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Chapter 4

Ignorant Bodies and the Dangers of Knowledge in Amazonia

Casey High

In this chapter I consider how anthropology, a discipline that has increasingly adopted Foucauldian approaches to the question of knowledge and its production, might also account for ethnographic contexts in which ignorance takes centre stage. Based on fieldwork with Waorani communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon, I explore the mutual implication of knowledge and ignorance in Amazonian understandings of learning and being in the context of shamanism. Drawing on recent calls for ethnographically grounded studies of ignorance (Dilley 2010; High, Kelly and Mair 2012), I raise questions about the tendency to project our own anthropological preoccupations with knowledge onto ethnographic contexts in which the people we study insist on ignorance as a social value. I also examine how local concerns about ignorance, formal education and relations between older and younger generations require attention to the ways in which Waorani people understand knowledge to be inseparable from bodily experiences.

Conceiving an anthropology of ignorance requires not only a new approach to ethnography, but also some critical reflection on the history of how ignorance has been understood and debated by anthropologists. The interpretive practice of anthropology implies what Viveiros de Castro (2003: 3) describes as an ‘epistemological advantage over the native’ insofar as we claim to know about ‘cultural’ practices that our informants assume to be ‘natural’. In this process we attribute meanings and functions to the illusions or ‘beliefs’ they hold about themselves such that the very premise of anthropological knowledge implies the delegitimation of the claims of ‘natives’ (Viveiros de Castro 2003: 4). At the same time, many anthropologists today embrace ‘indigenous knowledge’ as a valued object of ethnography. In describing this ‘traditional’ knowledge in terms of cultural continuity and the agency of

informants, they attempt to remedy precisely the traditional epistemological advantage alluded to by Viveiros de Castro. This state of affairs reveals a certain tension between how anthropologists conceive of their own knowledge and how they relate to the knowledge of others.

I compare this apparent tension in anthropology to anxieties about the relationship between knowledge and ignorance in Amazonian Ecuador, where my Waorani hosts make strategic claims of ignorance about shamanism and lament the ignorance of young people. While Waorani people are ‘wilfully ignorant’ of shamanism in part because its practice is associated with assault sorcery (High 2012a), young people are described as not having specific knowledge and abilities as a result of lacking specific bodily experiences associated with previous generations. Drawing on Roy Dilley’s (2010) notion of ‘bodily ignorance’, I examine the transmission of knowledge in terms of a Waorani ontological premise that refuses to separate knowing from being. By exploring the kinds of knowledge and being that shamanism, school education, and the bodily capacities of elders entail, I describe how Waorani are less concerned with the loss of ‘indigenous knowledge’ than they are with constituting the kinds of relations with various ‘others’ they envision in a *comunidad* (community). Their formulations of knowledge, its production and its absence challenge the focus on cultural reproduction implicit in much writing on indigenous knowledge, memory and Amazonian ethnography.

Ignorance and Anthropology

While questions of ignorance have long been neglected in anthropology, it is important to recognize that this is at least partly the result of its controversial presence in earlier anthropological debates. Perhaps the most prominent anthropological discussion of ignorance was sparked by Malinowski’s claim in *The Sexual Life of Savages in North Western Melanesia* (1929: 171) that ‘physical fatherhood is unknown’ to his informants in the

Trobriand Islands. Leach's equally famous response to Malinowski in 'The Virgin Birth' (1966) provides a clue to why questions of ignorance have since fallen out of fashion in anthropology. For Leach, the Trobrianders' insistence that *baloma* spirits, rather than men, were responsible for pregnancy was akin to the Christian notion of the Virgin Birth, rather than actual ignorance of physical paternity. In warning against the tendency to take specific religious claims as the total knowledge (and thus ignorance) of a particular society, he noted that 'Western European scholars are strongly predisposed to believe that *other people* should believe in versions of the myth of the Virgin Birth. If *we* believe such things we are devout: if *others* do so they are idiots' (Leach 1966: 41).

Leach saw Malinowski's claim as an example of the resilience of nineteenth-century evolutionist assumptions about 'primitive societies' being ignorant of basic knowledge; the idea, for example, that the supposed promiscuity of primitive societies coincided with their ignorance of paternity. I mention this example here merely to illustrate how debates about ignorance in anthropology were, until relatively recently, centrally about the question of whether certain societies demonstrated or lacked certain forms of knowledge characteristic of Europeans. In this sense, anthropologists have since had good reason to eschew questions of ignorance in favour of a more relativistic approach to culture and, more recently, adopting 'knowledge' – rather than ignorance – as a primary ethnographic object. This is to say that non-knowledge ceased to be a viable category of ethnographic enquiry due to the moral and political connotations of ignorance in modern anthropology and Western thought more generally.

And yet, while anthropologists today are no longer interested in describing certain people as ignorant, there remains an implicit assumption that much of the whole enterprise of anthropology is about establishing what Viveiros de Castro (2003: 3) describes as an 'epistemological advantage' over the 'native'. Whether in describing social structures, interpreting culture or simply engaging in participant observation, the basic assumption is that

anthropologists can and should come to understand things that their informants cannot. This, according to Viveiros de Castro, is in fact what distinguishes the ‘native’ from the anthropologist, as ‘the latter may be wrong about the former, but the former must be deluded about himself’ (ibid.: 4). What Viveiros de Castro is alluding to here is not simply an assumption of false consciousness on the part of ‘natives’ or their assumed failure to understand what anthropologists do, but a more general feature of how anthropologists tend to conceive of differences in terms of culture and representation. In positing culture as a plurality of perspectives on a single objective world, the ‘multiculturalist relativism’ of Western thinking ‘supposes a diversity of subjective and partial representations, each striving to grasp an external and unified nature’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 478). This multiculturalist understanding, and the epistemological advantage it implies on the part of anthropologists, has important consequences for how we think about anthropological knowledge and the knowledge of the people we study.¹ Despite the increasing focus on reflexivity in anthropology, this epistemological advantage that Viveiros de Castro describes continues to inform the project of interpreting culture and meaning:

What makes the native a native is the presupposition, on the part of the anthropologist, that the former’s relation to his culture is natural, that is, intrinsic and spontaneous, and, if possible, non-reflexive – or better still, unconscious. The native expresses his culture in his discourse; likewise the anthropologist, but if she intends to be something other than a native, she must express her culture culturally, that is, reflexively, conditionally and consciously. The anthropologist necessarily uses her culture; the native is sufficiently used by his[;] ... the anthropologist holds total sway over those reasons of which the native’s reason knows nothing. She knows the exact doses of universality and particularity contained in the native, and the illusions which the latter entertains about himself

– whether manifesting his native culture all the while believing he’s manifesting human nature (the native ideologizes without knowing), or manifesting human nature all the while believing he’s manifesting his native culture (he cognizes unawares). (2003: 3–4)

While this ignorance on the part of ‘natives’ remains an implicit assumption in certain conceptualizations of culture, the focus on ‘indigenous knowledge’ and ‘agency’ appears to indirectly address the epistemological imbalance described by Leach and Viveiros de Castro. Just as theorizations of agency in anthropology have challenged the notion that women, indigenous peoples and subaltern groups should be understood mainly in terms of marginality and subordination to structures of power, the central place of indigenous knowledge appears to be part of a similar political and ethical move within anthropology. Rather than debating whether or not certain ‘natives’ are truly ignorant of what the West upholds as ‘truth’ or ‘rationality’, today we describe other forms of knowledge, other ways of knowing that sometimes depart in significant ways from our own. My point is not to dismiss this movement towards knowledge as a key object of anthropological study or to call for a return to pejorative speculations about ‘ignorant natives’. However, I suggest that, as ethnographers, we should also take seriously the claims our informants make about not knowing. While Malinowski and his predecessors appear to have spent considerable energy attempting to determine whether or not certain ‘primitive societies’ could truly be ignorant of Western standards of rationality, my interest in this chapter is to consider Waorani claims to non-knowledge on their own terms, to think about the ethnographic contexts in which ignorance is expressed, valued, contested and lamented by different people.

Approaching ignorance ethnographically in this way requires reconsidering how we tend to think about indigenous knowledge in places like Amazonia. One of the problems with placing indigenous knowledge at the forefront of anthropology is the tendency to associate

'knowledge' with an implicit notion of cultural continuity. This is particularly striking in studies of indigenous Amazonia, where ethnographic descriptions of indigenous knowledge and agency tend to focus on the resilience of Amerindian sociocosmological principles and the creative responses indigenous peoples bring to social transformation in the face of colonial history and powerful contemporary outsiders. This preoccupation with knowledge, whether in writings about shamanism, environmental knowledge or advocacy for the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples, risks ignoring indigenous claims to non-knowledge.

In this context, any potential gap in knowledge is assumed to be a problem, a cultural deficiency or worse, an indication of the loss of 'traditional culture'. Like the exotic body imagery that has gained certain indigenous Amazonian peoples the status of 'authenticity' in the eyes of environmentalists and indigenous rights activists from around the world in recent decades (Conklin 1997), indigenous knowledge has an important political value that constitutes part of the changing 'middle ground' between Amazonian Indians and ecopolitics (Conklin and Graham 1995). As some groups are better able to seize on these expectations than others, and the governments of South American countries claim an interest in indigenous knowledge as part of a national heritage to be protected (Conklin 2002), alliances based on the cultivation and preservation of indigenous knowledge may prove just as fragile as those between indigenous people and environmentalists.

The central aim of this chapter, as outlined above, is to think about Waorani notions of knowledge and ignorance outside of conventional Western concerns about cultural continuity and acculturation. Rather than worrying about what I think Waorani people *should* know and piecing together their accounts as partial (or even deficient) knowledge, I examine the practical and conceptual implications of ignorance for Waorani people themselves. This perspective leads to a series of questions about the mutual implication of knowledge and

ignorance in a context where knowing and not knowing are inseparable from indigenous understandings of being and bodily experience.

Shamanic Knowledge and the Dangers of Being a Shaman

In Amazonia, perhaps even more than in other parts of the world, shamanism has come to be seen as a key site and source of indigenous knowledge. Associated with specialized knowledge of plants, animals, spirits and healing, shamans have featured prominently in studies of indigenous cosmology (Harvey 2003; Thomas and Humphrey 1994; Brightman, Grotti and Ulturgasheva 2012). For similar reasons they are a focal point of ecotourism projects, ethnobotanical research and heated debates about intellectual property rights.

Shamans have come to be defined, and in some contexts define themselves, as ‘guardians’ of indigenous knowledge in ways that are redefining the relationship between indigenous people and the state. In Brazil, for example, despite the ongoing conflicts between indigenous people and aggressive, state-driven development policies, indigenous knowledge is now cast as part of the country’s national patrimony (Conklin 2002). Similar concerns about indigenous knowledge can be seen in debates about museum collections and the ownership of native ‘culture’ in North America (Brown 1998, 2004). Whether in the context of national debates about indigenous culture, global commercial interests or anthropological research, shamans have come to be seen as a key repository of knowledge.

In Waorani villages shamanism is a manifestation of what we would conventionally describe as ‘indigenous knowledge’. But what kind of knowledge does it consist of? Waorani shamans know a great deal about plants and animals, and they know about them in ways ordinary people generally do not. Like shamanic practices described elsewhere, Waorani shamanism involves a form of communication between humans and animals. Shamans develop a special kin relationship with jaguars through dreams in which an ‘adopted’ jaguar-spirit visits the shaman and speaks through the voice of its human ‘father’ (Rival 2002; High

2012b). As it temporarily inhabits the shaman's body, the jaguar-spirit tells its adopted father and his family where to find game animals. Shamanic practices are associated with keeping animals close to Waorani people, ensuring their abundant supply and 'attracting them back when they flee from people' (Rival 2002: 78). In the Waorani language, shamans are called *meni* (jaguar) or *menera* (jaguar father) or, in accusations of assault sorcery, *iroinga* (witch/sorcerer).²

In part as a result of the engagement with predatory jaguar-spirits that shamanism entails, and its association with sorcery, shamanic practices have become highly contentious in Waorani villages today. There are in fact very few Waorani who claim to be shamans, especially in the larger villages. While elders also describe sorcery as a cause of intergroup revenge-killings in past times, the establishment of permanent villages appears to have coincided with growing concerns about shamans carrying out sorcery against their neighbours. The proliferation of sorcery accusations in recent years should be understood in the context of a general transition from relatively autonomous Waorani households to the establishment of large villages since missionary settlement in the 1960s. These villages, the largest of which today incorporate up to two hundred people, bring together former 'enemy' families, people from other indigenous groups who intermarry with Waorani, and a range of non-indigenous Ecuadorians. This growth in the scale of Waorani villages and the intensification of intergroup relations they entail appears to have created fertile ground for sorcery accusations in a context where violence has a central place in social memory (High 2009).³

I initially came to understand Waorani fears and frustrations about sorcery and the apparent decline of shamanism as a result of missionary influences since the 1960s. The Waorani are best known for their relative isolation from other Ecuadorians until the late 1950s, when five North American missionaries were killed by Waorani while attempting to establish an evangelical mission along the Curaray River. With the help of a Waorani woman

who had fled her people years before in the wake of intense violence between Waorani clans, the widow and sister of two of the deceased missionaries established a mission at Tiweno where, by the late 1960s, some five hundred or more Waorani had come to live for the first time among *kowori* (non-Waorani) people (Kimerling 1996: 181).

Although few Waorani today identify as Christian, most who lived at the mission settlement had converted to Christianity by the early 1980s (Yost 1981; Robarchek and Robarchek 1998), when the missionary organization was expelled from Ecuador.⁴ The small number and marginal position of Waorani shamans today can be understood in part as a result of this process of missionization common to much of Amazonia (Vilaca and Wright 2009). However, rather than simply evidencing a loss of shamanic knowledge or indigenous ‘culture’ in the face of missionary teachings, the decline of Waorani shamanism is also related to the seriousness with which Waorani people understand the consequences of shamanic practices. The problem for my Waorani hosts is less one of losing shamanic knowledge than one of preventing the kind of ‘predatory’ relations that shamanism involves.

As local concerns about shamans turning to sorcery appear to have intensified in this context of social transformation, the status of Waorani shamans was almost untenable in some villages at the time of my fieldwork. My hosts often denounced shamanism on the grounds that such practices constitute a threat to what they see as the ideal conditions of village life. As one of my Waorani interlocutors suggested, ‘Here we live well; we have no shamans’. His comment voiced a common concern about assault sorcery, which is often lamented as the cause of sickness and death. Although Waorani generally attribute these misfortunes to sorcery, few claim to know a great deal about how shamans carry out their attacks. What is clear to them, however, is that shamanism involves a highly dangerous two-way relationship between the shaman and his ‘adopted’ animal spirit in which human and nonhuman perspectives can be exchanged, confused or in dispute (Fausto 2004, 2007, 2012). Whereas Waorani people ordinarily identify themselves as victims of predatory human and nonhuman

forces (Rival 2002), many fear shamans may invert this relationship by adopting the predatory perspective of a jaguar-spirit. The result of this reversal of perspectives, according to my hosts, is sorcery, a process that involves a shaman domesticating his spirit animal 'like a pet', sending it to harm people (High 2012b).

Shamans become potential killers when, through their anger or jealousy, they adopt the predatory perspective of jaguars or other animals. Since to see the world from the jaguar's point of view is to be a killer, Waorani people who become jaguar-shamans are seen as a source of danger, even when they are respected elders with famous biographies in local lore. This dual perspective has made the social position of shamans increasingly untenable in contemporary Waorani communities where, after decades of revenge-killings between rival families, shamanism is seen as an obstacle to the local ideal of peaceful sociality. As a result, few self-proclaimed shamans remain in the villages in the western part of the Waorani reserve where I work. Fear, suspicion and outright hostility towards shamans appear to be widespread across many of the more than thirty present Waorani communities, where people who are socially distant or perceived to be selfish and untrustworthy are rumoured to practise assault sorcery.

With the rampant speculation that circulates about who is responsible for sorcery attacks, it is no surprise that few Waorani claim much knowledge about them. On a recent visit to a Waorani community, two brothers complained to me that their mother was ill as a result of the sorcery of a shaman living nearby. When I asked them why their neighbour would want to harm other people in the village, they explained that the man was sad and 'angry' (*pii*) that his own son had recently died, and as a result performed sorcery against their mother out of jealousy. The same man, who was rumoured to have become a shaman only recently, while living in a distant *kowori* community, was also blamed for the death of a child in the village. People commented that seeing other families prosper with many children made the man feel a kind of jealous envy that eventually led him to attack his neighbours.

Although the kin of these victims, and the surviving victims themselves, identify specific shamans who they say are responsible for assault sorcery, they rarely have much to say about how the attacks are carried out. My questions in this direction were usually met simply with claims to ignorance, such as *aramai* ('I don't see') or *iinamai* ('I don't hear'), followed by moral evaluations of the act itself, such as *wiwa keranipa* ('they do badly') or *ononki wentapa* ('he/she killed without reason'). This is because to claim knowledge about the actual techniques of shamanism would be, I suggest, tantamount to claiming one's own ability as a shaman, thus opening oneself up to potential sorcery accusations. In this context, not knowing can be seen as a strategic defence against unwanted, negative attention: a way of denying relations that are considered to be inappropriate (Chua 2009).

While the emphasis on not knowing about shamanism may in part be a strategic denial in the context of sorcery accusations, I suggest that this form of ignorance also has an ontological dimension. Contrary to the assumption that shamanism is centrally premised on a specialized body of accumulated knowledge, Waorani people envision shamanism more as a particular state of being that implies relations with nonhuman entities. Beyond strategically denying inappropriate relations, these claims to ignorance are expressed with the awareness that 'knowing' about shamanism is not altogether distinct from 'being' a shaman. In a context where 'knowledge' and 'experience' are not theorized as separate, knowledge about the practice of sorcery would necessarily imply a predatory perspective. As Viveiros de Castro (2004) observes in Amerindian shamanism more generally, 'Shamanism is a form of acting that presupposes a mode of knowing, a particular ideal of knowledge'. In contrast to 'the objectivist folk epistemology of our tradition', in Amazonian shamanism '[t]o know is to personify, to take on the point of view of that which must be known' (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 468).

Waorani explain that people often become shamans not as a conscious choice, but as a consequence of events outside their own control. One risks becoming a shaman as a result of

a life-threatening accident or illness, such as suffering a severe malarial fever, becoming a victim of sorcery or surviving a plane crash. As can be seen in the above example, the man accused of sorcery is described as having become a shaman after experiencing tremendous emotional pain. Such experiences, whether an accident or other personal trauma, may lead people to see the world from the perspective of a predatory jaguar. In Carla Stang's (2009) description of the Mehinaku in the Brazilian Amazon, changes in emotional consciousness, marked by excessive fear or desire, have the potential to collapse ontological boundaries and cause people to enter into different worlds. In Mehinaku understanding, people risk coming to see the world from the perspective of spirits or animals, rather than that of living humans.⁵ In a similar way, Waorani do more than simply acquire a kind of knowledge about the world when they become shamans: they become a different kind of being in the world. They carry out assault sorcery because, like jaguars, they see people as animal prey.

For Waorani people this shamanic perspective is not as much a form of knowledge as it is an ontological state that allows people to engage in different kinds of relations. In contrast to positivistic scientific traditions that seek to fill in knowledge gaps by accumulating facts with the aim of moving ever closer to a universal truth, Waorani shamanism is part of a cosmology that assumes the ways in which people experience the world to be inherently transformative. Although some shamans are known to be particularly powerful and experienced, Waorani anxieties about them focus less on the level or degree of their ability than on the question of whether one is or is not a shaman. Put another way, it not a question of whether a person is 'more' or 'less' shamanic or knowledgeable, but what perspective they bring to relations with other people.

Waorani seldom question whether one's point of view is 'real' or 'true', but are concerned instead with the moral implications and effects of the perspective taken in a given relation. That killers and, at times, shamans experience the world from the jaguar's point of view is not a point of debate or speculation, even for Waorani who have converted to

evangelical Christianity. It is simply a manifestation of the dangers inherent in a transformative world in which various kinds of agency are not restricted to human beings. Some Waorani explain that they converted to Christianity in the 1960s precisely because they hoped it would protect them from the sorcery of shamans. This ontological premise sheds some light on current efforts to quell shamanism in Waorani villages. Not knowing about shamanism is not only a strategic claim, but also a desired state of being that confers a person's moral position within a wider set of relations. Like positioning oneself as a victim, in this context being ignorant is part of embracing a fully human perspective.

Bodily Ignorance and Waorani Ways of Knowing

Waorani understandings of shamanism and assault sorcery illustrate how ignorance, seen in the context of actual social relations and cosmology, cannot simply be reduced to the loss of indigenous knowledge, much less a pejorative sense of moral or intellectual deficiency. Not knowing about shamanism is in many ways a strategic claim that confers a commitment to what most Waorani people consider to be a desirable form of sociality. It is an important part of living in what my hosts describe as a *comunidad* that brings together several Waorani groups who were engaged in intense mutual hostilities a few decades ago.⁶ Of course, it would be misleading to construe the cultural value placed on not knowing about shamanism as the only, or even the primary place of ignorance in Waorani communities. Just as any ethnography of knowledge should account for multiple and in many cases contrasting forms of knowledge in a given social context, there are multiple meanings and values attributed to ignorance.

This section considers how, in contrast to the ignorance people claim about shamanism, Waorani elders in some contexts lament the absence of knowledge among young people. At the same time that Waorani efforts to stem the threat of shamanism embrace ignorance as an indigenous expression of discontinuity with past violence, recent social

transformations have also led to certain anxieties about the kinds of knowledge and skill that Waorani fear may be lost from one generation to the next. While their concerns about the failure of certain forms of cultural transmission reveal a clear contrast to the strategic ignorance of shamanism described in the previous section, indigenous understandings of learning and bodily experience also point to the same ontological premise that emerges in shamanism. Both of these contexts reveal how, in Waorani understanding, questions of knowledge and being are mutually constituted.

It is difficult to ignore the ways in which the social and political lives of Waorani people have transformed radically in the past few decades. Elders often recount stories from the period that preceded the arrival of missionaries, a time they associate with the relative autonomy of individual households, the hardships of intense interclan revenge-killings and the invasions of *kowori* outsiders. The causes of this violence and the relative isolation that some Waorani still struggle to maintain have sparked considerable interest and debate among missionaries, anthropologists and other outsiders. Various scholars have pointed to colonial history (Cipolletti 2002), sociobiology (Beckerman and Yost 2007) and ethnopsychology (Robarchek and Robarchek 1998) in attempting to explain the remarkable degree of ‘pre-contact’ violence between Waorani people. However, they generally agree that, in the years prior to missionary settlement, the frequency of intergroup spear-killings accounted for a remarkably high proportion of deaths among the Waorani, whose population was only around five hundred in the 1950s (Yost 1981).⁷ Today elders remember not only how they lost many kin to revenge-killings, but also how they feared the intrusion of *kowori* – whom they assumed to be semi-human cannibals.

Today, some fifty years after U.S. missionaries established the evangelical mission, most Waorani live in multi-family villages with airstrips and state-supported schools. While the bulk of missionary activity ended in the early 1980s, today young people learn Spanish at school and make regular visits to Ecuadorian cities, and most men at some point work on

temporary contracts for oil companies operating on Waorani lands. The oil industry, which has intensified and expanded its activities on Waorani lands considerably since the 1960s (Stoll 1982), has had a major social and ecological impact that is felt in even the most remote Waorani villages. While changes like these are not unique to the Waorani or to Amazonia more generally, the prominent place of violence and group autonomy in Waorani social memory gives particular salience to the contrasting generational experiences of elders and young people (High 2015).

Elders embrace many of the changes they have seen since missionization, a period they describe in Spanish as *civilización* (civilization). For them, *civilización* refers not only to a time when many Waorani converted to Christianity, but also to the relative peace, the intensification of relations with *kowori* people and the rapid expansion of the Waorani population. Above all, discourses of *civilización* draw a contrast between this sense of expanding social relations and the violence and isolation they ascribe to previous times. However, elders and many young people do not simply remember the past as a time of hardship and suffering. Deceased kin and the elders (*pikenani*) who survived the period of raiding prior to the mission are also associated with a sense of freedom and independence by which even young Waorani people today distinguish themselves from other indigenous groups and *mestizo* (non-indigenous) Ecuadorians. Ancestors are associated with the skill and strength that my hosts say allowed them to maintain their autonomy in the past and provide abundant food to their kin. Elders today, both men and women, are celebrated in a similar way, as are the few ‘uncontacted’ groups who live in voluntary isolation within the Waorani ethnic reserve (High 2013).⁸ Elders and uncontacted groups are emblematic of the value Waorani people generally place on the idea of being *durani bai* (‘like the ancient ones’).

But how do Waorani reconcile the notion of being ‘like the ancient ones’ with an equally important notion of being ‘civilized’ and living in close contact with *kowori* people? This is a context where generational changes come to the fore: where young people who

attend Ecuadorian schools become knowledgeable and skilled in things that their parents and grandparents are not. In many cases elders acknowledge young people's abilities to interact with *kowori* people and technologies in more productive ways than they can. This recognition is one of the key reasons that urban Waorani political leaders are almost invariably young men who speak reasonably good Spanish and have completed at least a basic school education. However, it is increasingly apparent to elders that young people also lack certain abilities associated with being 'like the ancestors'. This is a concern that elders expressed repeatedly during my fieldwork, despite their statements in support of *civilización* and formal education. They sometimes lament young people not having the strength or skills expected of young adults, who in the past were expected to carry out nearly all subsistence tasks and other household responsibilities from an early age (Rival 1996; High 2006).⁹

Rather than referring to a sense of ignorance or knowledge in the abstract, in alluding to the perceived deficiencies of young people, elders say that they 'don't see' (*aramai*) or that they 'don't hear' (*inamai*). In this context and in others, they refer to non-knowledge as a consequence of the absence of specific bodily experiences. At one level, for example, young people know less about the forest because, as students who spend most of their time in school or in the village, they lack the same sensory experience of 'seeing' and 'hearing' in the forest and gardens that older adults demonstrate. It is perhaps not surprising that, in a society that traditionally depends on hunting, gathering and small-scale gardening, there is an emphasis on the body as a source of knowledge. What became particularly noticeable during my fieldwork, however, is that parents and elders do not see school education as directly responsible for what they see as the deficiencies of young people. In contrast to Western ideas about the effects of school education, they do not envision direct competition between these two kinds of knowledge, with one potentially replacing the other. Nor do they say that young people fail to listen to the detailed stories that elders tell about their ancestors while sitting around the cooking hearth in the evenings.

Instead, on several occasions during fieldwork I heard parents complain that young people today ‘don’t know’ certain things because their bodies are deficient. They explained that the current generation of boys and girls is weaker than previous ones, who were stronger and better able to withstand hard work in the gardens and long treks in the forest. In their view, young people are weak in part because, unlike elders, they were never whipped with a jungle vine after male elders returned from peccary hunts. Men and women often recall how, in their childhood, they suffered these painful lashes from their father or grandfather. Elders explain that this practice made children strong enough to hunt peccaries and carry out tedious gardening work themselves one day. Being subjected to whippings is understood as a way of transmitting knowledge or ability from one person to another through specific bodily practices, whereby children acquire the capacities of adults.¹⁰ Rather than being a form of punishment to correct mistakes, the whipping of children reveals a particular understanding that bodily experiences constitute the acquisition of specific kinds of knowledge and agency (High 2010).¹¹

Some elders say that they stopped whipping children during the missionary period – the time of *civilization*. The resulting lack of embodied knowledge appears to have had a particular impact on young men, who are said to be unable to hunt peccaries with spears and to be ignorant of many aspects of life in the forest. So why, given this understanding of knowledge as constituted through (painful) bodily experience, do few parents today whip their children? In response to this question, one father told me that he does not whip his children because their arms and legs are too weak and would break from the impact of the lashes.¹² He explained that young people cannot withstand the whippings because today they eat too much ‘foreign food’ (*kowori kengi*), referring to the rice, noodles, oatmeal and other *kowori* foods they eat in school lunches and during trips to frontier cities. In this sense, their bodies are seen as deficient in terms of both knowledge (lacking specific bodily experiences) and their very constitution. This is particularly significant in a society where consanguinity is

understood to be made within household groups through the shared consumption of food and drink in everyday life (Rival 1998; Overing and Passes 2000).

The idea that young people are becoming physically and culturally deficient as a result of recent changes resonates with studies elsewhere in Amazonia, where older generations of men are understood locally to have grown larger, stronger and more capable than men today, who have never experienced specific rituals after warfare (Conklin 2001). What is clear in these cases is that men are seen as unable to ‘actualize their masculine potential’ (Conklin 2001: 155) as a result of not experiencing specific bodily transformations. The problem is not just that young men and women today are failing to fulfil their expected gendered roles, but also that they lack specific embodied capacities attributed to previous generations – capacities that are in fact central to indigenous ideas of what it means to be a proper Waorani person. Whereas young Waorani are seen as being less ‘hard’ or ‘strong’ (*teemo*) than elders, the few remaining uncontacted groups are said to have remarkable physical abilities and knowledge due to their strict diet of ‘Waorani’ foods and because, in contrast to ‘civilized’ Waorani who live in villages, they continue to whip their children.

In discussing this state of affairs, Waorani elders appear to be voicing concerns about young people’s lack of bodily knowledge, or their ‘bodily ignorance’ (Dilley 2010: 184). Roy Dilley develops the concept of bodily ignorance in attempting to redirect discussions of ignorance from conventional questions of epistemology to those of ontology:

My point is that in the absence of culturally specific bodily techniques and mastery of bodily forms, this ignorance or not-knowing, if we can call it such, is construed in ways that indicate fundamental moral problems of definition about what it is to be human. An absence of ‘bodily knowledge’, as we coin it, is not simply a form of ignorance; it is often related to questions of being. (Dilley 2010: 184–85)

In the hierarchical context of Senegalese craftworkers that Dilley describes, knowing or not knowing specific forms of knowledge is a social function of the division of labour, whereby learning is transmitted within bounded social groups and ignorance is part of what maintains the gulf between different social statuses. As specific skills and knowledge ‘are conceived as being linked to particular lines of descent traced back to the mythological originators of a trade’ (Dilley 2010: 184), people who do not master their natal craft are seen as ‘lesser exemplars of craft being’ and their ignorance ‘relates to the whole being of the person, not just to an inquiring mind or an ability to see the world’ (ibid.).

In the relatively egalitarian context of the Waorani, the bodily ignorance of young people is conceived as a failure with respect to indigenous understandings of personhood. While young people, no matter how weak or ignorant they appear to elders, are still considered to be Waorani, their perceived deficiencies are often compared to those of *kowori* people – an explicit measure of moral failure. The strong moral connotation of the word *kowori* can be seen in its reference not only to non-Waorani ‘enemy/others’, but also cannibals who prey on Waorani, the true measure of proper people. In the worst of cases, a young person risks being called *kowori bai* (‘like a *kowori*’) when he or she transgresses specific expectations of Waorani sociality. So whereas in Dilley’s discussion of specialized craftsmen, ‘the weaver who cannot weave is a lesser kind of weaver-person than one who can’ (2010: 184), for Waorani people bodily ignorance implies a kind of deficiency at a more generalized level of what it means to be a person. In both of these cases, however, ignorance has important ontological dimensions that extend beyond questions of knowledge.

Learning and Being in School

Although Waorani once associated *kowori* people relatively unambiguously with predatory violence and generally avoided them, today they tend to praise their medicines, manufactured

goods and skills, such as the ability to fly aeroplanes and drive cars. For Waorani people these skills and knowledge are in no way exclusive to *kowori* people, at least not in principle.

During fieldwork my hosts repeatedly expressed their curiosity about objects and abilities they wanted to know more about, whether this was the process of manufacturing an aluminium pot, piloting the small aeroplanes that often arrive in their villages, or space travel. Increasingly confident that some *kowori* can be trusted in certain things, they see this new knowledge as attainable through their interaction with Ecuadorians and other outsiders. Their desire to attain new technologies and new knowledge may have contributed, among other things, to the increasing Waorani preference for interethnic marriages with indigenous groups who have more extensive contact with the national society.

While the younger generations are seen as lacking in certain forms of knowledge as a result of not having been whipped by elders and eating too much *kowori* food, they also are expected to learn new and important knowledge in school. But what is it, according to parents, that children ‘see’ and ‘hear’ in the context of formal education? In school, Waorani students are understood to inhabit a *kowori* world – this is in fact the whole point of formal education for Waorani people: to learn Spanish and to become familiarized with skills and knowledge that are relatively unknown to older people. More specifically, they are expected to hear and see things in the presence of *kowori* teachers, who are predominantly *mestizos* or indigenous people from other parts of Ecuador. Parents hope that this education will allow young people to engage *kowori* people more productively in the future and lift Waorani people out of their relatively marginal social position in Ecuador.

At the time of my primary fieldwork (2002–2004), teachers spent a considerable amount of time reprimanding students for their poor study skills and admonishing parents for doing little to encourage their children to study at home. In some ways the teachers were right in their assessment of the situation. Many Waorani parents, despite the strong support they voice for schools and the sacrifices they make to keep their children in them, do not pressure

young people to do their homework or to improve their performance at school. While part of this may be the result of the generational transformations described above, whereby elders have relatively little knowledge of the content of formal education, it also reflects a strong emphasis on personal autonomy in a cultural context in which parents rarely make specific demands on young people. They do, however, place considerable emphasis on their children's school attendance. For these parents, the kind of learning that occurs in school is primarily the consequence of a physical presence in the school and among *kowori* teachers. The assumption is that if young people attend the classes they will somehow automatically learn the *kowori* skills and knowledge that elders see themselves as lacking.¹³

It emerged in my discussions with parents that, in their view, if children attend classes and fail to learn, it is clearly because the teachers are in some way failing to demonstrate the abilities and knowledge expected of them. This is because, for them, learning is less about coercive discipline or an abstract process of acquiring knowledge than it is about learning from the presence of people who demonstrate their knowledge by carrying out specific practices (Bloch 1991). This is much the same way I came to understand Waorani approaches to teaching and learning in the home and in the forest: adults generally teach by example, by demonstrating certain skills and knowledge, whether this is the ability to weave a makeshift basket in which to carry fish home or identifying bird calls or the traces of animals on hunting trips. The assumption is that people, young and old, will learn by being in the presence of others who demonstrate these abilities, rather than being repeatedly instructed and corrected. In this way, processes of learning and cultural transmission should be understood in the context of specific forms of sociality that are not always appreciated or recognized in formal school education.

The conflicts that emerged between Waorani parents and *kowori* teachers at the time of my fieldwork reveal some of the tensions between formal schooling and the mutual implication of knowledge and being in Waorani understandings of learning. One of the major

complaints from parents was that teachers in the village were drinking too much, to the extent that some either missed their lessons or appeared drunk in the presence of students. At one point teachers were also hosting late-night parties in which teenage students joined them in drinking *tiname* (cane liquor). The central concern for parents was not just that the teachers' behaviour would prevent their children learning in school, but that they were learning one of the *kowori* practices that is most despised by elders. While Waorani people value many of the technologies, objects and practices they associate with *kowori*, the consumption of alcohol is one of the key practices by which elders distinguish Waorani from non-Waorani people. As a particularly *kowori* state of being, drunkenness is described in stark contrast to the distinguishing characteristics of the *pikenani*, whose revered knowledge and skill are seen as antithetical to being drunk or 'crazy' (*dowenta bai*). The Waorani were until recently almost unique among indigenous peoples in Ecuador for their lack of alcohol, preferring to drink even their manioc beer (*tepe*) almost entirely unfermented.

It is in this context that Waorani parents and elders raised serious concerns about teachers drinking. They worried that students, rather than learning to read, write and engage in other valued *kowori* ways of knowing by their presence at school, were becoming *kowori bai* (like *kowori* people) as a result of the presence of drunk teachers. Despite their usual deference to the authority of teachers in village affairs, several parents denounced the teachers at a village-wide meeting and successfully petitioned the educational authorities in the regional capital to have one of the teachers dismissed from the school. Waorani understandings of school education, and learning more generally, again illustrate the ways in which knowing and being are mutually implicated. In a context where highly valued new knowledge is sought precisely from people whose moral standing as *kowori* 'others' is constantly in question, it is perhaps no surprise that formal education raises certain problems in Waorani villages. The central question, for my Waorani hosts, appears to be how to become skilled in reading, writing and other abilities without becoming 'like *kowori*'.

Conclusions

Anthropological approaches to ignorance demand much more than the age-old questions about what is known and what is not in a given society. In the context described here, such an approach requires attention to Waorani understandings of learning, the body, and the moral implications of knowledge and being in a changing world. Seen as a form of ‘indigenous knowledge’ or ‘traditional culture’, shamanism is often valued as an important expression of cultural continuity in places like Amazonia. For many Waorani, however, shamans are contentious and dangerous figures who have the potential to carry out assault sorcery by engaging the point of view of predatory jaguar-spirits. In this context, where knowing about shamanism is not entirely separable from being a shaman, ignorance of such practices confers a certain commitment to a fully human perspective on social relations. The idea that rejecting or denying certain forms of knowledge can constitute ‘strategic ignorance’ should be familiar in many if not most of the ethnographic contexts described by anthropologists. The knowledge economies of the modern world, in fact, which are increasingly focused on the creation of strategic gaps in knowledge, could equally be described as ‘ignorance economies’ (Roberts and Armitage 2008). However, an anthropology of ignorance should recognize that ignorance is not just strategic; nor does it necessarily mark a state of social or intellectual deficiency. It is also produced and conceived and acquires meanings in ways that depart significantly from economies of knowledge familiar to the West.

The point is not simply to recognize that different societies have different ‘ignorance economies’, but also to consider how the different kinds of not-knowing found in a given ethnographic context, strategic or otherwise, relate to ontological questions about what a person is. Like the multiple forms of knowledge alluded to by Leach and many scholars since, the different values of ignorance may appear contradictory. In the brief examples presented here, Waorani claims to ignorance about shamanism confer one’s place within indigenous

understandings of personhood, while at the same time and in the same place indigenous concerns about bodily ignorance raise the spectre that certain young people may be becoming deficient, to the extent that they are sometimes compared to *kowori*. Even in situations where people lament the absence of knowledge, questions of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ prove inseparable and are closely linked to bodily experience. By locating ignorance at the interface of indigenous understandings of knowledge and being, it has been the aim of this chapter to illustrate how we might come to understand the ways in which not-knowing is valued, lamented and contested in social life. At the very least, ethnographies of ignorance should make us ask what ‘indigenous knowledge’ means to so-called ‘natives’ and what its absence implies for their own ways of being.

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Notes

¹ Viveiros de Castro describes how this 'multiculturalist' cosmology is but one way of thinking about difference. His formulation of Amerindian perspectivism, for example, describes a 'multinaturalist' cosmology that, in contrast to Western cosmology, supposes 'a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity' where 'culture or the subject would be the form of the universal, whilst nature or the object would be the form of the particular' (1998: 470).

² These attacks, referred to in this chapter as 'sorcery' or 'witchcraft', are sometimes described by Waorani using the Spanish word *brujería*, meaning 'witchcraft'.

³ It is also worth noting that, since the 1970s, many Waorani have intermarried with Quichua-speaking indigenous people, who are known for their powerful shamans in Amazonian Ecuador and elsewhere in the Upper Amazon (Reeve and High 2012). In most cases these Quichua spouses move to a Waorani village after marriage.

⁴ While the missionaries were affiliated with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), one of the women who established the Tiweno mission remained among the Waorani until her death in 1994.

⁵ See Londono Sulkin (2005) for another Amazonian example of how immoral behaviour is attributed to nonhuman perspectives.

⁶ Waorani use the Spanish word *comunidad* to describe their villages and to convey a sense of mutual participation in periodic collective activities, many of which are closely related to a local school. In contrast to the sense of collective unity by which many outsiders imagine 'indigenous communities', there remains a high degree of autonomy among households and clusters of closely related households in large Waorani villages.

⁷ In part as a result of the decrease in revenge-killings and the growth of large families in villages since mission settlement, the current Waorani population is estimated to be around 2,500.

⁸ These 'uncontacted' groups are the subject of considerable interest and debate among the Waorani and in Ecuador more generally. Waorani people until recently described all people living in voluntary isolation in their territory as Tagaeri, in reference to the man Tagae who fled deep into the forest with his followers after refusing mission settlement. Today these groups are more often described as Taromenani, a group of mysterious origins who apparently decimated and possibly incorporated the remaining Tagaeri in recent years. Some Waorani have been involved in ongoing violent conflicts with these 'uncontacted' people since the

1980s, culminating in a large-scale attack on an isolated longhouse in 2003 (Cabodevilla 2004; Cabodevilla and Berraonda 2005).

⁹ This is part of a wider Waorani emphasis on individual autonomy evident in many aspects of social and political life (High 2007).

¹⁰ This notion of bodily knowledge appears to have at least some historical depth among the Waorani and elsewhere in Amazonia. For example, according to the account of an early evangelical missionary who met Waorani people in the 1950s, one of the first Waorani men he brought to a large Ecuadorian town asked to be beaten by a tractor driver so that he would acquire the ability to use the machinery in his home village (Wallis 1960: 256).

¹¹ Fisher (2001: 122) describes another Amazonian example of how, in indigenous understanding, social qualities are created through ‘bodily states’.

¹² Rival (2002: 162) makes a similar observation regarding Waorani views on dietary changes leading to ‘soft’ bodies.

¹³ In recent years a number of Waorani women and men have become teachers in their own communities. It remains to be seen how this will affect Waorani understandings of the role of schools in their villages.