

Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 2

June 2009

Becoming a Real Woman: Alterity and the Embodiment of Cashinahua Gendered Identity

Cecilia McCallum

Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McCallum, Cecilia (2009). "Becoming a Real Woman: Alterity and the Embodiment of Cashinahua Gendered Identity," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol7/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

Becoming a Real Woman: Alterity and the Embodiment of Cashinahua Gendered Identity

CECILIA McCALLUM
Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador
Cecilia.mccallum@uol.com.br

Yes, you can come and stay with us,' replied Pancho, leader of the Cashinahua village at Recreio, on the alto Purus river; 'We need a friend,' he added. Five minutes earlier I had stepped off the air taxi from Rio Branco, capital of Acre state in Brazilian Amazonia, onto the grass runway at the centre of Sena Madureira. Two boys had carried my bags as we walked to the church overlooking the airstrip. 'Are you going to work with the Indians?' they asked, adding 'only women work with Indians'¹. At the church door, I found Padre Paulino, the padre who presided over this vast Amazonian parish and acted as 'friend' to indigenous people, offering them what help he could with limited resources. I had phoned him a week earlier and briefly explained my wish to visit the upper Purus indigenous area and to begin research for a doctoral thesis. 'Come at once!' he replied, 'Pancho is in town with some relatives. I will introduce you'.

Within minutes of our encounter, Pancho baptised me with a real name (*kena kuin*). 'You will address me as *Chaitan*,' he explained. 'It means "Cousin"'. Knowing the significance of this naming, I hardly dared to believe my luck. Through the real name, I had acquired a 'kin relation' with every Cashinahua (nearly 3,000 people at that time, in January 1984). Learning a newcomer's real name, one knows the category of kin to which s/he belongs. A limited stock of such names are integrated into an eight group alternative generation namesake system, divided between Inu and Dua moieties. They are bestowed according to a principle of 'parallel transmission'. Thus, a girl inherits her name from a woman in the category of maternal grandmother, and a boy from a man in the category of paternal grandfather. Marriage practices, fundamental to the reproduction of the system, are compatible with the Kariera-type kinship terminology, and are moiety exogamous. Offspring of marriages between bilateral cross-cousins inherit names in the correct categories and Cashinahua actively encourage such 'correct' marriages (Kensinger 1984; D'Ans nd; McCallum 2001:21-

7). By addressing Pancho as *Chaitan*, I would speak from the position of a marriageable cross-cousin. Addressing me as *Xanun* in return, he would place me precisely in the constellation of his kin, as a potential marriage partner.

Having read Ken Kensinger's pioneering discussion of these matters, I was aware of the general significance of my new, 'real' name. But I understood little about my own future position among Pancho's people, summed up for him in my putative status as 'friend' to his people. I was to be a friend—*amiga* (Portuguese) or *haibu* (Cashinahua), a condition that my real name made possible². As the months in the field passed I learnt more about both categories; and as subsequent years went by, I began to unravel the implications of the relationship between them, with respect to my gender and to my foreignness. In this paper I explore the complex relationship between alterity and gender in Cashinahua thinking and practice, from the perspective of my own experiences.

To acquire a real name makes possible a transformation from *Nawa* (Outsider) to *Ainbu Kuin* (Real Woman) and thus *Huni Kuin*, the Cashinahua's self-denomination, which signifies 'Real Person' and may also be translated as 'Real Man' (McCallum 2001). Only a few Nawa are thus baptized and only those who are not involved in an exploitative relationship as boss or trader³. The state of proper personhood is made possible through allocation to the particular category of kin implied by the name. Transformation from outsider to Real Woman or Real Man may only be completed (temporarily) in the case of children born into a kin group. Like the Huaorani 'guest child', the newborn's humanity is created through collaborative work between the couple (as well as other kin); it is not pre-established in the womb (Rival 1998). A small child gradually accrues personhood in gendered form in an on-going process that is dependent on constant hard work, both on the part of the individual concerned and those in relationships with her. The gendered person, like the community itself, is mutable, composed of both internal and external elements that are integrated in a precarious and evolving balance. Engaging in the productive, consumptive and reproductive activities constitutive of sociality, people embody the gendered force and knowledge that makes social life possible. Kinship is constituted as embodied memory (Gow 1991). Blood, the body fluid through which memory and thought circulate, sustains and integrates this process of social regeneration (Belaunde 2005).

Outsiders may also be submitted to these learning processes,

embodying knowledge and thus gender over time through taking part in day-to-day productive activities and social interactions⁴. However, such a transformation into kin is never complete: Some differences always remain.

As this article explores, there is a close relationship between a kinsman- or kinswoman-in-the-making and a *haibu* (friend). There are no formal institutions associated with the category *haibu*, to my knowledge. A *haibu* relation implies well-meaning intentions and a history of mutual help between people who are often already related by kin ties and through the naming system. Although I did not ask specifically about the matter, my ethnography shows that Nawa who demonstrate a friendly attitude and who actively support Cashinahua causes, culture and people are potential friends. Since being capacitated to become a proper person is a necessary pre-condition for proper social engagement, these Nawa proto-friends are endowed with a true name. This enables her or him to enter into the path of becoming a proper man or woman, progressively transformed, in a material sense, through heard and embodied words, corporeal experiences and the ingestion of *piti kuin* (real food). Therefore becoming kin and becoming a friend are enmeshed but distinct processes.

Nawa proto-friends may or may not enter into sexual relations with Huni Kuin and this possibility is inflected by gender. In earlier discussions of alterity and gender, I focused on the constantly present sexual dimension of relationships between Huni Kuin and Nawa (McCallum 1997; 2001), which I experienced soon after I arrived in Recreio. Over the months that followed receiving a name, by taking part in day-to-day life, I learnt how to correctly address the different categories of kin and affinal kin that I had acquired. So I was taught how to exchange sexually charged banter with my male-cross cousins. My sister, mother or sister-in-law would whisper in my ear ‘Tell him “Chaitan! Go kill a deer, I am hungry for meat!”’. My *chaita* would reply ‘We’ll go together! There will be so much meat, I will need you to carry it back’. The innuendo—that we would have sex in the forest – led to the riposte ‘I won’t go, you are *yupa* (a bad hunter)’ which implied that my *chaita* was impotent as well as unlucky in the hunt. It never failed to draw laughter from bystanders.

I often observed men flirt with their own wives and marriageable cousins in this way and in fact sexual joking flavours Cashinahua living⁵. It is essential to the generation of high spirits on festive occasions, such as the Kachanawa fertility rituals. At the start of this ritual cycle men dance (*nawa-*) around a *kacha*, a hollowed out tree trunk above which tubers and bananas may be suspended, in a clear allusion to a uterus and male genitals. Women shout insults into the ears of potential or actual sexual partners, such as “Your penis is like a tortoise neck”. Later, when the women dance,

their husbands, lovers and potential spouses chant “*Kaxin, Kaxin* (vampire bat)”, a pejorative allusion to women’s vaginas, and other such insults⁶.

Joking and sexually spiced humour is part of any interaction between *chais* (brothers-in-law) and it is a key component of male-male interaction during encounters between Cashinahua men and male Nawa friends.



The *kacha* during a *Kachanawa* in Recreio, 1984. Photo © Cecilia McCallum

This sexual dimension of affinity is less marked among female affines. Women do joke with their *tsabe* (female cross-cousins / sisters-in-law) but not in the same degree as men with their *chais*. I do not remember being instigated to joke in the same way with my *tsabe* as with my *chaita*. My relationships with *tsabe* were little different in kind to those with my sisters, with whom, however, I spent more time on a day-to-day basis. This circumstance arose from the arrangements Pancho made on my arrival in Recreio. I was to sleep in his house and spend my days with his two wives, sisters who promptly included me in their household as female kin. Anisa, the younger, immediately began to address me as *chipi* (elder sister), whilst Luisa, the elder, used my moiety appellation or addressed me as *ichu* (younger sister).

My relationships with the Huni Kun were not typical of their relationships with other Nawa female ‘friends’. I was the only non-Cashinahua woman to be addressed according to the relation between the speaker’s *kena kuin* and mine, plus age differences. This was a direct

consequence of my interest in acquiring fluency in the language. During the early 1980s, to my knowledge I was the only Nawa in Brazil who spoke or understood Cashinahua⁷. My inclusion in the kin address system expressed recognition that I was a student of Cashinahua culture and language. It was not a necessary aspect of status as a friend. In fact, other Nawa considered 'friends', such as the activists in the pro-indian organisations, did not speak Cashinahua.

In the past, however, one Brazilian 'friend', Felizardo Cerqueira, was reported to have readily understood spoken Cashinahua and other Panoan languages (Iglesias 2008). During the first half of the twentieth century Acreanos knew him as a pacifier of indians. Cerqueira was both a boss to and sponsor of the Jordão Cashinahua. They identify him as their saviour and 'father' because once they were 'pacified', he shielded them from extermination, the policy advocated by most rubber bosses at the time. Cerqueira also became an affine. For some years he had a Cashinahua wife, Raimundinha, as well as a harem of captured Yaminahua women and girls (Iglesias 2008).

The records do not say how 'his' Cashinahua addressed Cerqueira, but Nawa men may be addressed and treated as *chai*, a term that carries with it the weight of potential affinity (Viveiros de Castro 1993) and also implies that the person so addressed is an actual or potential friend. Such Nawa *chai* are encouraged to engage in jocose and sexually flavoured exchanges with their male interlocutors. Only those few foreigners who give support to the Cashinahua and show interest in their culture—anthropologists or activists in the pro-indian organisations—are thus addressed. Though they are not expected to learn to speak Cashinahua, such friends are expected to eat real food when visiting. Usually, rubber bosses, tappers, ranchers, traders and most other Nawa are neither classified as friends nor addressed as *chai*.

The potential affinity implied in the use of *chai* as a term of address is virtually never realized in relations with contemporary Nawa, even those that are given real names and are classified as 'friends'. The Huni Kuin are largely endogamous. There is a clear sense in which the potential for real affinity through actual sexual relations and marriage is suppressed. Only in exceptional cases such as Cerqueira's have such unions taken place⁸. I did record a few marriages between traders or rubber tappers and Cashinahua women but they lasted no more than a few years. Probably more common in the past, marriage between Cashinahua women and Nawa men has diminished as the former's demographic and political autonomy has strengthened⁹.

Thus the sexualization of Nawa-Huni Kuin relations is largely confined

to a discursive realm. The sexual dimension of dialogic exchanges between Nawa and Huni Kuin expresses and enacts the affinization of inter-ethnic relations. From the perspective of lived kinship and the creation and maintenance of sociality, such affinization opens the possibility that categorical affines may become actual kin to Cashinahua over time. Viewed as part of an ongoing process, the sexual dimension of interaction constitutes difference as something that may eventually be overcome. For this to take place, the incorporated or in-married person must take part in mundane social activities amongst Huni Kuin, necessitating co-residence over a long period. Since this is not an aspect of most marriages between Nawa men and Huni Kuin women, there are strong pressures against their taking place and in favour of continued endogamy.

Ordinarily, marriage entails a vigorous insertion into reproductive and productive processes. Unmarried teenagers 'help' (*dabe-*) their elder kin but a new spouse is expected to act as an increasingly autonomous adult. As noted, the Cashinahua encourage moiety exogamous marriage, preferably between actual cross-cousins. Ideally, such unions are settlement endogamous, since cross-sex siblings prefer to live near to each other all their lives (Kensing 1995). Bonds between affines strengthen over the years as children marry their cousins and grand-parents take on responsibilities for their namesakes. Post-marital residence is uxorilocal. A bridegroom moves to his mother-in-law's house and works for her and his father-in-law over the coming years. Inter-ethnic marriages are exceptions and potentially disruptive in every sense. They not only go against the preference for marriage between cross-cousins, but also usually entail that a woman or man move away from kin and cease to take part in the productive cycle.

Thus there are good reasons that discursively enhanced affinity between Cashinahua men and Nawa *chai* usually remains just that—merely discursive and not enacted in practice. One manifestation of the limit placed on the potential for sexual exchange across Huni Kuin / Nawa lines is the linguistic convention for dialogue between sexes. Cross-sex terms of address 'consanguinize' relationships between strangers initially—thus a man should call a strange woman 'Sister' (until they discover their true names, if any). Women should leave direct interaction with Nawa to men, ignoring them initially, perhaps serving food to them eventually, as part of the process of 'familiarization' and conversion into potential kin¹⁰. Even when they do know Portuguese, women usually refuse to speak it. Men have no qualms about using the Nawa language. This division of labour, whereby men are responsible for direct contact with the outside and with outsiders and women for transforming external products and people for internal consumption, underlies the central place of gender in



Dancing *Kachanawa* in Recreio, 1984. Photo © Cecília McCallum



Paulo Lopes chasing women with fire during a *Kachanawa* in Recreio, 1984.
Photo © Cecília McCallum

the constitution of sociality, a topic I have explored extensively elsewhere¹¹.

During the 1980s, pro-indian activists (both men and women) adopted '*chai*' as a mode of address to all indigenous peoples in Acre, erroneously translating the term as 'amigo'. Some male leaders and young men recruited as teachers or 'health agents' began to adopt a new style of sexualised interaction with Nawa, drawing upon Brazilian sexual idioms and gender concepts in dialogues among themselves and with Nawa women (McCallum 1997). Sexual exchanges and some love affairs occurred across ethnic boundaries, between female activists and Cashinahua men. According to diverse sources, indigenous men sometimes visited city brothels¹². However, such sexual relations did not have significant reproductive consequences and both groups remained mainly endogamous¹³.

In my case, becoming a *xanu* to several hundred men initiated a two-year period of celibacy. It seemed to me at the time that any sexual involvement with Cashinahua men would put my work in peril, complicating relationships in unforeseen ways. Those who knew me best—Pancho and his family—took this abstinence for granted and never questioned it. However, I was called upon to joke with those men classified as cross-cousins often. As I have described, my female kin and affines instigated this behaviour. At first I was incited to repeat utterances that I did not comprehend. A group of women would listen approvingly as one amongst them urged me to call after a passing man, whispering insulting or provocative words in my ear for me to repeat out loud. The group would reel with laughter when I did so, making the passer-by either joke back or, ignoring us, hurry on. But those who did not know me so well sometimes jumped to conclusions about my sexual habits. By the time I visited Conta, a Cashinahua settlement on the Peruvian alto Purus, in 1985, I was practised at this form of humour. Perhaps this skill contributed to a rumour that circulated about my stay there, to the effect that I was in the habit of surreptitiously visiting single men in their hammocks at night¹⁴.

Sexual banter, or rather the laughter it inspired, probably served to lighten the burden of suffering borne by my hosts during those years. I have written little about the more sombre aspects of life in the alto Purus indigenous area (AIAP). Rereading my field-notes, the frequent episodes of illness and the too many deaths I recorded leap from the page. The difficult health situation was part of the rationale about the necessity of a friend such as myself. In fact, my first days with the Cashinahua, in Sena Madureira and during the subsequent journey to Recreio, provided a lesson in the importance of Nawa medicine to them. Pancho's mission in the town was two-fold. His first task was to acquire supplies for the village

cooperative. I was able to help him with this, not only by paying for half the costs of the trip upriver, but also by ‘lending’ him money to buy goods and consumables. A year later, he confessed that the moment also served as a test of my worth as a ‘friend’. If I had refused the request of a loan (we both knew it would be unlikely that the cooperative could pay it back), then he would not have taken me with him upriver. The second purpose of the visit to the town was for healthcare. Pancho came to fetch Ana, his mortally ill ‘sister’, a patient in the town’s small ‘hospital’, as well as his sickening father-in-law, Sampaio, who had been seeking treatment. Elias, his ‘brother’, who had stomach pains, also sought medical help. None of them had been successful in the search for a cure and by the time I arrived the plan was to take them all back home, even though their condition was unchanged or had worsened.

We set off upriver on a boat carrying freight, our hammocks slung above the boxes of merchandise, the village canoe in tow. Ana, the sick woman, lay in the canoe, in a hammock, cared for by her son Abel. During the journey, Pancho and Sampaio taught me their own true names and the kin terms I should use to address them. ‘When you arrive in Recreio,’ Pancho continued, ‘Call Luisa, my wife, *Chipin*, “Elder Sister”. Call Anisa, my other wife, *Ichun*, “Younger Sister”’. Sampaio concluded ‘Ask them *nane hayamen?* Is there any genipa?’ If there was, I should request to be painted.

After six days in tow we arrived at Manuel Urbano. From there we set off in the canoe, powered by an outboard motor, arriving four days later at the small village of Recreio, population then less than 150¹⁵.

Here my new sisters greeted me. Pancho introduced me at a village meeting, describing me as a pupil of Cashinahua language and customs, a potential teacher, and a ‘friend’. Over the next few months my sisters began the painstaking task of tutoring me in being a ‘real woman’. This apprenticeship was based on observation and practice: I went with them to the gardens, seeded cotton, held babies, made fires, stirred pans and tried my hand at innumerable day-to-day tasks. I sat with Luisa and observed her cook or weave and attend to her children. As the eldest, she was in charge of my progress. She was kindly and calm, though she often seemed tired. It began to appear that she was pregnant. Until the end of my fieldwork I remained a part of this household, helping in daily chores and eating there, even after I moved to my own specially built house some twenty metres away.

Pancho departed in mid-March for Rio Branco, where he was to attend a political meeting and then, funded by an NGO, journey to Brasilia with other indigenous leaders. They were to pressure the federal government to

demarcate their land, under threat from a planned road. To my surprise, Pancho designated me as the person in charge of the village co-op. I was to stand in for him, behind the counter. (Luckily its shelves were bare). But



The trip upriver: a lunch-break on the alto Purus, 1984. Abel in foreground, Elias in back. Photo © Cecilia McCallum



Cecilia McCallum pretending to be a 'real woman' cooking a harpy eagle. Recreio, 1984. Photo © Cecilia McCallum

barely a week had passed after his departure, when the villagers demanded my services as 'friend' in another context. It had become clear that Luisa was seriously ill, and required Nawa medical attention. I was asked to go by canoe two hours upriver to Fronteira, another Cashinahua village, in order to radio FUNAI (the National Indian Foundation) for a plane to fetch her and several other ill people. However, we discovered on arrival in Fronteira that the radio did not work. If the FUNAI agent had left gasoline for the generator, this had already been used. That night, on our return to Recreio, the villagers decided that I should journey downriver on the morrow, taking Luisa and another sick woman to Manuel Urbano, where I would be in charge of organising a plane to take her to Rio Branco. I objected to this plan, worried that my role as 'friend' was going too far, but my hosts insisted. So we set out the next day, in a canoe piloted by several men.

Manuel Urbano, population perhaps two thousand, consisted of a grass airstrip, a brick-paved street leading down to the river, lined with some general stores, some houses or shacks, a bank and a brand new town hall. On five other streets there were shacks housing displaced rubber tappers and a few public buildings—the police headquarters, a Baptist church, a Catholic chapel. The place's central lifeline, the port, consisted of a muddy shore along which a few boats and canoes were always moored and where rubber, agricultural produce and merchandise were off-loaded. Four nuns, the Josephine Sisters, provided the main source of support for indigenous people in this small urban centre. They also held prayer meetings for the inhabitants, taught literacy classes, tried to set up community associations and gave some medical assistance. During our visit they were busy in the rice harvest, supplementing their own stock of food. They offered us a place to stay and shared their meagre rations with us.

During the next two days I accompanied the sick women on a doctor's consultation, confirming Luisa's need for hospital treatment. I spoke by radio with FUNAI in Rio Branco, thus organising the plane. She was flown off on the third day, eventually being taken to the hospital in Manaus.

The mayor helped us in this endeavour. The Cashinahua looked to him as the main power in Manuel Urbano. One of my companions made him a gift of a chicken. He was courteous towards them and provided us all with juice or coffee every time we passed by his office. But I was his main interest and he regarded me as the leader of our party. Like the boys in Sena Madureira, the mayor regarded me as 'the woman who teaches the indians' or the 'moça da FUNAI' (FUNAI girl), a label I heard repeatedly, despite my attempts to explain who I was. Thus this new context altered my overt relationship with the Cashinahua. No matter how hard I tried

to avoid the role, I was the spokesperson for our group. The young men who piloted the canoe actively collaborated in the re-categorization from incipient *ainbu kuin* to a special category of *nawa*. Everyone walked behind me in public places. If I spoke in Cashinahua to one of them, they would not reply, although they spoke this language amongst themselves.

My Cashinahua companions showed extreme suspicion towards the Nawa of Manuel Urbano—on good grounds, as I was to discover. On a later visit there, I witnessed a shopkeeper offering to pay half the market price for Cashinahua pork, on the grounds that it was Indian-produced meat¹⁶. Several unpleasant incidents occurred on this first visit. A shopkeeper began to tell me that Indians are ‘like children, like animals,’ he said, ‘but they learn and they are very obedient’, he added, referring to my supposed civilizing mission amongst them. I beat a hasty retreat, following my Cashinahua retainers, who had left his premises immediately and without a word.

On the third day, after the plane took off bearing Luisa to the hospital in Rio Branco, the young men and I returned to Recreio. On the trip upriver, as night approached and we sought a place to sling our hammocks, they insisted that I should climb the river-banks and approach the houses of Nawa settlers to request accommodation. Without a male leader among us, I remained the spokesperson.

I never saw Luisa again. The doctors in Rio Branco had her transferred to a hospital in Manaus, where they could do nothing for her. Three months later FUNAI returned her to Recreio. She died, aged about 30, within a week, from ‘barriga d’agua’¹⁷.

Death is a constant presence in Cashinahua life, but that year was particularly hard on the villagers. On the very day we arrived back from Manuel Urbano, we walked in upon a wake. The body of Abel’s teenage brother-in-law was laid out, victim of sudden dysentery. I cannot find any record of this event in my fieldnotes, except the date of his death, perhaps because I was too shocked to write about it. (I had recently spent a pleasant day hunting and gathering in his and his family’s company). A month later, Abel’s mother Ana died after her long illness (probably cancer). In this case, I recorded the funerary proceedings in some detail (McCallum 1996, 1999).

The morning after Ana was buried, a baby was stillborn. The corpse was laid out for all to see, before being given a simple burial. Shortly afterwards I was called to see the mother, Maria Antonia, who was suffering from a post-partum haemorrhage. ‘You must give her this injection!’ her father stated. He handed me a flask of *Benzetacil* (a form of penicillin) and a syringe. Hands trembling, following the guidelines in my dog-eared copy



Luisa toasting corn in her kitchen, Recreio 1984. Photo © Cecília McCallum

of 'Where There Are No Doctors', I tried to comply, reckoning that an antibiotic would help avoid postnatal infection. But my skills at nursing were so obviously lacking, that Maria Antonia's father snatched the syringe away from me and gave her the shot himself¹⁸. Happily she survived.

Other deaths followed that year in Recreio. Sampaio (who was Anisa's father) passed away a month after his 'daughter' Luisa. Several people came down with a virulent form of dysentery and one child succumbed. Similar mortality afflicted the neighbouring village of Fronteira, where the FUNAI nurse was unable to save several patients. Later that year she left, never to return, leaving me as the only Nawa immediately available to help the people of the AIAP, until my departure for the Jordão indigenous area in July 1985. I encountered a similar precarious health situation there. Indeed, after two months, the trip ended prematurely when I was asked to take a sick woman to the nearest downriver airstrip and to radio FUNAI for a plane. This time I did not protest, accepting my role as 'friend' and as intermediary with the Nawa.

These and other episodes, where I was called upon to care for the sick and to distribute medicine, punctuated my day-to-day life amongst the Cashinahua. As time passed there were fewer demands for either nursing or pharmaceutical services. My inexperience at the former was clear. As to the latter, I did not keep a stock of medicines, although on each trip I brought some drugs upriver, as did the leaders and visiting pro-indian

activists. These were obtained from CEME, the federal government distribution programme, or occasionally through Padre Paulino from a Catholic charity. The flasks and cartons of vermicides, antibiotics, cough medicines and scabies lotion went directly to the coop, where Pancho took



The day of the dead, November 1984 in Recreio.
Photo © Cecilia McCallum



Zé Augusto mourning his daughter Luisa, November, 1984.
Photo © Cecilia McCallum

charge of ministering and distributing them.

Whether as a health-worker, a potential coop administrator, or a spokesperson for Cashinahua on trips along the river and to the city, my tasks as 'friend' replicated in some aspects those of male leader. My agency and productive capacity as a foreigner included obtaining scarce goods and medicines from outside the community, ensuring that needy people had access to services in the city, and putting to use my language skills and my prestige to secure hospitality from the Nawa. Pancho and other male leaders encouraged or insisted that I adopt such roles, but they also knew that I could pose a political threat to them. By giving me the keys to the coop building, Pancho recruited me as an ally and a supposed substitute. But his long absences on political and other business also gave me the space to make friends with other families and to develop close relationships with other informants. Eventually, towards the end of my stay at Recreio, a group of disgruntled young men approached me asking for help in disrupting Pancho's virtually exclusive access to wealth and knowledge from the Nawa in the cities. I was to take a letter to the pro-indian activists, describing their dissatisfaction with his often high-handed behaviour. They also asked me to support their claims with my own testimony.

My outsider skills also had a female-gendered inflection. It was decreed that I should teach the unmarried girls the basic skills of reading and writing. Pancho explained that they could not study with the newly appointed male teacher, because it would probably stimulate flirtations and sexual interactions. Thus I acquired three unruly teenage pupils, among them, the deceased Luisa's eldest daughter, Emerinda. They took their lessons in my small house, built for me at the centre of the lower area of the village, about thirty metres from Anisa's and Pancho's house, where I mainly took my meals.

During our afternoon sessions, I tried to persuade my pupils to take the matter seriously, largely unsuccessfully. The teenagers saw little point in learning to write, a skill that is known as *Nawan kene* – 'Foreigner's design'. They spent their days occupied with women's work, developing and honing their skills. In the mornings I sometimes accompanied them and their female relatives in their tasks, part of the ongoing process of becoming an *ainbu kuin*. From the teenager's perspective I barely made the grade of a five-year old girl. They delighted in laughing at manifestations of ineptitude, but also willingly showed me how to toast and grind corn, or pick and spin cotton, or hiss and rock a baby to sleep. In the late afternoons they bathed and put on clean dresses, decorating their faces with a few simple motifs, strokes and swirls of red urucum (or of lipstick)¹⁹. Thus beautified, unmarried girls were said to delight in flirting and in seducing



Afternoon literacy classes for girls in the anthropologist's house, Recreio, 1985.

Photo © Cecilia McCallum

men. Sometimes they painted my face as well. '*Nun bai kai?*'—'We are going visiting!' they would say. At this time of day, the cleared ground between houses sometimes resembled the main square of a Spanish small town on a Sunday. I would join the villagers in walking at leisure about the village, dropping by on neighbours or just exchanging small talk with other strollers.

Over the months I fitted in as best I could to the day-to-day activities constitutive of sociality. Food—getting it, preparing it, serving it (and to whom)—was the main focus of our days. I managed to fit in to the dense flux of food related activities through a number of strategies, at all stages of the socio-economic cycle, from production to making others consume. During the first months, when Pancho was away in the city I found myself living with his younger wife Anisa, her children and her co-wife Luisa's children. As a member of this household, I received a share of the garden produce that she fetched and cooked and the meat or fish that she received as gifts from kin, supplemented by occasional female fishing expeditions in small streams near the village. I learnt the unspoken rules of food distribution within the household and recorded the flows of prestations of cooked and uncooked food. I contributed the remains of my own store-bought supplies to Anisa's household, cooking porridge oats for the hungry children, and sharing the few gifts of food that I received. Participating in semi-ceremonial female expeditions to the gardens and

to other Cashinahua settlements I also learnt to fetch, prepare and cook my own food. In this way, on occasion I was able to take a plate of cooked manioc or plantain with me, when called to someone's house for a meal²⁰. Nevertheless, these were months of hunger for all of us.

Six months later, though living in my own house, I continued to eat at Anisa's and Pancho's. After the latter's return, the quality and quantity of meals improved. But in the interim I had established closer ties with a number of key informants and developed a better understanding of food production and distribution. Rather than spending long hours in the gardens and in cooking, I would buy a sack of *farinha* (manioc flour), scooping out a plateful as my contribution to communal meals to which I was invited. When I received visitors, usually I could serve them a plate of manioc flour, accompanied by some bananas, or peanuts. Thus I could play the part of the generous hostess, even if only minimally. The condition of being generous—*duapa*—is key to becoming a Real Person. A generous person fortifies other people's bodies, their memories of being cared for, and sociality in general.

In addition, each time I returned from downriver trips to Rio Branco, I made gifts to the villagers. Knowing that a general gift to the 'community' would be construed as a gift to Pancho, and be the source of tension and criticism, I learnt to make individual presents: small glass beads, cloth, fish-hooks, shot, gunpowder, caps, pans, knives, machetes, or other items. Armed with a detailed list, I separately wrapped and labelled each person's present before I left town. Each gift had to be made surreptitiously, so that others would not demand a share. I learnt to make gifts of ammunition to key male informants—especially those known as excellent hunters. This contributed to an increase in the number of invitations to share meals I received (such that my weight and health improved in the latter half of my stay in Recreio).

I do not think that the increase in the number of invitations to eat in other people's houses I received was only due to my canny gift-giving strategy, however. My hosts commented on my own progress in speaking Cashinahua, in addressing my Huni Kuin kin correctly and in other aspects of learning to be a Real Woman. In particular they approved of my investment in spinning cotton and learning to weave 'with design' (*keneya*). At the same time, my appearance altered gradually. I became chubbier, my skin tanned, my hair grew longer and I abandoned cotton trousers and long-sleeved shirts (protection against the myriads of mosquitoes, sandflies and horse flies) wearing skirts and sleeveless T-shirts, or dresses sewn by Cashinahua seamstresses. I wore the characteristic white and sky-blue bead bracelets, which Anisa threaded and fastened on my arms. When I

sat, washed clothes, bathed, carried loads, rocked babies and performed culinary tasks, my body movements began to resemble those of the women with whom I spent so much time. I never imagined that I would come to look like a Cashinahua woman, yet I had the feeling that I had acquired some of their style and aesthetic.

If I became more adept at ‘caring for others’, partly as a strategy to widen my network of relationships and my own quality of life in the village, through my gifts of powder and shot, machetes, or cooking pans, I also empowered my friends (even if only slightly) to better care for me. The emotional aspects of such mutuality can go deep, as Conklin (2001) describes so eloquently in her discussion of the intertwining of her experiences with those of her Wari’ friends. On several occasions when I returned to Recreio after Luisa’s death, I was subject to a ‘welcome of tears’. Her father, Zé Augusto, began to cry ritually, chanting ‘*En bake buai*’ (‘My child is arriving’), provoking a similar desire to weep on my part. ‘He remembers Deceased Luisa when he sees you’, his son explained to me, grinning. My part in her last months marked our memories, our emotions, and thus our bodies.

Throughout my time in Recreio, I grew accustomed to being addressed by kin terms or, when spoken to by elders, by the moiety appellation ‘Inanin’. In my last months there, during village meetings I was sometimes referred to as *Nukun Nawa* (Our Foreigner), a designation that I took as friendly and perhaps even affectionate. The expression captured the inalienability of my condition as foreigner. But through the conditioning pronoun *nukun* it also emphasized the multiple processes of incorporation into the Huni Kuin social domain to which I had been subject and with which I had tried to collaborate.

It is clear that an outsider or Nawa is not understood as simply the embodiment of an anti-social alterity. Rather, on first contact, Nawas are living riddles, ambiguity in proto-human form. In the process of decipherment they are treated as beings with whom one might establish and maintain a social relationship based on multiple styles of reciprocity—of goods, words, services, emotions, knowledge and so on. Some Nawa—the majority—are immediately perceived to embody latent or overt hostility and to belong to an anti-social domain. One can place the unfriendly, exploitative and patronizing Nawa we encountered in Manuel Urbano in this category. Such beings do not qualify as potential ‘friends’. If they visit a village, women ignore them, as if invisible. ‘There is no point offering them food,’ they explained to me—‘They won’t eat it.’ Such visitors wander around the village, looking at people performing daily tasks. The hope is that they will finish their business rapidly and depart.

It is up to the Cashinahua who interact with those Nawa whom they consider potential friends to give direction to the relationship, working against the negative components of their inherent ambiguity. For this purpose they have available two possible models of domestication: As affinal or as consanguineal kin. As I described above, gender difference guides the form of address initially adopted. First, Nawa are classified as either *ainbu* (woman) or *huni* (man), whether hostile or friendly. On initial contact, female strangers are addressed as sisters, males as brothers-in-law. Yet as is clear from my own story, once a proto-human is judged capable of personhood, the next step in the process is to place him or her in the closed field of potential human relationships. It seems that this placing through bestowal of a real name usually privileges affinal relationships; that is, the person who bestows a name chooses one from the spectrum of same-generation affinal kin, as Pancho did in my case, thus over-riding the concept that a female gendered foreigner necessarily belongs to a category of unmarriageable kin.

In the widest sense, I became 'Our Foreigner' as someone who was partially incorporated into a social domain defined by consanguineal kinship. Much of my behaviour could be interpreted as that of a generous 'older sister', or in the case of my *chaitans*' children (including Luisa's and Anisa's kids, and my teenage pupils), as that of a 'mother'. However, it is also clear that the overt, linguistically expressed, sexual aspect of my relationship with my *chaitans* was important to my hosts. Given that words have material power to alter the bodies and moral attitudes of those who hear them, sexual banter gave physical content to otherwise chaste relationships. Thus, there was a constant tension between the enactment of what may be described as 'affinity-producing behaviours', such as sexual banter, and the enactment of the 'consanguinity-producing behaviours' that contributed to the process of making kin, such as caring for others and being cared for.

In conclusion, viewed through the focus on day-to-day interactions and lived experience, two points stand out: Firstly, like identity, alterity is not an absolute condition, but a field of potentialities for transformation. Some aspects of alterity should be preserved in the interests of drawing upon Nawa powers, albeit domesticated. One may read the young men's refusal to respond to me in Cashinahua on the streets of Manuel Urbano as a way to maintain my position as an outsider with power to summon a FUNAI plane or call upon the mayor for support. In that context it was important to deny that I was in an incipient sense part of the Huni Kuin social world. Secondly, gender in this context should be read as both a symbolic marker delineating the potential for creating specific

relationships, and as an unfinished project for constituting a particular kind of body. From the point-of-view of the Huni Kuin, a newcomer can be identified as male (*bene*) or female (*yuxan*), in much the same sense as a game animal, but to become a true man or true woman, he or she must engage in the activities that lead to the production of sociality. Ascribed gender informs the possibilities of how to turn a Nawa into ‘Our Nawa’—in other words, to make her or him more human than other Nawa—but does not limit it. Nawa who are identified as hostile or indifferent remain excluded from the acts and social processes that lead to appropriately human, embodied gender. In the case of those Nawa classified as potential friends, ascribed gender does not dictate the forms of interaction and sociability that are possible—rather, it gives direction, style and content to developing relationships. Nawa categorized as ‘friends’ are encouraged to live up to an ideal type of gendered personhood, learning and enacting the multiple activities, sexual and otherwise, that create proper gender. Nonetheless, their condition as ‘Other’ is never completely transformed, nor is this desired. As active participants in the constitution of their own being, such Nawa determine in some measure the extent and nature of their becoming Huni Kuin, or, in other words, how far their gendering goes.

NOTES

Acknowledgements. This article was first presented as a paper at the session on “Experiencing Gender in Amazonia: Fieldwork, Emplacement and Social Roles in Indigenous Communities”, 105th AAA Annual Meeting, between 15–19 November, 2006, San José, CA. It was subsequently presented at the 26th Reunião Brasileira de Antropologia, held in June 2008, in Porto Seguro, Bahia, Brazil, in GT 16: ‘Temas atuais relacionados à questão de gênero entre os povos indígenas’, organised by Vanessa Rosemary Lea and Levi Marques Pereira. I thank participants in both events and especially the organizers. I am also grateful to Laura Rival and anonymous reviewers for their comments leading to the final version. Original fieldwork was funded by the ESRC of Great Britain and later field trips by the Leverhulme and Nuffield Foundations. Needless to say, my greatest debt is to the Huni Kuin.

1. In fact, both men and women worked with indigenous peoples in the region.
2. In the text Cashinahua words are italicized and Portuguese underlined.
3. Speakers of other Panoan languages also attribute a *kena kuin* to their kin. The Cashinahua say that these groups, whom they call ‘Yaminahua’ (a generic category that includes Sharanahua, Yaunawa and others), share the same naming system and accord them a greater degree of personhood than their neighbours and

enemies, the Aruwan speaking Kulina, or the Nawa. Very few of the latter are ever baptized with a *kena kuin*.

4. See Conklin 2001 on becoming kin and memory.

5. See McCallum 2001:60-61 and also Kensinger 1995, *Hardfaced hussies*, p. 67-74.

6. For an extensive discussion of Kachanua, gender and the production of sociality, see McCallum 2001:129-177. On Penis Insulting or Vampire Bat songs, see p. 137.

7. My fluency was never complete but adequate for basic communication and comprehension. On the Peruvian side of the border, more Nawa spoke and studied this language. Among Nawa women who did so one stands out: The SIL missionary Susan Montag compiled a study and a dictionary (Montag 1981).

8. A recent example is the marriage between Terri Aquino, leading anthropologist and pro-indian activist in Acre, and a Jordão Cashinahua woman, during the 1990s. Aquino, who writes *Papo de Índio*, a regular newspaper column available online at <http://www.pagina20.com.br/>, is known as 'Txai Terri'.

9. There are no figures available, but my ethnography and other sources suggest that in rural areas inter-marriage decreased over the twentieth century. During the conquest of Cashinahua territory at the height of the rubber boom and in the following decades (1900s-1960s), some Cashinahua women living in Brazil on the Jordão, Tarauacá and Énvira rivers married Nawa men (Iglesias 2008). There are no available ethnographies of Cashinahua migrants to urban areas, but the sociologist Pirjo Virtanen interviewed a number of young Cashinhua living in Rio Branco in Virtanen 2007 and her study indicates changes in marriage practices for this group (see Virtanen 2007).

10. McCallum 2001 discusses female agency in familiarizing strangers; see also McCallum 1998. On the term 'familiarization' see Viveiros de Castro 1992; Fausto 2001; Viveiros de Castro & Fausto 1993.

11. Cashinahua men engage with outsiders and external domains, such as forest, river and city. Women are associated with the inside and responsible for the transformation of externally acquired produce and persons into 'real' food, objects and persons. This should not be read as evidence of a distinction between a female domestic domain and male public domain. For ample discussion of gender as process and the relation between male and female agencies see McCallum 2001. For further discussion and deconstruction of the domestic/public distinction in anthropological theory and in the literature on Amazonian societies see McCallum 1989.

12. Cashinahua informants on the Purus and the Jordão, as well as medical personnel in the Casa do Índio in Rio Branco, corroborated this information. I did not visit the brothels and I have no ethnographic information on the relationships between Cashinahua men and prostitutes. This topic remains under-researched, but see Rival 2007 for a discussion of Huaorani encounters with prostitutes.

13. Aquino and his Cashinahua wife had a son, Irineu.

14. An Italian lay volunteer with the Catholic mission in Puerto Esperanza, the nearby mestizo settlement, informed me about this rumour.

15. By my departure in July 1985, it had risen, by in-migration and a few births, to about 200. By the mid 1990s the inhabitants dispersed to other settlements, leaving Pancho and his family (Lagrou p.c.).

16. See also Aquino 1977; McCallum 2001.

17. A condition in which the abdomen swells due to a swollen liver.

18. The next day, after much insistence from Maria Antonia's relatives, the FUNAI nurse came from Fronteira with a more appropriate anti-hemorrhagic drug. It was the only visit she made to Recreio during my stay there. She was definitely not a 'friend' to the Cashinahua. Openly hostile to 'indians', as well as anthropologists, she dreamt of returning to city life and changing her job.

19. The designs (*kene*) that teenage girls paint on their faces each afternoon contrast with the denser and more geometric black genipa patterns used for rituals (see Lagrou 1998).

20. On women's productive activities in gardens and on inter-village visits, see McCallum 2001, 1998.

REFERENCES CITED

- Aquino, Terri V. de
1977 "Kaxinawá: de Seringueiro "Caboclo" a Peão Acreano." MA dissertation, Universidade de Brasília.
- Aquino, Terri V. de & Iglesias, Marcelo M. P.
1994 *Kaxinawá do Rio Jordão: História, território e desenvolvimento sustentado*. Rio Branco, Acre. Gráfica Kenê Hiwê/CPI-Acre.
- Belaunde, Luisa Elvira
2005 *El recuerdo de Luna: Género, sangre y memoria entre los pueblos Amazónicos*. Lima, Peru: Fondo Editorial de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos.
- Conklin, Beth A.
2001 *Consuming Grief: Compassionate cannibalism in an Amazonian society*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- D'Ans, André-Marcel
n.d. 'La parenté et le nom: sémantique des dénominations interpersonnelles des Cashinahua'
- Fausto, Carlos
2001 *Inimigos Fieis: História, guerra e xamanismo na Amazônia*. São Paulo: Edusp.
- Gow, Peter
1991 *Of Mixed Blood: Kinship and History in Peruvian Amazonia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Iglesias, Marcelo M. Piedrafitá
2008 'Os Kaxinawá de Felizardo: Correrias, trabalho e civilização no alto Juruá'. Phd.Thesis, PPGAS, Museu Nacional. UFRJ.

Kensinger, Kenneth

1984 'An Emic Model of Cashinahua Marriage'. In *Marriage Practices in Lowland South America*, ed. K. Kensinger. Urbana, IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

1995 *How Real People Ought to Live: The Cashinahua of Eastern Peru*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Lagrou, Elsje M.

1998 *Caminhos Duplos e Corpos. Uma Abordagem Perspectivista da Identidade e Alteridade entre os Kaxinawa*. PhD thesis. Universidade de São Paulo.

McCallum, Cecilia

2001 *Making Real People: Gender and Sociality in Amazonia*. Oxford: Berg.

1999 "Consuming pity: The production of death among the Cashinahua". *Cultural Anthropology*. V.14. No.4: 443-471.

1998 "Alteridade e sociabilidade Kaxinauá: Perspectivas de uma antropologia da vida diária". *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*. V.13. No.38: 127-136.

1997 "Comendo com Txai, comendo como Txai: A sexualização de relações inter-étnicas na Amazônia contemporânea." *Revista de Antropologia*. Vol.40(1):109-147.

1996 "Morte e pessoa Kaxinauá." *MANA, Estudos de Antropologia*, 2/2:49-84.

Montag, Susan

1981 *Dicionário Cashinahua*, 2 volumes. Yarinacocha: Ministério de Educación Peruano & Instituto Linguístico de Verano.

Rival, Laura

2007 "What kind of sex makes people happy?" In *Questions of Anthropology: Festschrift for Maurice Bloch*. R. Astuti, J. Parry & C. Stafford (eds.). Oxford: Berg, pp.167-196.

1998 "Androgynous parents and guest children: the Huaorani Couvade." *JRAI (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute)* 4(4):619-642.

Virtanen, Pirjo Kristiina

2007 "Changing Lived Worlds of Contemporary Amazonian Native Young People: Manchineri Youths in the Reserve and the City, Brazil-Acre." Doctoral Dissertation, Faculty of Humanities, University of Helsinki.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo

2001 "GUT Feelings about Amazonia: Potential Affinity and the Construction of Sociality." In *Beyond the Visible and the Material: The Amerindianization of Society in the Work of Peter Rivière*, ed. L. Rival and N. Whitehead. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1993 "Alguns Aspectos da Afinidade no Dravidiano Amazônico." In *Amazônia: Etnologia e História Indígena*, ed. E. Viveiros de Castro and M. Carneiro da Cunha. São Paulo: EDUSP/Núcleo de História Indígena.

1992 *From the Enemy's Point of View*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo & Fausto, Carlos

1993 "La puissance et l'acte: La parenté dans les basses terres Sud-Américaine." *L'Homme* 33(2-4): 141-170.