

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

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

---

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Special Issue in honor of Joanna Overing: In the World and About the World: Amerindian Modes of Knowledge*

Article 1

---

May 2006

## Introduction: Amerindian Modes of Knowledge

George Mentore

*University of Virginia*, [gm3c@Virginia.EDU](mailto:gm3c@Virginia.EDU)

Fernando Santos-Granero

*Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute*, [santosf@si.edu](mailto:santosf@si.edu)

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



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mentore, George and Santos-Granero, Fernando (2006). "Introduction: Amerindian Modes of Knowledge," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol4/iss1/1>

This Introduction 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](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

# Introduction: Amerindian Modes of Knowledge

**GEORGE MENTORE**  
University of Virginia  
gm3c@virginia.edu

**FERNANDO SANTOS-GRANERO**  
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute  
santosf@si.edu

This collection of essays on Amerindian modes of knowledge attempts to build upon the architecture of ideas present in the intellectual endeavors of Joanna Overing. It is the result of a conference organized by her students and held at the University of Virginia on November 28 and 29, 2005 to celebrate her tutelage and the trajectory of her anthropological thoughts since the publishing of *Reason and Morality* in 1985. Not in any way to diminish the influence of her wide-ranging scope of research interests and projects, the topic of indigenous modes of knowing seeks rather to find a common ground upon which her students could pay tribute to her innovative thoughts and teaching.

The contributors to *Reason and Morality* argued persuasively against the existence of a universally valid notion of rationality. They favored instead the concomitance of multiple theories about human thinking and knowledge. They questioned the very idea of an amoral “truth” and the autonomy of “facts” disarticulated from value—main tenets in our Western concept of rationality. They alternatively proposed that, in non-Western societies, ideas about rationality cannot be extricated from their systems of morality nor, indeed, from the creative aspects of metaphoric thinking. Thus grounded in different ontological and metaphysical assumptions about the world, non-Western theories of knowledge may possibly posit different connections between mind, body, soul, and emotions. By continuing the focus of inquiry on native Amazonian peoples’ modes of knowledge, this current collection of essays further elaborates upon and adds to some of these propositions.

The charge to our essayists began with the request to be suggestive about the relations drawn between knowledge and such other elements as power, truth, being, emotion, morality, beauty and even monstrosity. The implication being that these served as valuable discursive paths or streams along which a wholly different configuring of subjectivity and its

4 *George Mentore & Fernando Santos-Granero*

particular articulation with the body could be considered. Perhaps from such analysis it might be determined how these relations can deliver the societies, polities, economies, and religions within which indigenous living takes place. Even in the tangled interface between the local, national, and transnational, as well as between the traditional and the modern, some space must be given to analyzing the production of indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, or at least to the taken-for-granted ideas about being and knowledge lodged inside these terms. The tension between modern nation states and indigenous modes of knowledge, as well as the effects of the latter, manifest themselves regularly in Amazonia. Different forms and contents of time and space, hence of identity and property, all challenge each other in the contested terrains of knowledge. In this collection, we think that the reader may agree that our essayists have presented some interesting and intriguing options upon which to contemplate.

A single generalizing principle persists in the bringing of knowledge into the world. Constituted wisdom brought into human existence to make itself and the world knowable must first locate and be registered by the body. This is true even in those cases in which meaningful knowledge is conceived of as being attainable only through the agency of noncorporeal dimensions of self. Be it while in sleep, in song, in sex, in death, or in the culinary arts, knowledge about the experiential world possesses the body so as to be brought into its substantive state[ment]s. As becomes apparent in this volume, Amerindian examples proliferate in their diversity of this principle. We have grouped these examples into five sections, according to the different aspects of Amerindian modes of knowing emphasized by the contributors.

The first section, devoted to the “Poetics of Knowledge,” deals with the multiple ways in which bodily processes and sensory life interrelate in the production of particular ways of knowing. Joanna Overing argues that Piaroa social consciousness and moral reasoning can be crafted into knowledge forms by sensory processes engaged with achieving an aesthetics of action. Through the analysis of two contrasting narrative genres, sublime and grotesque realism, she explores the oppositional and complementary connection between the upper and lower bodily processes in the acquisition and loss of creative knowledge. Elsje Lagrou argues, in turn, that among the Kaxinawa laughter and grotesque humor constitute important dimensions of the ritual knowledge necessary to engage the productive forces of nonhuman beings and thus ensure human fertility. If power incites laughter, she claims, laughter has its own power.

The second section, “Disembodied Senses,” addresses the issue of the nature and complex relationship between bodies and souls in Amerindian

thought. Through an examination of Yanesha noncorporeal modes of sensing and knowing, Fernando Santos-Granero contends that whereas meaningful knowledge—i.e., knowledge acquired from extraordinary beings—is always embodied, far from being the cause of knowledge, bodies are caused by knowledge. Calling for a renewed anthropology of the senses in Amazonian studies, he proposes a critical revision of the theory of Amerindian perspectivism. Also placing emphasis on the nonbiological reality of knowledge, Dan Rosengren proposes that individual identity and self-awareness among the Matsigenka are not functions of corporeal shape but of social interaction, insofar as they are fashioned by the very particular historical conditions and personal trajectories that influence the development of each individual's soul. Consciousness has little to do with physiology but is rather the product of social interaction. Following a somewhat different track, Guilherme Werlang suggests that the ambiguous relationship between Marubo bodies and souls does not preclude their immanence to human beings and the periodic transformation of bodies as the result of the agency of cosmic souls both within and without humans. Marubo ontology, like *saiti* songs-myths, has to do as much with the creative powers of “gods” as with the creative powers of “souls.”

In the third section on “Embodied Knowledge,” the authors discuss the multiple ways in which “in-corporated” and “ex-corporated” knowledge induce a variety of bodily transformations. Calling for the development of an Amazonian hematology, Luisa Elvira Belaunde explores the central place of blood in Amerindian notions of knowledge and gender. Drawing from a large number of examples, she contends that blood—being the locus of thoughts, spirits, and strength as well as the means by which knowledge flows throughout the body—both unites and differentiates men and women. In the other extreme, focusing on death rather than life, Sylvia Caiuby Novaes examines the importance of ritual knowledge in the “de-facement” and “re-facement” of the deceased in Bororo funerary rituals. Such transformations involve not only the bodies of the deceased, but also their souls, their ritual representatives, and even their social relationships. Alan Passes tackles the relationship between body and knowledge from a different, original angle. He argues that Pa'ikwené mathematical metaphors, rooted in being able to perceive and experience the geometry of touch, can extend such knowledge out into the world without the restrictions of graphic reductionism.

The fourth section, “Knowledge in Practice,” dedicates its analysis to the direct processes for sustaining normal daily life. In the work by Carlos D. Londoño Sulkin, “true” and “beautiful” Muinane knowledge must “dawn” in well-behaved children, the healing of diseases, and in the

6 *George Mentore & Fernando Santos-Granero*

production of foodstuffs and ritual substances. A primary relation exists between human will and its effects as materialized words whose content transforms the immorality of sickness and misfortune. The content of spoken words here draws upon the logic of mimesis, similarity, or (what has been famously called) “sympathetic magic.” Robert Storie presents the Hoti experiential knowledge of fearfulness as the strategic emotion for administering political life. Particularly in its capable lightness—that produces the porosity and permeability characteristic of the stage between waking and sleeping, life and death—the weight of the human body offers the heightened sensibilities for negotiating the power terrains of the material and spiritual worlds. To have fear among the Hoti is to be human, but to have such fear induced by another who goes beyond the awe of the sublime, to exercise dangerous intent, destroys the moral egalitarian framework of everyday life. In his piece, John Renshaw focuses upon the curing function the shamanic singing voice performs among the Ayoreo, but he intriguingly adds the pragmatic questions of how and if such techniques achieve their ends when compared to Western biomedical techniques. He identifies an interesting set of ideas from the different interpretations given to time, order, and the body.

In the fifth and final section, we explore the “Politics of Knowledge,” that is, the ways in which knowledge is generated within the frame of complex political relationships and gets used for a variety of political purposes, thus defining and shaping the political field itself. According to Peter Gow, the Piro voice in song defies Western historicity and hence any attempt to use the past in an agenda to codify modern nationalism and statehood as the only self-evident truths about political identity and geography. While written histories appropriate events, places, and emotions—making them retrievable in the present, future, and wherever their archival forms can be housed—indigenous songs keep such histories only for the voice and its democracy of heard knowledge. In turn, George Mentore argues that Waiwai fractal being relies upon knowing, as embodied experience, their recursive counting system, which brings unit and aggregate into unison for lateral visibility. Notions of embodiment, self, and person directly inform the relation between knowledge and power. The contrast and comparison here between indigenous Amerindian and modern Western ideas of being serve to shed light upon the different styles in which political power becomes distributed and exercised to obtain obedience.

It is our hope that this compilation of essays—in tribute to our teacher and her scholarship—should encourage the desirable result of making Amerindian modes of knowledge critically relevant and substantive to dominant Western thought. The least we could hope for would be

the continuance of debate about the obvious contribution indigenous knowledge has for the world at large. On the other hand, the most we could desire would be that, in knowing such knowledge, our work produces the effect of creating greater respect and tolerance for alternative ways of being human in the world.