Bajo Caura	Jivi
Kusime	Medio Caura	Sanema
Kuyuwininiña	Alto Caura	Sanema
La Pava	Medio Caura	Ye'kwana
La Poncha	Bajo Caura	Ye'kwana
Madoña	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
Majawaña	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
Majiriña	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
Mana Osô Takaka	Alto Caura	Sanema
Manaka	Alto Caura	Sanema
Maravilla	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
Masô Pô	Alto Caura	Sanema
Michema	Alto Caura	Sanema
Nichare	Bajo Caura	Ye'kwana
Osotakaka	Alto Caura	Sanema
Palo Quemao	Alto Caura	Sanema
Payaraima	Bajo Caura	Jivi
Platanal	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
Porlamar	Bajo Caura	Sanema
Salasalaña	Alto Eretrato	Sanema
San Juan Mincheña	Alto Caura	Sanema
San Pedro Adawaña	Alto Caura	Ye'kwana
Santa Fe	Bajo Caura	Sanema

Santa Maria de Erebato	Alto Erebato	Ye'kwana
Sayusodiña	Medio Caura	Ye'kwana
Sedumenadi	Medio Caura	Ye'kwana
Shimaraña	Alto Caura	Sanema
Soledad	Bajo Caura	Sanema
Surapire	Bajo Caura	Ye'kwana
Surukumiña	Alto Caura	Sanema
Tadakwaña	Medio Caura	Ye'kwana
Troncon	Alto Erebato	Sanema
Waña	Alto Caura	Sanema (+Ye'kwana)
Wasaña	Alto Erebato	Sanema
Wasudijaña	Alto Caura	Sanema
Yakunawa	Medio Caura	Ye'kwana
Yudiña	Alto Erebato	Sanema

### **Appendix 3: Silverio's Account of the Founding of Maduaña**

We decided to 'go down' because of all the problems we were having in Sakiniña. Felipe [the previous chief of Maduaña who died in 2006] was the first, he always said to Vicente 'let's go down river, to Alto Caura, lets go and live there.' Five moons we travelled. First we arrived at X [Ye'kwana community]: me, René, Wilfredo and Victor. Felipe left us there to go to Maripa so we had no motor, no canoe. We waited in X and worked there, waiting to catch a lift downstream. We waited a long time before we left.

First we found a territory called Jasakuri [Upper Caura]. Later Felipe arrived with our women. We started to clear the land for the gardens, we were there for one moon, but when we were cutting the small trees [the first stages of clearing land] the Ye'kwana arrived and said 'no, you're not going to live here because this is where we go hunting and if you make your houses here, you'll kill all the animals.' So the Ye'kwana arranged to take us in their canoes to Y [location above the waterfalls]. We waited there in Y for a month looking for yucca to make cassava, we worked for Ye'kwana to get casabe so we could eat. Then we walked down to the bottom of the falls [Lower Caura]. Then we went to another terrain on the Lower Caura and began to make gardens, but a Ye'kwana from Z came and said we could not live there. This was the old man who I knew as a child. So I said to him 'you were like my father, why are you saying no? I want to make a community.' But he said 'no, I don't want you to make your houses here.' Then he said, 'come, come further downstream, come

to Maduaña.’ So, it was him who brought us here. When he dropped us here he left with his canoe and we were without one. We all set to making gardens but a small piece of land was already cleared.<sup>97</sup> Vicente made a small canoe and with this the women went to the Ye’kwana communities to look for cassava [in exchange for work] while we continued to clear land and make houses.

When we were making our community there was a Ye’kwana man from a nearby community who came and said ‘we don’t want you to live there in Maduaña because in this territory there is a lot of *san pablo* [thatch] and *bejuco* [vine], this is where we go when we need it. This is our land.’ The next day he went up to another nearby Ye’kwana community upstream to talk to the *jefe* there too, but the *jefe* there said not to move ‘make your community, stay where you are’ he said. So the Ye’kwana man went to another community but the *jefe* there said the same thing, he said to stay. I have never been back to Sakiniña, this is my village now.

#### Appendix 4: Kinship Terminology

##### MALE EGO

	Male		Female	
+2	FF <i>jawani</i> MF <i>jawani</i>		FM <i>nawani</i> MM <i>nawani</i>	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
+1	F <i>jawani</i> FB <i>jawani</i>	M <i>nawani</i> MZ <i>nawani</i>	WF <i>pishisha</i> MB <i>pishisha</i> FZH <i>pishisha</i> <i>parawan</i>	WM <i>pishishisoma</i> FZ <i>nawani</i> MBW <i>pishishsoma</i>
0	B e <i>Jepala</i> y <i>joosa</i>  FBS e <i>Jepala</i> y <i>joosa</i>  MZS e <i>Jepala</i> y <i>joosa</i>	Z <i>sawa</i>  FBD <i>pashia</i>  MZD <i>pashia</i>	WB <i>sholia</i>  MBS <i>sholia</i>  FZS <i>sholia</i>  ZH <i>sholia</i>	W, WZ <i>puspa</i> MBD <i>aitō</i> FZD <i>puspa</i> BW <i>puspa</i>
-1	S <i>ula</i> BS <i>ula</i>	D <i>padia</i> BD <i>padia</i>	DH <i>pusapa</i> ZS <i>pusapa</i>	SW (no term, avoidance) ZD (no term, avoidance)
-2	ula			

<sup>97</sup> A Ye’kwana family used to have a small community on this site but abandoned it because they believed that evil spirits (*kanaima*) inhabited the area and was probably the reason it was ‘given’ to the Sanema.



FEMALE EGO

	Male		Female	
+2	FF <i>jawani</i> MF <i>jawani</i>		FM <i>nawani</i> MM <i>nawani</i>	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
+1	F <i>jawani</i> FB <i>jawani</i>	M <i>nawani</i> MZ <i>nawani</i>	HF <i>pata</i> MB (no term, avoidance, <i>pishisha</i> ) FZH ( <i>pishisha</i> ?)	HM <i>patasu</i> FZ <i>aitö</i> (or by name, <i>pishishisoma</i> ) MBW <i>aitö</i> (or by name)
0	B <i>sawa</i>  FBS <i>sawa</i>  MZS <i>sawa</i>	Z e <i>Jepala</i> y <i>joosa</i>  FBD e <i>Jepala</i> y <i>joosa</i>  MZD e <i>Jepala</i> y <i>joosa</i>	H, HB <i>panupa</i>  MBS <i>pötawai</i>  FZS <i>aitö</i> (or by name)  ZH <i>panupa</i>	HZ (name) MBD <i>aitö</i> (or by name) FZD <i>aitö</i> (or by name) BW <i>pashia i pusupa</i>
-1	S <i>ula</i> BS <i>pusapa</i>	D <i>padia</i> BD (no term, avoidance)	DH <i>pusapa</i> ZS (no term, avoidance, <i>pusapa</i> )	SW ( <i>ula jusapa</i> <i>puspa</i> ) ZD <i>padia</i>
-2	ula			

**Appendix 5: The Myth of The Origin of Modern Goods**

**From Colchester (1981: 67-71)**

In the time when Omao killed off the jaguar there were still no Sanema. Omao was yet to create them; there was just Omao and Soawe.

It was way downstream that Omao created the original Sanema. He created many of them. He created the Shamatali people and also the *sedenabi*.<sup>98</sup> He created many groups of Sanema, all speaking the same language. Omao also originally created us too. It was other people who chased us into the highlands from there beyond.

Once Omao had created the Sanema he thought to himself, “Now that I’ve created these Sanema people, these incomplete<sup>99</sup> Sanema, I must introduce them to aeroplanes, and pens paper so that they can live like *sedenabi*.” For Omao knew all about all these things – like aeroplanes and shotguns.

So it was that Omao offered books to the Sanema.

<sup>98</sup> *Sedenabi* – foreigner, as opposed to *Nabi* – Yekuana, and *Sanima* – human.

<sup>99</sup> The word, here translated as ‘incomplete,’ usually refers to the larval forms of butterflies, i.e. caterpillars and young fledgling birds. The sense is of unformed, unfinished

“Here! Take this book! With this book you can be like a foreigner, really properly so. Learning to say ‘A’, ‘E’, ‘U’, in the way of these foreigners, you can become like the missionaries.”

But they did not accept the gift.

“*Wii!* But what should we do with a book! How does one work this pen? We don’t know how to write at all!” Thus replied our ancestors.

“What about this shotgun?” asked Omao. He fired the gun – to! “It kills game really efficiently, taken!<sup>100</sup> Do you like this? Take it!” said Omao.

“This thing? It’s stupid and heavy!” they relied. “How does one work it? This shitty, black thing; it’s really fiddly! And you might hurt yourself firing it! It’s enough to make you run away!” That was how our ancestors replied.

“O dear! This is really bad. These Sanema don’t want to be like Yekuana at all I’m afraid.” So said Omao. “Not yet it seems. I think it must wait until later.”

“What about an aeroplane, then, I’ll give them this now I think, but not a big plane just a little one,” said Omao.

“What about this thing that flies? This is the tail that waves about. Here are the wings sticking out. You pull this little switch – *gli!* *Eeeeeeeee!* Then this other switch – *gli!* *Eeeeeee!* *Krrrrrrr!* Then the Sanema climbs in – *tolo!* And another one can sit here. In front of you is a little radio. You can fly off.”

“Where to?” you ask.

“This way!” a foreigner replies.” So said God.<sup>101</sup> That is what Omao said. But our Sanema ancestors didn’t accept it, they didn’t like it at all.

“*Wii!* People clambering about like that high up, in this flying tree. That’s really nasty!” replied we Sanema.

“What about this? Do you like this?” said Omao putting a cloth hammock and rolls of cotton cloth on the ground – *blo!* *Blo!*

“Oh no! We don’t like it at all. This hammock it’s all close woven. We’d be cold in this!” They said.

“No! It’s not cold at all. You can wrap yourself in a sheet and thus get warm. You don’t need to fan the fire at night because you are enveloped in this sheet and

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<sup>100</sup> Tili – literally ‘taken,’ an exclamation that accompanies the killing of a game animal for the pot.

<sup>101</sup> The particular informant who tells this myth considers God and Omao synonymous. He has had contact with the evangelical missionaries for at least 15 years.

blanket. When you wake up in the morning you aren't cold at all. And if you're a little cold you can put on a shirt." Thus explained Omao.

But the Sanema did not take them, the ancestors accepted none of these things.

"O! My turn it seems," said Soawe. He pulled down some lianas<sup>102</sup> - *selulo!* *Selulo!* *Selulo!* He waxed some hammock bindings and bound them on. Then he bundled up the hammock and slung it on his back.

"Right! Arrows! They don't like guns," said Soawe. So saying he collected some arrow canes - *pliki! pliki!*; straightened the arrows carefully; made the arrow notches - *pakeke! Pakeke!* Ripped down the *shitokolia* bark - *gledididi!* And spun it for a bowstring - bound on the arrow bindings, stuck in the *laka* arrowhead - *gloso!* Stuck in the *arali* tenon - *gloso!* Attached the bone point - *gloso!*

"Dogs next I think. They don't like cows," continued Soawe. He collected the kasha mouse, a kasha mouse, a kashtali mouse and an arboreal opossum<sup>103</sup> and dragged them after him. He painted his face black with charcoal and painted his arrowheads red with annatto.

Omao had decided to prepare the Sanema really slowly. "Later on I think," he had said.

Soawe clashed his arrows - *da'u!*

"*Heu ho! Heu ho!*" he called out fiercely, then he pulled at the leashes of his little dogs.

"*Wa! Wa! Wa! Wa! Wa!*" the dogs barked.

Thus it is that when the Sanema come visiting they cry out "*Heu ho!*"<sup>104</sup> And the dogs bark at them. Soawe made it so. He painted one dog black, one white, one red; so it is that the Sanema have lots of thin dogs all over the place. These dogs the Sanema received instead of cows. It was the *Sedenabi* who received those. And they *Shamatali*, they too had been sitting by and looking on.

"Give it to me!" said the *Shamatali* people ancestors. "I'm really hungry."

"And this book?" said Omao.

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<sup>102</sup> *Magamdodo* - strong woody lianas of the species *Heropsis integerrima*. The term applies to the simple hammock made from the liana.

<sup>103</sup> *Wanapanaima* - the arboreal opossum (Didelphidae) is, like the above-mentioned mice, considered inedible. It is a particularly unattractive animal in Sanema terms, but is as often associated with the arboreal mice as with the common opossum *pubmudami*.

<sup>104</sup> In fact the ferocious *heu ho!* Warcry of the Sanema is very rarely uttered these days. Visitors are more likely to make the high pitched call of the Yecuana *hi hi hiiiii!* *Hi hi hiiiii!*

“O yes! Me too,” they said, “all that strange writing, though I don’t know how to write at all!”

“And this little aeroplane? You too?”

“Yes. Me too! Though if we try flying in that plane we’ll probably crash!” they said.

“And this shotgun?”

“O yes! Though I don’t know about guns at all, all these shitty bits and fiddly operations!” so said the *Shamatali* people; and so replied the *sedenabi* also.

High up in the sky – *m m m m m m m m!* they go flying by. Things, things they go by! Go by! Go by! And here are we, us children below.

“O! Woe! My ancestors they really make me angry!” that is what we say now. “Walking slowly along on the ground – over mountains, along the trails, crossing rivers! – all this is really tiring. And all the while those others go swiftly by. And all thanks to our ancestors.” That’s what we say now, and we are really angry too.

## **Appendix 6: The Myth of The Origin of the Sanema**

### **From Colchester (1981: 37-8)**

It was long, long ago that the great curassow cried, during the time of the ancestors. And before that the ancestors did not exist at all. A single ancestor there was only and that was Omao: and Omao was about to create the Sanema. These *Shamatali* (Southern Sanema), these *sedenabi* (foreigners), these too Omao was yet to create and it was we Sanema that Omao was just about to create.

Down by the big river Omao went to collect *poli* trees.<sup>105</sup> Having collected a single tree, he went on downstream, far downstream, to find another. Returning with a single tree that he had collected he came on his younger brother Soawe.<sup>106</sup>

“Go and collect me more *Shididhina*,”<sup>107</sup> he said to Soawe. Then Omao went off again to collect more himself. The tree people accompanied him, and again he collected a single tree.

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<sup>105</sup> *Poli* – a tree with very hard wood (not identified), that has a fine peeling bark. The trees are rare and widely dispersed.

<sup>106</sup> It is probably quite significant the fact that the Sanema consider Soawe as the younger brother of Omao, whereas the Yanomami express them as having the opposite relationship (e.g. Lizot 1974: 23 ff.) and also contradictorily call them ‘twins’. (There is no term meaning ‘twins’ in Sanema). It may be that this fact is related to the Sanema’s emphasis on patrilinearity which, apparently, is not common to all Yanoama groups (Ramos and Albert 1977).

“O dear! My elder brother will expect me to collect this wood very quickly, I’m afraid,” said Soawe from where he sat. So he went out and hastily collected many lengths of *kodalinase*<sup>108</sup> wood. Once he had collected these, Omao returned. He saw all the *kodalinase* lying on the ground.

“*Ga!* Really bad.<sup>109</sup> That younger brother of mine he’s really bad, I’m afraid,” so said Omao angrily. The Sanema were made from the *kodalinase*. Omao made us from the *kodalinase* wood.

“*Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!*” so laughed the *hanakasa* weasels,<sup>110</sup> the reflections of women, when they saw all the *kodalinase* that Soawe had collected. And so it was that we Sanema became really feeble.

“That bad younger brother of mine, he’s made me really angry.” Said Omao, “It was snakes that I was going to make all feeble. I was going to make that *hedugigi* anaconda<sup>111</sup> just as soon as he had had a child. And those children to die as quickly. And it was the Sanema that I was going to make from *poli* trees so that they could cast their old skins. They could dive into the river – *kopu!* And, lying on the sand, they could peel off their old skin – *gledididi!* They could thus become fresh and new as the inside was revealed. Once they had become really elderly both husband and wife, they could have dived into the rivers and stripped off their old skins – *gledididi!* And so become beautiful again.<sup>112</sup> That was what I had wanted to do!” so said Omao. But instead Soawe had gone and collected a load of trash and Omao became really angry and made us Sanema from that. And so because these weak trees had been collected the Sanema die really quickly. We were created from that *kodalinase* wood. So we

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<sup>107</sup> *Shidishina* – the term used by the Yekuana to refer to the Sanema.

<sup>108</sup> *Kodalinase* – a very soft-wooded tree found commonly along river banks (*Trema micrantha* (L.) Blume).

<sup>109</sup> In other versions Omao exclaims “*Sibalusi koni!*” or “*Sibalusi toni!*,” a phrase whose meaning is not clear even to the Sanema. *Sibalusi* means ‘metal’ in Sanema; *toni* means ‘one’ in Ye’kuana. Perhaps Omao is crying ‘only that which is hard (metallic)’.

<sup>110</sup> *Hanakasa* – (*Mustella frenata*). The Sanema believe that all human beings have a *nonoshi*, a term that means literally ‘shadow’ or ‘reflection,’ and which Ramos (1972) has translated as ‘alter ego spirit’. Most women’s *nonoshi* are said to occur in the form of this weasel, which it would be folly to try to kill for the snake *nonoshi* of particularly tall women – *nonoshi gi’ apada* – would take revenge. Men’s *nonoshi* occur in the form of harpy eagles (*Harpia harpyja*).

<sup>111</sup> *Lalagigi* and *hedugigi* are the two species of anaconda recognized by the Sanema.

<sup>112</sup> In another version the informant specifically mentions that snakes were created from the *poli* trees. It may be noted that the Sanema say that the *hekula* spirits are able to rejuvenate themselves in exactly this way.

became weak. So we die. So we mourn, instead of being able to peel off our skins when we become really old, as we would like.

And because Soawe had collected those weakly trees, Omao became really angry. Omao left the world; way, way, way downriver he went to the bottom of the sky. But Soawe he did not go there too; he went off elsewhere.

### **Appendix 7: Two Stories of the ‘War’ with the Ye’kwana**

Raul’s Story of the ‘War’ between the Ye’kwana and the Sanema:

My father told me that when he was young his father told him this story. One man, his father, he was an *oka tö* [raider/sorcerer]. They walked little by little. They arrived where the Ye’kwana were and my father’s parents went to kill all the Ye’kwana that were there. His father hid and after they killed the Ye’kwana with arrows. They left running into the forest, my ancestors. The Ye’kwana heard the noise and they had a motor [so they went up the river] and then someone shouted “mama!” close to the river and the Ye’kwana went little by little to where they were and shot them with a shotgun. They killed my father’s father. They had shot him in the chest. The following day they burned him. Then they continued walking to arrive home. After 3 days they went back to kill more Ye’kwana. They hid behind a tree and the Ye’kwana came by to look for water. Then a man went up the tree into the branches and stayed there and watched them. They collected their water and he shot a woman in the back with an arrow and a man shot another woman in the breast with an arrow and blood came out. Then a Ye’kwana man went running back to the community shouting, “an *oka töpö* killed 2 women!” The parents of the women came running with a shotgun. The Sanema were ready to shoot the Ye’kwana and then they shot at each other. Face to face they killed everyone.

A week later more people came, they were angry with the Ye’kwana. In another community they went to kill more people. They continued to shoot each other so they wouldn’t bother them again. Then they went to kill more Ye’kwana. Because they were *oka töpö*, they hid behind the house and then killed the people and then they escaped. Then they came again and the Ye’kwana didn’t want them to continue bothering them, so they decided to kill all the Sanema. The Ye’kwana arrived where the Sanema were and killed the Sanema. The Sanema didn’t want them to kill them and they went back again to kill the Ye’kwana. They trod on the feet of an old woman

who had chiggers, and she cried, walked like this, she cried and shouted out to her family. An old man too had chiggers and they trod on his feet and then burned his house. After that they went and burned the house of some people who had gone hunting and they were angry because they burned the house. After this the Ye'kwana had a meeting and called everyone in the community together so that they could fight with the Sanema. They walked little by little and slept one night and another night. 3 days later they arrived. The Ye'kwana shot and killed and burned the houses of the Sanema. They did the same as what the Sanema did, burned the houses and killed all the dogs so that they wouldn't bother them any more.

They started this fight because the ancestors bothered the Ye'kwana, they wanted to grab their women. They wanted to have sex with them. That's why it started. Lots of people died. This was between lots of communities. The Ye'kwana were united. The Sanema didn't unite but they killed many Ye'kwana. My grandfather died for his. Now there is none of this but when a Ye'kwana passes with a motor and a Sanema wants a ride they don't want to give us one because in their minds they still have this thing, the fight from the past. Sanema don't like to talk about this fight between Ye'kwana and Sanema and my father also said that no one should talk about this to the Ye'kwana or other people that come because he was afraid that they would kill him.

Nerys' Story of the 'War' between the Ye'kwana and the Sanema:

The Sanema didn't have gardens and they didn't have cassava and so a woman went to the garden of Ye'kwana to rob yucca. One day the Ye'kwana didn't want them to rob any more and so they went to the garden to see who was robbing the yucca. The Ye'kwana were hidden near the garden and two Sanema women came to rob yucca and one had her one-year-old son with her. The other was alone. The Ye'kwana were 'jealous' of their Yucca and they found the Sanema women and attacked them and grabbed the one with the child and cut her on the body with a machete. The women that were in the garden, the other was hidden and the other was cut. The one that was hidden escaped and went to tell her people, she told them everything. So they became angry and started to make their arrows and then when they had lots of arrow they went to get revenge and make a war and killed lots of Ye'kwana and Ye'kwana killed a few Sanema. They grabbed a Ye'kwana and cut their whole body. From there they had problems. So then the Sanema killed lots of Ye'kwana but the Ye'kwana didn't

kill many Sanema. They wanted to take revenge for the women so they grabbed Y and cut them all over the body like they did with the woman. That's what they were like. From there they started a war. These Sanema were called '*kakali topo*', they are the ones that made the problem. The Ye'kwana always ask 'where do the *kakali töpö* live?' [to find them and take revenge] but the Sanema always say 'they all died', they don't live any more, none live. They always say this so that there won't be any more problems.

### **Appendix 8: The Ye'kwana Myth of the Sanema (Shirishana)**

#### **From de Civrieux (1970: 90)**

This is how Shirishana, the first one, the grandfather of today's Shirishana, was made. He was ensorcelled by Odo'osha. He went with his people to look for Mamaku. He killed him and ate him. But Mamaku had not been a good shaman but a witch, an evildoer. When he ate him, Shirishana went crazy. He retained his human form, but only the form, no more. His spirit became like an animal's. He lost his intelligence. He hid himself naked in the forests: he no longer knew how to do anything; nothing more than to kill and to rob from real human beings. His descendants have remained the same. They go without loincloths, they do not make houses; they do not make anything; they do not have hammocks, yuca-presses, baskets, blowpipes or canoes. That is why they come to rob us for they have nothing to give in exchange for our things. They do not cultivate, they only eat meat and wild fruits. They only know how to climb, scream and howl like howler-monkeys. They grab everything they see, beat up the men and carry off the women.

It was when they ate Mamaku that they started. They came to rob and kill our grandfathers. Our grandfathers pursued them into the forests in order to punish them and retrieve the women. They searched for their houses, their villages; but they had none. Like peccaries they wandered the forests large and small, each night they slept in the trees. They sheltered under Calathea leaves and slept in strips of liana.

They were ambushed at night with the women that they had stolen. But they (the Yanoama) fired their arrows, struggled and left. They hid themselves behind the women. The elders stopped shooting their arrows so as not to kill the women. So the Shirishana escaped and reassembled again. Our grandfathers set fire to termite nests and threw them amongst them. All the jungle filled with smoke. The Shirishana wept,



coughed and abandoned the women.

## Appendix 9: Population Segments

Adapted from Colchester (1982: 462-3)

Population segments: men

Padashibödö	Old man, literally 'big old man'	'Big' category
Pada dö sai	Grandfather, literally 'real big man'	
Pada hadaudö* OR pada hadaudö* hisha	Middle aged father, literally 'wary big man'	
Pada dö hisha OR pada hisha dö	Father, literally 'big youth'	
Hisha haapa dö	Father with first child, literally 'father youth'	'man' (youth) category
Hisha tö sai	Bachelor, literally 'real youth'	
(manogoshi dö)	Recently initiated, literally 'the surrounded one' (i.e. seclusion)	Liminal phase
Ulu padashibö OR ulu padashili	About to be initiated, literally 'old child'	'child' category
Ulu a pada hadaudö*	Boy, literally 'big/wary child'	
Ulu a sai OR ulu osewai	Child, literally 'true child'	
Ulu oshti	Infant, literally 'soft/unripe child'	

Population segments: women

Padasoma	Old woman	'big' category
Pada dö suī	Grandmother	
Pada hadaudö* suī	Two children or more	
Moko dö awan OR suö dö	Woman (one child)	'woman' category
Moko dö awan	Young woman (no children)	
(manogoshi dö)	Recently initiated	Liminal phase
Moko dö padashibö	About to be initiated	'girl' category
Moko dö osewan	Young girl	
Ulu dö (suö)	(girl) child	'child' category

Ulu oshti (suö)	(girl) infant	
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\*Colchester translates *hadau* as ‘wary’, I am inclined to think it is closer to the concept of ‘aware’ as in ‘knowledgeable’.

## **Appendix 10: The Myth of Pumutuma**

### **Told by Victor:**

I’m going to tell the story of Pumutuma, the opossum. One day Pumutuma went to the gardens while his brother Kasöna stayed at home. While he was at home some women entered, lots of beautiful women where Kasöna was. They put a fire in his eye so that when you see Kasöma today he has a black mark here, this is where the ancestor burnt him, the *mokö töpö* (young women). Kasöna ran to where his older brother was in the gardens and arrived saying ‘Lots of beautiful women arrived in our house.’ Pumutuma sent his younger brother to his house to look for all his adornments – his feathers, paint, beads and loincloth. He sent his brother to look for all that in his house. When he returned Pumutuma put all his adornments on in his gardens and then went back to his house to see the women. All of the women held their noses from the smell of Pumutuma. They all had their foreheads down from the smell and Pumutuma went to his hammock, the women still with their heads down and nostrils held closed.

Pumutuma wanted to get their attention, so he took the stick out of his lip and let it fall on the ground. One of the nearby women didn’t want to touch it so she grabbed the stick with a leaf and passed it back to Pumutuma. But he made it fall again but the same happened - with the leaf she passed it back to him. As Pumutuma was doing this Samönamöniapata (the ‘honey man’) arrived with tobacco in his mouth. As he passed the women he blew in their direction. They smelled the sweet perfume of the tobacco and they followed him to his house. They followed him and when he entered his hammock, they wanted to get in with him. The women liked Samönamöniapata more. Pumutuma got angry at this and wanted to kill Samönamöniapata as he smelled of flowers and Pumutuma smelled ugly. He went to find the tree with venom and put it in his blowpipe and blew it on Samönamöniapata who lay dying in his hammock. When he was dead in the afternoon the women cried and cried. In his house Pumutuma talked bad about the dead man ‘I don’t care that he’s dead’ he said, but someone heard him (Wöomönonia, type of snake) and went to tell the others. Wöomönonia told the others that it was Pumutuma that had killed

Samönamöniapata and so all those that were crying got together and decided to kill Pumutuma.

Pumutuma overheard the conversation about him and escaped from his house into the forest. The people in the community invited Lulunanöpu to kill Pumutuma. Lulunanöpu are ants, miles and miles of ants and they came walking, looking for Pumutuma. When they found him they called to the others who were crying. Pumutuma crossed Mitatipö, a large river. He crossed it, but when they continued to pursue him they couldn't cross the river. Piumuki the snake said 'I'm going to help you cross the river.' So, he stretched himself out and grabbed a tree on the other side of the river. The ants crossed over the river on his body and continued to look for the tracks of Pumutuma. The tracks had gone to a huge tree with a gigantic and thick trunk (Sa. *shindei*). The ants looked all around the tree but couldn't find him. Pumutuma had gone up onto a branch. The ants knew he had gone up so sent Kolöjauroma (monkey) up to look for him. He arrived at where Pumutuma was and told him off. Pumutuma shouted back at him. Kolöjauroma came back down and told everyone else, who all got together to cut down the tree. They tried but they couldn't do it.

Others tried, Luisiolo tried, but the tree was so big that their machetes broke as they tried. All the people, all the animals that have short beaks, this was their machetes. When they cut down the tree they broke their machetes. So now these animals don't have long beaks but short ones. Everyone broke their machetes except the toucan who arrived late. When the tree finally fell, as it was falling it got caught in a huge vine on the way down. Saulema, the sloth wanted to help so he said 'you have to be able to climb like me' and he went tried to cut the huge vine, which was as thick as a barbasco root. But he couldn't, he was too slow and the people below shouted at him 'come down, you can't do anything!' The Sinonitawö töpö (squirrels) also came because they had sharp teeth. They cut the vine and the tree fell.

The tree fell with a loud crash – TAN! Those that were at the tip of the tree killed Pumutuma. He was in a hole and when the tree fell they hit him with sticks until he was pure blood so that he wouldn't survive and they killed him completely. Where Pumutuma fell the deer was first. If you see a deer, he is red, all red. Currasow also has a red beak, this was painted in the blood of Pumutuma. The howler monkey and squirrel too. If you see the nose of *masöpa*, it's red too. This was all painted by the blood of Pumutuma. All the animals that have white, this comes from

Pumutuma's brain. The large tree also had branches full of food like banana, potato, sweet potato, lots of types of fruit and food that now we see here. All the people that pursued Pumutuma grabbed this food but the last to arrive was the jaguar and the tapir. The tapir arrived and there was no food so now he eats nothing but branches and leaves. There was also nothing left for the jaguar so he said 'you didn't leave me anything to eat so now I will eat all types of animal. When I see an animal or a person I'm going eat them because no one left me any food to eat.' So now the jaguar only wants to eat meat and people. I have finished the myth now.

### **Appendix 11: The Myth of Waso Osowai**

#### **Told by René:**

There was a boy called Waso Osowai who lived in his wife's community and one day he wanted to take a trip to visit his mother. This boy had a wife but she didn't want to go with him to visit his family in a different village. His Mother-in-law said 'If my daughter doesn't want to go, then I will go with my son-in-law. I'll go there and then come back' So Waso Osowai left with his mother-in-law, they both left together. They walked and walked and walked. They stopped to rest in the middle of the route. Her son-in-law said, 'come and sit here next to me' but because she was his mother-in-law, she didn't want to be near her son-in-law. The mother-in-law was afraid of her son-in-law.

They carried on walking but it got late. It was very late and the night was arriving so they stopped to sleep. They set up their hammocks on opposite sides of the fire and went to sleep. Later the son-in-law said, 'there is a lot of smoke here. I can't sleep here because there is too much smoke. Where you are there is no smoke.' The mother-in-law said, 'then come into my hammock but only with your head at the other end'. So he got into the hammock with her but with his head by her feet and his feet by her head. 'There are a lot of ants here', he said, so she said 'Ok, put your head this end where I am.' Then he said 'lots of smoke again', he said panting because he was weak.

Because the son-in-law wanted to have sex with his mother-in-law, he didn't want to sleep alone; he wanted to sleep with his mother-in-law. Waso osowai grabbed her legs and began to have sex with the back of her knees and his penis became large. After than the mother-in-law said, 'lets go to where your family are' so they next day

they walked, walked, walked. He arrived were his family was – his sister, mother and father. He said ‘jo jo jo jo’. They heard that and said ‘my brother is coming!’ He didn’t have any clothes, no shorts so when he arrived with the big erect penis they all saw and they said ‘my bother has a large penis! What happened?’ So Waso Osowai said ‘I’m not going to arrive in my house’ so he flew off ‘sö sö sö sö sö!’ He became a bat and flew off. The mother-in-law ran off to the stream making the noise of a frog (*kolakolawan*). This is the story of the bat and the frog woman.

## Appendix 12: The Myth of the Origin of Fire

Told by Carlos:

Tö kuanoi i tö wösö pia köle	I’m going to tell the story of what happened with the ancestors
Suduba tö kuanoi inatö kuama	Before, when the ancestors arrived, it was like this.
I töpö liki i nupatapö töpö	They were the spirits of humans
Ina tö kuataja ji makökua kule na ina nupatapö töpö kua ku kini	So, in the time of the spirit people, they made a house for themselves. I’m going to tell a story of what they did there. The first thing they did when they arrived was build a house.
Ku kini töpö ku kini ji makö namo ju ku kua wina ina töpö kua naio jötoma	So, they did then what we do today with game.
Nu patapö töpö jupa naio ma kasa sua naio pia salo	The ancestors also looked for grubs too.
Nu patapatatöpönö kasa sua totiopama	They got lots of grubs.
I nu patapö töpönö kuataka taimi ipama. Kötönö niti li ipi tö wa soa pöa talo opama	And the ancestors, because they still didn’t know how to make a fire, they ate meat raw.
I töpö patatöpö kuo wakio ma maike koataka taimi ipa soama	They were older people but they still didn’t know how to make a fire.
I natö kuataja ai saia pata kuoma ia saiana kamani pusupa i panopa töpö kuo asa tima. I töpö liki i iatama kuo asama. I ai töpö liki i töpö uliamö töpö jupa naio nö kasa jalo ta naioma töpö wala kokönö i watamana kasa jalo totota na i oma. Maiki iwatamani uliamö kamani itö jalo löpöta soa asatasonö tö jalo löpöpi tö jalo kai walotako soa soluma. Ai sanakö li ipi nakönö tö jaloa kosotalinö awani walota kosoa soluma.(3:20)	There was a house that had walls and a door. Inside there was a man and his wife and they both ate well-prepared food because they knew how to make a fire inside the house. The people outside didn’t know that they had fire inside that house. Those that knew how to eat well-prepared food were the alligators. And the others that lived in other houses around that house, they wrapped up meat in leaves and gave it to the alligator and he grabbed it and exchanged it for something else.

	The others thought he was eating raw meat but he took it to the forest hidden and cooked it with his fire.
I natō kuataja pi sateje epi ai moko tōpō waloa jai kō solōnō ai saiana tōpō lishi palonō tōpō iapalo jupalo jaitima. Ai tōpōnō sala suamo juapashia kona solō noiaja tōpō ai ti saiana tōpō lishia nomō pasoma maiki i watama saia pashi liki ia saia la akōko opa pasitioma.	One day, while all the men were out hunting, a group of women went around each house looking for meat to eat. They wanted to get into the alligator's house but the door was tied well shut.
Kuapōlata tōpō japalo jaionō i tataka matō jakō palō nikō tōpō japalo ku jaioma. Kuanō wanibi taka wai jakō palinō tōpō lishi palolōnō puwani iapalo jaitima. Jaitipaja wanibi ishishi tō osowai talalima. Talalinō tō osowai topamakōma. Patatōpō waloa kokō iaja tō mumapō tōna toi tapotitaja pata tōpō waloa ko jōtōkōma kuai i aja i ishitoi mōmaiaja tōpō pewō japalo kokamo opama.	They all got together to open the door and they managed to open it a crack and squeeze inside. They looked through everything to see what the alligator had to eat. They found a piece of pot that had been burned. So they took the piece of pot with them to show to the others when they returned from the hunt.
Kuaiaja sala supa tasonoi i tō tatotia kusotokōma kuanō tōpō pewō japalonō tōpō sapōko kokamo piama. Kuanō tōpō sapōkoma i patatō liki mōtala aloa sotamakōma kōnō ia kotona pola kapi jisija tōpō loa sota makōma. Makōnō tōpō kusotama. Makōpi mosaia totiki tōpō kuma.	They all met and decided to do a game to see what the alligator had in his mouth. The alligator sat in the middle of the circle. His wife sat at his side. Two men said to the others sitting next to him to keep their eyes peeled for when he opens his mouth.
Kunō tōpō sapōko toitima maiki i watamaliki a ikiapalo ma apama. Ina tō kuateje cuatro wakalatō kuapupasoma. Kuaiaja ai patatōna ai tō japaloma. Japalonō kawōnō tō mōa toitakōtō. Ai tō ulina ai sanōmatō shimi lōma. Tōpō naka tasoia.	They made jokes to try and make the alligator laugh but he didn't laugh for four whole days. All the people started to get really tired. The chief of the community send a man to another community to invite them to a traditional party.
Inate kuataja aitō ulina ai sanōmate shimōa naisotalōma tōpō kokamo taso pia salo.	So the other went to another community to invite them too.
I tōpō juso jōtotasoma tōpō paia piasalo.	They all agreed to come to the party.
Tōpō waloa jōtō kō solōma. Solunō tōpō samōpalo opama kuateje aitōpō waloa nai sotakōsoluma. Tōpō samōpalo somanōi i tōpō baia piasalo tōpō julasolōma.	They all arrived painted for the traditional party. The ones that arrived first came all dressed up and started to dance.
Julasolōnō tōpō baia tasoia tōpō shino opi tōpō baia ia tōpō ikia palo opaia patatō pi ikiaja naipasoma. Kuaiaja tōpō kusotama. Kuataka otapo opa wakiaalo kule tōpō kuma. Tōpō baia matalonō tōpō jua kosotasolōma.	They came to dance next to the alligator and they danced naked. So the alligator almost laughed. They all agreed that he was about to let the fire out of his mouth. When they finished dancing, they returned to their camp in the forest.

<p>Solönö akusota ma. Sa tö öta wakileje koataka ki akuiaja i töpö pewö baia jua totisoluma. A shioshimo opawi a baia paloa palo toti opama. Ia nojana ai töpö baia nai sotama.</p>	<p>When they arrived in the forest they said to everyone there ‘lets all go and dance there at the same time.’ The funniest one danced naked at the front of the line of dancers. He was the first, and behind him his companions danced too.</p>
<p>Kuanö awani shioshimo opawi a shino opi awani baia paloa totiopama. Awani baia pölanö awani jotapolo opanö awani baia toti opaia töpö komöto toti opa ma. Kuateje mötala patate pata lo pashitio ma. Ia koto patana polakapi jishia töpö. Loateja awani baia pashile ia shiwani nia toti lonö aite jukuna tö sötöpaköma. Sötöpakö iaja i patate pata ikia palo totisoma. Soiaja kuataka ani sutuja toti soiaja ai jishia tene tö sulönö jiti kolona lope toti ipö a uma toti soluma.</p>	<p>The one in the front danced as funnily as he could to try and make the people laugh. While he was dancing, the alligator was in the middle of the circle and there were men seated either side of him. The funniest one had diarrhea, and he let out an explosion of diarrhea on top of all the spectators. When the shit went on all the people, suddenly the alligator began to laugh. When he opened his mouth, a little bit of fire came out and the men who were seated next to him, they grabbed the piece of fire. The one that grabbed it quickly ran up a tree.</p>
<p>Solönö jitikolo jösöka patana tö ala so otakö kuaiaja jiti kolo waköpata umöa sota lima. I taka ani sutilonö ai jiti kolona tö sötö pakö iaja tö wakö umönai sota alöma.</p>	<p>So, he went up to the top of a tree and left a little bit of fire up there. When he left it there, a huge fire lit and grew until it set alight all the surrounding trees.</p>
<p>Kuaiaja patatapata öpa sotalönö a kusomtama. I koataka na makö isiopo pashitio piasalo. A kuaiaja i töpö kujititama kawa solakö matu ola osowaina sami ipi wa wani kajötö tio piasalo. I au pusupa sola makö kuo totio jititio maikiti töpö kusotama.</p>	<p>The alligator got angry and told the people off, he said ‘with this fire that you have grabbed, you will all burn’ (i.e. not bury in ground when they die but burn). When he said this they all responded ‘you will not be with your women, but instead you will always sleep alone in the streams, your wife will also be alone’ they said to the alligator.</p>
<p>Tö kuaiaja töpö wanipaso opama kuataka pina. Ina tö kuaiaja i sanöma töpö kujötö tama. Matu okipatana wawani kuo jötöti pia salo.</p>	<p>They spoke about the fire and then they said to the alligator ‘you will always be inside the river even though it’s deep.</p>
<p>Patatöpö kua somanoi i töpö kusotama. Okawani i polapolama tö wajatoti awani suo opakötö patatöpö ku shisiamama. Kunö i patatöpö kuo noi i töpöki tö wajatote töpö kunoi i pitilita kuo ma.</p>	<p>Before the fire, our ancestors said not to eat crabs, frogs, and ants because if you do, you will act like them. That’s the truth. They have souls and if you eat them their souls will take revenge in this way. After the fire, these animals had weaker souls, so people can eat them now. The fire burned all bad things including poison and illness. We used to die form lots of things, but not after the fire.</p>
<p>Nojatö uli kuonoi ita töpeiwo wasu</p>	<p>Our ancestor used to tell us not to eat</p>

<p>upama. Olökökönö wa ösö wölalöma wa nomato suama. Shinatokitiki ni wa ösö wilalöma wa nomato suama. Maiki kuataka kupalonö tö wanishana apawi tö pewö ishi ishi shioma. Jukibi jiti wakalana wa ösö wölalöma maike wa noma maikötö.</p>	<p>anything that walked on the ground, if you do you will be like them. Before the fire, in this time, all animals had venom, but everything changed after the fire. The fire burnt all the bad things. These days, if a snake bites you, it will hurt but you won't die, you will still be alive.</p>
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### **Appendix 13: Fabiana's Story of Escape from *Oka Töpö***

We moved here because of *oka töpö*. They are Sanema, the same as us but *malandros* (Venezuelan term for criminals). They killed two of my people. If there is someone dying in their hammock people say that an *oka tö* killed this person, that's all I know, I've never seen one. They come close to the house and hide there. One day a man and his son were on their way home and there were *oka töpö* there watching them so they could kill the boy that was with the man. When they arrived at the house the boy said 'I've got a headache, I'm tired.' That was *oka töpö*. So they arrived in the house and it was late. In the night the boy died, very quickly. There wasn't a good shaman in our community so many people died. My mother said to her people 'Lets go to Sakiniña because there are too many *oka töpö* here, we're all going to die here.' So we moved to Sakiniña. The *oka töpö* followed us to Sakiniña too but they couldn't enter, they stayed hidden in the forest. If an *oka tö* kills a man, they know he has died because they hear the family crying in the house. In the night-time, if the family of the dead person aren't '*pendiente*' (watching) over the body, the *oka töpö* creep in quietly, they come close to the body and they touch the body.