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Believing in the Gift: a Case of Successful Relationships of Exchange in the Colombian Amazon

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Abstract

Since the late 70's, the Colombian anthropologist Juan Alvaro Echeverri has logged more than five years in Uitoto and closely related communities in the Colombian Amazon. His relationships with individuals there have been long-lived and surprisingly successful, in contrast with the often-noted disappointment of many philanthropically oriented outsiders—NGO agents, anthropologists, missionaries, government personnel—who come to find ‘their Indians’ to be too materialistic and demanding, and of the Indians who cease to find these would-be philanthropists generous, desirable, or even interesting interlocutors. This essay, meant to be both an ethnographic and theoretical exposition on the forms and implications of substance exchange and an entertaining manifesto of admiration for an exemplary Amazonianist scholar, proves that the parties involved have achieved, and continue to achieve, practical, satisfying, and sustainable relationships, mostly through material gifts that index their mutual recognition as moral interlocutors.

Disappointed philanthropists and felicitous exchanges in the Amazon

This is intended to be a genre-bending essay, to the extent that it reads to some extent like an obituary, and an inappropriate one at that, since it is mostly about my fellow anthropologist Juan Álvaro Echeverri, who is still very much alive. My central interest was to produce a moral portrait of this excellent fellow, closely tied to the other central interest of making the case that in the social sciences and humanities, and certainly in social and cultural anthropology, morality is important. This is also, however, an academic piece that engages with three topics of established or burgeoning interest in social and cultural anthropology: those of exchange, materiality, and morality.

My point of departure is the now well-noted fact that government and NGO workers, anthropologists, environmentalists, and the occasional rock star working in the Amazon often come to find themselves disappointed or jaded about their relationships with indigenous Amazonians, mainly because of the latter's insistent demand for goods and money, which over time ends up offending Westerners' sense of what constitutes the proper footings of relationships of friendship (see Bathurst 2005:110-112 and Conklin 2005:127-131). For many Amazonians, though, exchanges of material gifts are necessary as elements of proper interpersonal relationships. When these gifts are no longer forthcoming (perhaps because outsiders understand their good relationships with particular locals to have evolved into purely ‘non-material’ friendships), Amazonians easily lose interest in the relationships.

Deep, nuanced discussions of these matters can be found in Bathurst (2005), Cepek (2011), Conklin (2010), Fisher (2000), and Rubenstein (2002), among others. These scholars problematize the naïve dichotomy between the purported asocial or antisocial materialism of capitalist societies and the equally purported, much sweeter, more properly social, nonmaterialism of non-capitalist indigenous societies. Echeverri (1997) does this as well. More interestingly, however, his personal relationships with Uitoto speakers and other People of the Centre (Colombian Amazon)¹ are, in my opinion, exceptionally successful. I will describe these relationships and then use the need to explain their success as an excuse for my moral portrait.

The matter of material demands and indigenous sociality came often to my mind during two weeks I spent with Juan in the Igaraparaná river area, at the Uitoto-speaking household of Don Hipólito Candre, an old healer with whom Juan had lived for several years in the mid to late 80s. Juan kept doing something I had seen him do many times over the years: he was constantly jotting locals' requests for goods in the last few pages of a small green notebook.

On that trip, Juan had already brought a number of gifts for Don Hipólito's family and others; things that they had requested in a previous visit of his or that he felt would interest them. For Don Hipólito and his wife Benilda, he brought fruit tree and tobacco seeds from other parts of the Amazon, a can of dietary supplement powder, a massage gel for muscular pains, and several pairs of shorts. He also gave Benilda a dozen panties of several sizes, carefully chosen by his wife, for Benilda to distribute among the women of the household (several daughters-in-law and grandchildren). He also had early literacy books for children (requested by their mothers), and bread and guava paste for these women to distribute. Don Hipólito's son-in-law Lucho had requested a saw, a plug tester, and a wood shaver, and Juan had complied. (Lucho said, half-jokingly but in a grave tone, "Now I am truly indebted!"). Finally, he had brought 1,120,000 pesos to pay informants for their collaboration with his most recent research interest: spatial categories in the Uitoto language. Some of this money—as well as quite a bit of mine—went to pay for little services during those two weeks, and for store-bought food for us and for the two households we stayed in.

At one point late in our two-week stay, I asked Juan to read the list at the back of his notebook to me. It included the following:

- plasticized printouts of scanned copies of early 20th century pictures of La Chorrera taken by Whiffen (1915), for the director of the boarding school;
- an enamelled pot for the desiccation of vegetable salt for Don Hipólito;
- fish hooks, lead weights, and nylon for two of Don Hipólito's sons;
- arnica massage gel for Benilda, for the stuff Juan had brought was not the right stuff;
- more "Nacho Lee" ("Nacho Reads") early reading books for children
- replacement diaphragm, impeller, and starter spring for a Yamaha 9.9 out-board motor;
- a set of gold earrings for a little girl, at the request of either Don Hipólito's daughter or one of his daughters-in-law
- a Spanish-English dictionary for one of Don Hipólito's granddaughters
- butter—not margarine! —for Benilda.

Juan himself received a number of gifts before leaving. Lucho's wife gave him a beautifully woven basket and five woven discs. Benilda gave him one liter of chili paste, and one of Don Hipólito's sons gave him one liter of tobacco paste.² He was also allowed to take some seeds from Don Hipólito's sons' tobacco fields, and from several fruit trees. We also made *mambe*³ together from Don Hipólito's and two of his sons' coca plantations, and packed a good amount of it into large cans for Juan to take to Leticia and Bogotá with him. Benilda opened the cans several times, tapping them so that the *mambe* would settle, insisting that her husband pack it tightly so that Juan would have plenty of the stuff.

I had spent time with Juan in other indigenous communities in the region, and concluded that despite sometimes long breaks in his visits to particular locales in the Amazon, he and his acquaintances there kept their relationships viable. The question—given the stories about mutual disappointments I mentioned above—is how they achieved this. One obvious and superficial answer is simply that Juan had kept coming up with the goods. A better, more textured response would address the motivations and understandings of Juan and his interlocutors. That is what I purport to do here, with the claim that their exchanges were morally and aesthetically satisfying: they indexed relationships between persons who were well constituted and thus competent, productive, generous, and consistent; relationships that brought pleasure and mutual profit.⁴ This relationship contrasts with the failed relationships outsiders and locals knew well, in which white people appeared to indigenous locals as flitting, stingy, and at ease with abandoning relationships, and in which to outsiders, indigenous people appeared despicably materialistic.

To support my claim, let me briefly address a matter of moral solicitude among People of the Center—that of ritual substances and their exchange.

The meanings of substances and their exchange

People of the Center's evaluations of their own and each other's bodies, subjectivities, actions, groupings, and other features were frequent and were frequently couched in the idiom of substances. They explicitly deemed people's possession and gifts of certain key foodstuffs and ritual substances as evidence of their virtues and capabilities. Indeed, they repeatedly told me that a man who offered others tobacco paste and *mambe*, and a woman who provided her family and others with an abundance of food or manioc drink, thereby proved that they were a "true man" or "true woman." True men and women "remembered" how to treat others appropriately, and they possessed the moral discernment to recognize that substance production is among the worthiest and most indispensable endeavours. They also possessed the knowledge necessary to produce these substances and the willingness to work hard to do so.

People of the Center's talk and other actions on these matters, for the most part, took for granted and recreated accounts of personhood in which thinking, feeling human beings were fabricated out of these substances and by means of capabilities that stemmed from them, in processes that began well before their conception and birth, and continued after their death. The 'juices' or essences of tobacco, coca, manioc, chillies, and a variety of other cultigens made up bodies' very tissues, and furthermore 'spoke' through them, thereby creating a person's thoughts and emotions. The substances were of divine origin, and also provided people with the capacities and efficacy necessary to ensure their livelihood and reproduction. Tobacco paste, for illustration, was the sweat and semen of the creator god, and it engendered people's feelings of care for their kin as it recognized itself as constitutive of them; it was also a nearly invulnerable and predatory being in itself, and its awareness and esoterically violent capabilities could come to characterize the people it constituted.

In People of the Center's cosmos, Real People—true human beings, made out of proper tobacco, manioc, and other cultivated substances—sought to live well and multiply in the face of animals and other inhuman beings bent on sabotaging a proper human lifestyle. These beings caused bodily and thought/emotional⁵ tribulations, causing people to fall ill, or to misbehave. In this perspectival cosmology—where each species or kind of being perceives itself and its co-specifics as human, and other species as animals or other inhuman beings—miscreants were persons whose thoughts/emotions were generated by animalistic tobaccos and other usurping, inhuman substances; as a result, they treated their human fellows as inhuman beings treated their own. The contrast was between the caring mutual perceptions and actions of persons with proper substances in their bodies, and the immoral and

antisocial emotions and interactions between persons polluted by animalistic substances.

In a cosmos in which key ritual and food substances were the constitutive elements and generators of persons' bodies and subjectivities, the processes of their cultivation, preparation, distribution, and consumption were matters of much moral solicitude. People treated these processes in a number of discursive and non-discursive ways as ones in which useless, impure, malignant agents, thoughts/emotions, and substances were transformed in a predatory fashion, purifying and keeping whatever was good and desirable in them and killing or burning or otherwise destroying everything else. In their everyday lives, people drew a great many moral entailments from these processes. I heard some address the lazy or vigorous way in which particular individuals participated in the felling of the forest to make a garden, the beautiful or else despicably weed-ridden look of manioc and coca plantations, the taste, variety, and amount of food prepared by different women, the predatory effectiveness of the tobacco paste sent by a ritual dance owner as an invitation to others to hunt for him, and the purported violations of protocol in individuals' or groups' ways of distributing and consuming *mambe*.

They deemed an abundance of substances, and their generous exchange, as evidence of actors' moralities—indeed, of their true humanity. Though words or Speeches (formal discourses produced with magical or otherwise creative intent) could be deemed powerful, their truth or power could only be gauged by their results in terms of substances. Words that did not eventually lead to the production of tobacco, *mambe*, chillies, manioc, and so forth, were deemed empty, weak, and not properly human. For them, therefore, Western ideals of pure friendship purportedly not involving material exchanges were truly foreign and in fact, I believe, not really intelligible.

Most adult men carried small flasks of salted tobacco paste, which they would sometimes exchange with others briefly in greeting, or repeatedly during conversations in the men's coca circles. Tobacco paste was meant to provide individuals with increased awareness and vigour. I heard exegeses to the effect that proffering one's tobacco showed that one was a hardworking, knowledgeable person. Of course, like every other performative⁶ gesture, proffering tobacco as a kind of claim to hard work, knowledge, and morality always risked infelicity. I recall one occasion in which one man deployed a rhetorical resource to some extent rejecting what could have been a claim to morality on my part. I had offered my flask of tobacco paste to the man, a visitor to the settlement where I was staying. In what I would call a not unfriendly voice of knowledgeable moral superiority, he gazed upon my flask in his hand, as if weighing it, and turned to me and asked me whether I would be able to offer him tobacco again. The gist of his message—for he provided his own exegesis of the question later—was that he knew that being white and an outsider, I had not produced that tobacco myself, and that people who did not produce their own tobacco should not proffer it for doing so was to make claims to having the proven capacity to produce. The chastisement was also tied to the oft-rehearsed counsel to youths concerning the perpetuity of moral endeavours and relationships; these counsels stated that once they began to consume tobacco paste and *mambe*, men were never to stop doing so, and once they established a relationship of tobacco exchanges with another, they were always to guard that relationship.⁷

Juan's exchanges of gifts and other symbolic deployments constitutive of his relationships with individuals among People of the Center indexed for them features of Juan's biography and moral formation that suggested a potential for continuity that was often lacking in their relationships with outsiders. Let me broach this in the context of a more general description of Juan.

The liminal Dr. Juan Álvaro Echeverri

I met Juan during the last year of my undergraduate program in anthropology, in 1994. We coincided at a meeting held by Uitoto, Muinane, and Nonuya people in

the Medio Caquetá, in the Colombian Amazon. He was working for the Gaia Foundation Colombia program at the time, in the midst of a longish hiatus in the process of writing up his own PhD thesis for the New School for Social Research. I quickly caught on to the fact that he knew both anthropology and the local indigenous mores well. As I would find out much later, he had begun to spend time in the Caquetá-Putumayo region of the Colombian Amazon since the late 70s, and by 1994 he had already logged nearly three years of actually living in the rainforest, in indigenous households. He spoke Uitoto fluently and with gusto, and clearly had a thick grasp of what was going on at the meeting. Eager for a sophisticated interlocutor with whom to converse about what I was learning in the Medio Caquetá, I asked Juan to supervise my own undergraduate thesis work, which he agreed to do.

The faculty at my own department of anthropology of the Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín, graciously accepted my strange request to have somebody from outside the university supervise me. They were well acquainted with Juan, for he had been one of their star students years before; his thesis on Rom (Gypsy) people in Medellín had been the only thesis in anthropology ever to be lauded at that university. He proved to be a perfect thesis supervisor for me. Without any hierarchical posturing, he would inform me that it was intolerable that I had not read this or that book (Whiffen (1915) was a biggy: he'd written about the Uitoto, Muinane, and Andoque in the early 1900s, and I'd never read him), or that a certain description I had written was pathetically thin. He had me read and think about material pertinent to anthropology in the late 80s and 90s, which I had not really been led to in my own decent department, which was quite solid on anthropology up until the 1970s, but had not managed to bring the program up to date in anthropology of the 80s and 90s. His demands and counsels situated me and contributed to my own competence. I submitted my undergraduate monograph in 1995, having already been invited—no doubt thanks to him—to do a PhD program in Scotland.

Over the next few years we became fast friends and, because we worked with some of the same individuals of the same groups, unique interlocutors for each other. In a single conversation, we could move from a discussion in Spanish on kinship terms in the Medio Caquetá as opposed to those of the Vaupés, to ironic racist joking in caricaturized French assuming the part of 19th century European travelers in the region, and then to a quick exchange of *mambe* and tobacco paste executed in Uitoto or Muinane. I always savoured the fact that there was probably no one else in the world with whom I could sustain a conversation like those I had with Juan, simply because of the particularity of our biographies, and our convergences in ethnographic experience. He learned much Muinane and Nonuya during those years as well. He eventually took up his PhD thesis again; I proudly edited the English of an early version of it in 1997, and he defended it in 1997, receiving the New School's Frida Wunderlich Memorial Award for an Outstanding Dissertation.

Over those years I had ample opportunities to get to know Juan well, and grew to admire him deeply. One of the features that most impressed me about him was his capability to become interested in just about anything, and the sheer will to learn about it. I noticed, for instance, that he could speak with considerable knowledge and precision about computers, accounting, agriculture, biochemistry, brain physiology, and alkaloids, among many other subjects. And limiting my description to what he knows about our region of work, I don't think there are more than a few of us who have read as many Amazonianist ethnographies. Beyond this, he's devoured dozens of texts on the ecosystems, fauna, flora, and climatology of lowland South America, and knows a great deal about the history of the region. Where I quickly decide that much of this material isn't really central to what I need to know and elide it, Juan decides that all this stuff interests him. His work also leads him to meet experts in all these fields, and he enthusiastically engages them in conversation. Today, he's a veritable Amazonianist encyclopaedia.

The social anthropologist Victor Turner termed 'liminal' that which bordered the realm of the 'normal.' Liminal persons, moments, and places were those that were permanently or temporarily differentiated from the rest because, for instance, they were sacred or corrupt. They could be deemed threatening to normality. I came

to think that 'liminal' described Juan well, given his atypical biography and how he thought and talked. The adjective came to mind on an occasion in 2002 in Leticia, when he narrated for me part of the intimate process that turned him into a deep believer in the Catholic pantheon.

His story that time began with the surprising revelation that prior to starting to study anthropology at the Universidad de Antioquia, he had pursued an undergraduate engineering program for a few semesters in the 70s, at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Medellín. Except for the math, which he loved, he found the whole thing unbearably boring. He dedicated himself to smoking marijuana ostentatiously in the halls of his university, prior to class, his brazen attitude about it embarrassing even the pot sellers. He had always enjoyed math and engaged with it pleasurably, and even in his perennially stoned state he managed to surprise his professors with his performance in problem resolutions.

Uninterested in engineering and persuaded that marijuana no longer had much to offer him, he experimented with hallucinogenic mushrooms, and became obsessed with the experiences they afforded him. He developed a superstitious system for their consumption: on a certain day of the week, at a certain time of day, he would take a long walk to pick up the mushrooms. If anything the least disagreeable or potentially ominous called his attention during the walk or the process of gathering and preparing the mushrooms, he would abort the process. A dead dog by the roadside, a particularly dark cloud covering the sun briefly, or a minor stumble, caused him to abandon the intention to take mushrooms at one point or another.

The last time he took mushrooms he had a brief moment of normal awareness, and realized he was lying in a cattle pasture under a ferocious downpour, with much lightning and thunder. He dragged himself to the little hut where he had begun his afternoon, and sank again into deep hallucination. He felt that the wind pulled him at terrifying speed and with irresistible strength towards a dizzying chasm. Fearful and desperate, he saw a great white cross, and with difficulty managed to take a hold of it and thus avoid being swept into the abyss. He awoke hours later, persuaded that there had been a message there for him.

He never consumed mushrooms again. He sought out a catechism, and finally found one for children preparing for the Catholic first communion. As he perused it, he felt the revelation that everything he had been searching elsewhere, without realizing it was a search, was right there. He was twenty-eight at the time, and decided to prepare himself for his first communion in the Catholic Church. He signed up for a course with a number of 8 and 10-year olds, with a priest anxious to get rid of Juan; I can imagine the poor *padre* fretting at the strange man who stood out so conspicuously among the children, and who never ceased to ask uncomfortable theological and ethical questions.

Normally, anybody telling me that that they had been reborn in the discovery of Christ would instantly cause me to distance myself intellectually from the person, simply because I would assume that our basic definitions of ourselves as persons would be so different from each other that only with great effort would we find any subject for intimate conversation. But I already knew Juan well and had had ample opportunities both to note his undeniable intelligence and to acknowledge the extent and sophistication of his knowledge of Amazonian and anthropological topics that mattered to me very much indeed. In fact, I had in the past already had to overcome my biases and overlook his passion for Tai Chi, an art that I associated with Westerners who produced cloying self-portrayals of spiritual depth. (By the way, I'm being a tad confessionalist here: I have serious issues with anything that appears to me to be an ostentatious claim to depth, spirituality, or enlightenment.) And I simply could not toss him into the box of bothersome, proselytising religious fanatics. On the contrary, there was nobody I admired more or whom I listened to as avidly.

The particular nature of Juan's faith seemed unique to me, and for this reason I am intrigued by and appreciate in him something that I usually find phony in some of our fellow anthropologists, and that is that to some extent he 'went native' in some important cosmological beliefs and moral understandings, if not in many other ways. Before I examine this point further, I hasten to add that though Juan is capa-

ble of immersing himself with conviction in an indigenous way of thinking about the world, he can come out of that mode without sounding like he's affecting sensitivity, profundity, or esoteric enlightenment. Furthermore, he is very much a scholar's scholar, eager to produce knowledge in social and cultural anthropology. For years he has been publishing judicious monographs and articles that have been up to par with the highest standards in international scholarship, and which deal competently with the most subtle phenomenological and sociological concepts at issue in current anthropology, and with his ethnographic observations. What's more, some of his writings (e.g. Echeverri 1997) are recognizably those of an anthropologist trained in New York in the late 80s and 90s, with the unmistakable influences of the likes of Talal Asad and Michael Taussig in his work.

But let me return to this contrast between phony cases of going native and more persuasive ones, and again, I know my attention to this is likely to say more about me than about the people I'm describing. I tend to feel mild condescension towards people who claim to have somehow accessed spiritual realms accessible only to a privileged few, whether because they have deep shamanic knowledge, an older soul, an unusually open mind, or what have you. I usually find these claims to be unpersuasive, ostentatious self-portrayals. This never happened to me with Juan. His engagement with People of the Center's understandings of the cosmos, of substances, and of selfhood seemed to me to stem from deep conviction in some elemental truth to them, tied quite directly to his belief in the cosmology and prescriptions of his Catholic faith. Witnessing him greeting a Uitoto man by exchanging *mambe* and tobacco, I could not help but attribute to him a very layered process of reflection: he knew he was an anthropologist deploying symbolic forms that were not traditionally his in the process of sustaining interpersonal relationships with a native, knew that he was nonetheless doing so competently, and had the conviction that the gestures and substances in questions were moral and indeed, partook of the divine.

In other words, Juan's engagement with People of the Center, as I knew it, was deep. He did not understand himself to be merely an anthropologist producing knowledge in his terms of art about a social object, or even that and furthermore a human being interacting with others; his *mambeadero* conversations and his deployments of tobacco were often those of someone who deeply believed that these substances could and did indeed carry divine speech with them, and that their possession and deployment did index certain moral features of their owner.

In any case, from their treatment of Juan that I witnessed, I believe People of the Center widely recognized important differences between him and other visitors from the outside. First, many had known him for many years, if not their entire lives. Many also recognized that he knew in detail greater than that of most locals their myths, their prayers, their healing rites, their institutionalized moral counsels, and the esoteric implications of diverse gestures and terms. Many respectfully acknowledged his great knowledge of their own world and of their traditions, and some even expressed some fear of him, as they did of sorcerers. I recall his visit to a Nonuya village, where one of the men asked him to reveal to him what ornament or special tobacco he carried, for his presence in the *mambeadero* on that occasion was 'heavy.' This was not the most welcoming of expressions, but it did clearly show that the man—a tough one—deemed Juan to be extremely knowledgeable in esoteric matters. Perhaps as importantly, Juan knew how to produce fully intelligible, pertinent talk in local Spanish, something many outsiders new to the region simply did not.

Juan had engaged with their world, and knew it well, in the embodied fashion People of the Center deemed to be characteristic of true knowledge, beyond knowledge that they dismissively termed 'pure theory.' Thus he not only knew stories about coca, but could toast leaves competently, with the right amount of fire and the requisite stamina (an endeavor in which I fared poorly, myself). He knew what went into fishing, and he could weave beautiful, even baskets with no unsightly bulges. He knew from experience how the river currents, nets, fishermen, and boats interacted, and so understood with precision what men were asking for when they requested fishing goods from him.

On one occasion, for instance, Lucho was showing Juan a sample of the exact kind of polyester line that he needed to make the edge of a fishing net. Juan was feeling the polyester with inquisitive fingers, and ascertaining in conversation with Lucho why it was that a certain nylon somebody else had brought him had not worked. Together they examined a net, and Lucho demonstrated what feature of the polyester allowed it to do something that the nylon wouldn't: the fisherman weaver could spread out the fibres, insert a lead pellet in their midst, and then tighten the polyester again so that the pellet would be firmly trapped between the fibres. Juan, among whose endless interests lay the weaving of baskets and the local ways of making all kinds of working tools, grasped the virtue of the particular polyester cord readily.⁸ It took Lucho and Juan some time to explain it to me.

I believe that some of the people who exchanged ritual substances and other gifts with Juan in the Colombian Amazon came to know him to have truly engaged with the prescriptions to produce substances and to keep up long-lasting relationships on the basis of those substances. Perhaps that accounted for their eager willingness to continue interacting with him. They also recognized in him an understanding of their world, practices, and relationships that other foreigners tended to lack. As for him, his engagement with them and with their world was one of conviction; he learned to use People of the Center's talk about substances and personhood to define himself, his relationships, and his world.

Salt

The histories of Juan's relationships with Uitoto, Muinane, Andoque, and other individuals among People of the Center were not without their moments of angry mutual questioning or disappointment. He reminded me that his first big project with Don Hipólito in the 1980s had been horribly fraught with political tribulations, where the indigenous political organizations in La Chorrera early on declared him a *persona non grata* out to exploit indigenous elders and undermine indigenous autonomy. Fortunately for him, Don Hipólito rowed up to La Chorrera and quietly asked the leader of the political organization why he had decided "to lay obstacles in [Don Hipólito's] path," when Don Hipólito had already agreed to work with Juan. Don Hipólito was known as a powerful *brujo* (shaman, healer, and witch) in the region, so this question ensued in embarrassed backtracking on the part of the leader, and in the leader's father visiting Don Hipólito with mollifying gifts of tobacco and *mambe*. But even with Don Hipólito the relationship went through some rocky periods, in those early years. Years later, while in the field with him, I noted that every so often, Juan would become pessimistic and brooding, and would grumble about these darned *Indios* who only thought about money and always ended up screwing people over. He went so dark at those times that it was funny, and I'd jokingly tell him in Spanish "*Te cogió la cínica*: The cynical one has taken over you."

On one occasion, I witnessed *la cínica* take him over at a meeting in a Muinane settlement in the Medio Caquetá, where he was discussing their advances in making some maps. He had travelled with several of them for weeks pinpointing on satellite maps the location of sacred sites, interclanic boundaries, old gardens, and so forth. This had been part of a well-funded project of Gaia Colombia and COAMA (Consolidación Amazónica) to document traditional land tenure, divisions, cosmological associations and so forth, for purposes relating to negotiation of territorial rights with the national government. It appeared that in the deployment of the project, besides much gossip and internal strife concerning the distribution of money, a great chunk of the latter had been shamelessly stolen by one of the leaders, following an oft reiterated local pattern in which those charged with administering community monies misappropriated and misused them. At one point, Juan scared several of the older men who were quite enthused with the project by expressing great tiredness and anger about the situation, and the willingness to dump the project altogether. They quickly rallied to appease Juan and propose solutions.

I had a brief email conversation with Juan about such tensions and problems, and he said—self-consciously reproducing an indigenous Amazonian type of claim—that these had been important, for his good relations had stemmed from moments that were difficult and contradictory, and of “mutual disappointment [...] much as those Bathurst⁹ had talked about.” He mentioned that he had found the Uitoto elder Oscar Román, with whom he had worked in a project on vegetable salt, to have been particularly skilful at articulating matters concerning the management of interpersonal strife. In this project, Juan made salt more than a hundred times, as he researched out such details as the species of salt-yielding plants, the firewood to be used, the filtering styles of different individuals, the chemical composition of different salts, and the entailments of chemical composition for taste, as well as the moral and cosmological associations of the process. Oscar, like many others in the region, tended to speak about moral matters and interpersonal relationships in terms of substances, and on an occasion in which Juan had felt bitter and overwhelmed by the endless problems and demands that came up in the midst of such projects, had said that the reason for which most if not all the projects of *las instituciones* (government sections and NGOs, including the Gaia Foundation for which Juan was working at the time) foundered and ended up in ‘abortions’ (the abandonment of plans and projects) was that they ignored ‘the matter of salt.’ “What I came to understand from this,” Juan wrote to me, “was that ‘salt’ means what each person wants, his desire, and that there will always be conflicts between different desires. The true art is to know one’s own desire, to interpret well the desire of the other, and to manoeuvre so that nobody is left ‘hungry’ (or as Oscar used to say, so that nobody felt ‘violated’ or—in his football metaphors—*goleado*¹⁰).”

More to the point, Juan added that Oscar’s cryptic statement also alluded to the fact that salt was a process of transmutation of problems and tribulations of all kinds. He was referring here to People of the Center’s accounts to the effect that envy, anger, resentment, and other thoughts/emotions destructive of relationships (the paths of Speech between people) and of bodies had to be transformed by consigning them in salt-yielding plants and then subjecting these to the extraction process. In the latter, the plants—and with them all human tribulations—would be burned to ashes; water would be poured through the ashes, removing the salt from them, and then the resulting saltwater would be dried over fire. By these means, all kinds of nasty, thorny plants, but also all kinds of nasty hindrances to proper social life, would be transformed into a nourishing substance, one that ‘sweetened’ tobacco paste and generated good Speeches. Once that happens, it appears to people as if the original thorns, itchy saps, cutting grasses on one hand, and the fights, anger, and other personal tribulations on the other, had never been. Oscar was thus telling Juan to transform his thoughts/emotions, and in telling me this anecdote, Juan was portraying the history of his own relationships with his Amazonian friends in terms of transformations akin to those of substances, where that which is antisocial or evil is transformed into something good.

Juan was probably alone among *blancos* (“white people”) in the region who could make his own ritual substances, and in fact often did so. On one occasion I witnessed him providing a man with a large quantity of excellent salt with which to prepare invitations for a dance ritual—a gift the receipt of which situated Juan in a unique kind of relationship that was the object of much moral solicitude in the Medio Caquetá. Not surprisingly, a common conversation Juan had with his interlocutors in the Medio Caquetá concerned the qualities and the processes of fabrication of the salt in the tobacco paste he offered them in greeting. What’s more, quite a few people from the Medio Caquetá, Igarapará, or Leticia had found themselves in Bogotá (where he has lived on and off for many years), bereft of tobacco paste and *mambe*, and had found solace for their needs at Juan’s place.

Believing in the gift

So what was the difference between Juan Echeverri and the myriad disappointed others who aborted their projects and left the Amazon in disappointment? I hasten to underscore that I am not saying that one has to go native to make relationships with others—Amazonian or not—work well. Still, Juan did become good at interpreting what his Amazonian acquaintances and friends said and did, because he had a great deal of knowledge about the physical world they lived in, their dealings with it, and their dealings with each other. He knew well what constituted the footings of relationships there, and which features and behaviours of persons they esteemed or despised. This achievement was doubtless an important part of what enabled him to maintain effective, mutually satisfying relationships with his Amazonian friends. Many other good anthropologists out there share this achievement, while many others, and many philanthropists working with Amazonian peoples, do not. Juan adds another element that is less common—his commitment to People of the Center’s world is stronger, and perhaps the extent to which he has gone native and deployed substances and their symbolic associations both to interpret himself and to conduct his interactions with them, has kept him going back to the Amazon, and suggests to locals that this is someone with whom relationships can be expected to last. Certainly, these relationships cohere better with People of the Center’s experiences of their own relationships amongst themselves.

Juan directs today the graduate program in Amazonian history and culture at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Sede Leticia, in the Departamento del Amazonas, Colombia. Despite relatively poor funding, he has managed to create a little school of his own, with students who bear his stamp; they are liminal, irreverent, rigorous, and obsessed with empirical research. He also owns a plot of land where he produces tobacco, *mambe*, and other valued substances, and his social relations there very much involve continued exchanges of these.

Notes

¹The self-named “People of the Centre” constitute a complex, multilingual aggregate occupying the Medio Caquetá and Predio Putumayo regions of Colombia. It is comprised of people who speak or descend from speakers of the Uitoto, Bora, Miraña, Muinane, Andoke, Nonuya, or Ocaina languages. They are organized in patrilineal clans which often intermarry across language group lines, hold rituals in common, and have similar livelihood practices. The consumption of tobacco in paste form is a strong identity marker.

²Tobacco paste is made by boiling tobacco leaves for many hours until a dense reduction is achieved. It is mixed with certain plant phlegms or manioc starch to thicken it further, and then mixed with vegetable or ash salt. People—men, women, and even children—consume it by licking small amounts of it. It is a strong substance, and hearty licks can cause people to sweat, get dizzy, and eventually vomit or defecate.

³Coca or mambe is a substance made of toasted and powdered coca leaves mixed with the ashes of certain leaves. The substance is often prepared and consumed in male-only coca circles or mambaderos. It is consumed by packing one, two, or more spoonfuls of the powder in the cheeks, where it is slowly swallowed with saliva. The alkaloids are absorbed through the mucous membranes of the mouth. It is a mild stimulant that may numb the mouth tissues and reduce sleepiness and hunger.

⁴In using the term “indexed” here, I am taking my cue here from Keane (2003:413). I mean it as a shorthand for the claim that certain material qualities of the stuffs that were gifted or exchanged, and certain material conditions of their production, distribution, and consumption—for instance, the labor-intensive nature of tobacco production—were taken by participants in the exchange as entailing among other things that they were hard-working and to that extent morally stalwart folks.

⁵Thoughts and emotions are not separate, in the Muinane lexicon or in the manifest understandings of People of the Center.

⁶I use the term “performative” to describe utterances and gestures that shape the very things they name or are supposed to be about (as per Judith Butler 1993). In this case, the proffering of tobacco attempts to shape a relationship and the persons so related. The gesture, and others like it, are supposed to establish that the persons involved are hard-working, knowledgeable adult men who relate to each other with mutual generosity. Any of these qualifiers can be questioned, in infelicitous instances of such performative gestures.

⁷For further details on People of the Center’s understandings of substances, personhood, and morality, see Griffiths 1998, Echeverri 1997 and 2000, and Londoño Sulkin 2000, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2012.

⁸For an excellent account of knowledge that requires deep familiarity with a certain world of practice, see Meloe (2005), on ship-making in Norway.

⁹I had mentioned Bathurst’s discussion of the mutual disappointment of indigenous peoples and visiting outsiders.

¹⁰The adjective *goleado* comes from the verb *golear*, which denotes beating another football team by an ample number of goals. The term *meter un gol*—to make a goal—is used metaphorically in Colombia to refer to an instance in which one gains an advantage over another by means of trickery, deceit, or sheer power. Oscar was referring to the feeling that one had come off poorly in an interaction.

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