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Substances and Persons: on the Culinary Space of the People of the Centre

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Abstract

This paper refers to a cultural ensemble of groups of northwest Amazonia who self-designate as the People of the Centre (Witoto, Ocaina, Nonuya, Bora-Miraña, Muinane, Andoque). The production of food and the production of ‘true people’, in People of the Centre’s discourse, are referred to with a same set of terms; and the instruments and technical transformations of cooking (heating, pounding, filtering, combining and separating) are conceived of as bodily processes. The first section presents the main substances that constitute such a culinary space, both ritual and everyday. The second section, addresses the main technical processes that they undergo to transform them into foods. The third section discusses the meaning of the combination of different processed foodstuffs. It addresses these substances, processes and combinations—this alchemy—as the culinary and technical expression of the formation of true persons.

Introduction

The production of food and of true people in the discourse of the People of the Centre are referred to with the same set of terms and the instruments and technical transformations of cooking (heating, pounding, filtering, combining and separating) are conceived of as at once culinary and bodily processes. Thus, the culinary space is not only about how foods - ceremonial and everyday - are processed and consumed, it is also about the native notion of personhood, expressed in a culinary idiom.

It is processing that renders substances edible and it is the technical processes that constitute the alchemy of substances into persons. The descriptions presented here are intended to show what a substance, such as coca, means for the People of the Centre. It is not only the substance itself and the effects it may have on the metabolism that matter, but rather the acquisition of proper thoughts/emotions through its managing and processing. In this sense it is *alchemy*, inasmuch as the labour necessary to transform matter - the substance of coca - works also within the labourer himself. The person, through the technical gestures, embodies the thought/feelings that make him into a proper man. Likewise, the maker of vegetable salt (which is mixed with tobacco paste) goes through the processes of burning, filtering and desiccating, which are images of the formation of an embryo in the womb, a narrative of the former workings of the Father Creator, and the idioms of his own sexual capacity to fecundate - a ‘sexual education’. These technical processes resonate in the discourse itself, which replicates the material form of the process in the verbal uttering of the words, such that ‘words of dripping’, where the words drip one by one, name the filtering of the brine.

In this paper I refer to a cultural ensemble of groups of northwest Amazonia who self-designate themselves as the People of the Centre (Witoto, Ocaina, Nonuya, Bora-Miraña, Muinane, Andoque). Their ancestral territory spans the area between the Caquetá and Putumayo Rivers in south-eastern Colombia along the border with Peru, with a total population of about 11,600 people (Fagua 2015). These peoples constitute a single society, in spite of their spatial dispersion and linguistic heterogeneity and they share a rich ceremonial

order that revolves around the consumption of coca and tobacco (cf. Londoño 2012; Karadimas 2005; Griffiths 1998; Pereira 2012; Gasché 2009). The People of the Centre conceive of themselves as being distinct from other neighbouring groups to the north (Eastern Tukanoan and Arawakan-speaking groups), to the west (Western Tukanoan speaking groups), and to the east and south (Yuri-Tikuna and Peba-Yaguan speaking groups). This difference is remarked on with reference to the manner in which substances, both ritual and every day, are prepared and consumed.

People of the Centre are unique in preparing tobacco in the form of a paste, which is licked, in contrast to the inhaled tobacco snuff of the groups to the north, and the smoked tobacco of the groups to the west, east and south. Their ceremonial drink is an unfermented beverage of manioc, whereas all the neighbouring groups drink fermented manioc or pineapple beer. The People of the Centre prepare a chilli paste thicker than that prepared by the groups to the north, and all other neighbouring groups do not prepare it. What they do have in common with most Eastern Tukanoan and some Arawakan groups to the north is the preparation and consumption of coca powder, which is absent in all the other lowland groups. The cultivation of manioc is common to all, but the People of the Centre and the Eastern Tukanoan and Arawakan groups to the north privilege the cultivation and processing of bitter manioc, whereas the Peba-Yaguan and Yuri-Tikunan groups of the south privilege the cultivation and processing of sweet manioc. Bitter manioc is mostly used to prepare manioc bread, and the sweet manioc is mostly employed to prepare manioc beer. In addition to the main two manioc varieties bitter and sweet known to all lowland peoples, the People of the Centre distinguish a third main variety - manicuera manioc (*farekatofe* in Witoto) a kind of bitter manioc, of which only the squeezed juice is used to prepare a ritual drink.

This set of ritual and everyday substances thus defines a cultural geography based on the processing and consumption of a few common species: manioc, chilli, tobacco, and to a lesser extent coca. These cultivated foodstuffs are combined with other cultivated and wild non-meat foods, fruits, mushrooms, wild meat/game, fish and insects and other substances, ashes and salt. The adequate combination of cultivated and wild food is what constitutes human beings' bodies, but it is the manner of processing and consuming them that defines properly constituted human persons. It is to these that I refer in this paper, focusing on the Witoto, which arguably share many of the concepts I refer below with the other groups of the People of the Centre.

I begin by detailing the main substances that constitute such a culinary space, both ritual and everyday; then, I address the main technical processes that they undergo to transform them into foods, and finally I consider what it means to combine different processed foodstuffs. I address these substances, processes and combinations - this alchemy - as the culinary and technical expression of the formation of true persons.

The Substances

The foodstuffs that compose the core of everyday meals are manioc bread, meat, chilli sauce, and manioc starch drink. The main ritual substances are coca powder, tobacco paste and manicuera drink.¹

What I call the culinary space is structured by the wild and cultivated spheres that constitute society and by the opposition and complementarity of gender roles. On the one hand, the bulk of cultivated food comes from women's labour and meat comes from male activities in the forest and the river. In broad terms, these are the domains of reproductive consanguinity inside and affinity outside and they are present at every level of the culinary space. It amounts to an opposition between cultivated stuff (manioc and its derivatives, tobacco and coca) and wild stuff: fish, game, insects, salt, and ashes from wild sources.² Coca powder and tobacco paste are made up of the combination of a cultivated substance - coca and tobacco leaves - and a non-cultivated admixture - ashes in the case of coca, and wild vegetable salt in the case of tobacco. Ordinary fare is constituted by the combination of cultivated manioc and chilli with meat from wild sources; and furthermore chilli sauce is the

combination of syrup extracted from cultivated manioc seasoned with chilli and wild food (insects, mushrooms).

On the other hand, ordinary fare is mostly the responsibility of women and the production of ritual substances that of men. However, men procure meat, a key component of ordinary fare and women produce and elaborate the manicuera drink, a ritual substance. The substances that make up the culinary space intertwine wild and cultivated substances, and male and female gender roles. The everyday food is the combination of cultivated manioc and chilli plus meat, and ritual consumption is made up of two substances that combine cultivated and wild stuff, plus a female-produced drink. Gender and wild-domesticated complementarities are thus at the core of the substances that compose the culinary space.

These substances make up human bodies and persons. “We are the substances of tobacco, coca and manioc” is a common expression of all the groups of the People of the Centre. Not only do these substances through their consumption form the material substance of bodies, they also build the moral constitution of a person. The consumption and processing of these substances induce proper “thought/emotions”, to use Carlos D. Londoño’s (2012) expression. The core substances of the culinary space induce proper thought/emotions that provoke the righteousness of taking care of and respecting their relatives and nurturing their children. They also allow one to become a proper human being.

These substances are furthermore engendered. One could assume that manioc and chilli are emblematic of a female person, and tobacco and coca of a male person - as women and men respectively cultivate them - but this engendering is not so straightforward. Tobacco and coca, for example, are idioms to mean a female and male offspring respectively, as is stated by the Witoto Elder Enokakuïodo: “Then, in this world, this plant that we say plant of coca does not speak to us; that plant of tobacco is just a simple tree. It is *this tobacco* [meaning a daughter] and *this coca* [meaning a son] that speak. This is what we care about”.³ What he means is that the thought/emotions that *a man*, who has learned to care for, process and consume these plants, acquires the thought/emotions necessary to take care of a family. These thought/emotions become embodied in him and are passed through to their children. This offspring that recognizes its parents and speaks back to them are the *true* tobacco and coca.

I emphasize ‘*a man*’ in the paragraph above, as the substances and their processing are the means to become an engendered person. A male person is constituted through the learning of growing and processing coca and tobacco; a female person, through the growing and processing of manioc, chilli, tubers and several other cultivated plants and fruit trees. I will exemplify this with the case of coca for a man.

To learn to be a true man, one has to learn to grow and process coca - *consuming* coca will come only afterwards. When a young man asks one of his male elders to teach him about coca, that elder will not give him readily consumable coca powder. Instead, he gives him the coca seeds (i.e., stalks) and instructs him to carry out by himself the processes involved in producing it: slashing and burning a new plot, planting the seeds, taking care of the plants while they grow, harvesting, roasting and pounding the leaves, getting dry *Cecropia* leaves to get the admixture and sifting the pounded leaves with the *Cecropia* ashes. These are time consuming tasks that demand effort and perseverance. This is the root of the Word of coca. Coca is “the first love of a young man” (cf. Echeverri 2000, where I further elaborate on this expression). Its processing is equated with a sexual relationship: coca is like a beautiful girl; if you just want to sleep with her, this will lead to a prompt rupture; if you flirt with that girl, you need to be prepared to live with her and be up to her demands so that the relationship evolves into offspring; this is true Word of coca, as stated by Enokakuïodo in the quote above.

Every step involved in the growing and processing of coca is a practical lesson of life, and each one is accompanied by orations and Words of advice to carry them out properly. These orations and council to plant, grow and process coca will later on be the same advice that enables a man to take care of a woman and their offspring. Let us take a quick look at some of those steps.

Slashing and burning a plot of forest is a predatory action over natural beings. A man needs to speak to the masters of the wild plants and animals so that no accidents will happen. A young man will slash a small patch of secondary forest, but this task will prepare

him for his necessary task of preparing a garden in primary forest for his future wife. Planting and tending the growing seedlings is good preparation for taking care of a woman and a family. It is said, "Take care of the young plants as if you were taking care of a woman or a baby". He must clean around them, feed and water them, and carefully remove vines that may entangle in their growing branches. An oration to help a young child to begin to walk, for example, makes reference to the removing of vines that impede the normal spreading of the branches of the coca plant.

These new plants will not be harvested for months. The young man will allow them to produce their leaves, leaving them untouched. It is a lesson in how to take care of a woman. A man should allow for a woman to mature before grasping at her leaves, so to speak. When the time comes to harvest the leaves, there comes a new set of Words of advice: one must harvest the leaves one by one, beginning from the bottom up, taking care not to break the buds or harvest immature leaves; only when one bush of coca has been fully harvested one will proceed to the next. These gestures prepare a young man to think and speak in an orderly manner: he tackles each issue starting from its base, does not jump to another until the first is fully dealt with and, when married, he allows for adequate spacing between child births; he does not mistreat his relatives and friends with unconsidered words and thoughts.

Gathering the *Cecropia* leaves to prepare the alkaline admixture is a lesson of sexual purity. These leaves, from which ashes are obtained, are like the semen that will fecundate the coca leaves. There are Words of advice on this task. One must only gather the leaves that have fallen on the branches of other trees or bushes, not those that have fallen on earth, because the latter will be sullied with dirt; one must not pee, defecate or think about sex while gathering the leaves, because they will also get polluted. Cleanliness and the purity of thoughts enable virtuous living, and the gatherer's relative virtue is revealed in signs while the leaves are being burnt: if the ashes scatter all around, he was probably thinking about women, and so forth.

Roasting the gathered leaves of coca is the most crucial part of the process. It has special Words of advice and orations, which are very similar to those that a man invokes when his wife becomes pregnant. Leaves are roasted on a clay griddle, equated to the woman's womb, and the drying leaves are like a baby forming in it. The heat under the griddle is named as "cool fire", "fire of life", "humanizing fire". If the roasting is not going adequately, and the fire is not well managed, the leaves may burn, which is akin to a (spontaneous) abortion.

These processes will take place several times, over the course of months or even years, before finally that young man tastes coca powder for the first time. All those technical gestures train his body and mind in the thought/emotions of a proper man. In this way he gets to know - bodily - what coca is all about. Once he begins to consume coca (*jibie dute* in Witoto) he will become acquainted with more Words of advice: how to sit down, how to remain silent, how to direct his thoughts, how to listen.

This description is intended to show what a substance like coca means for the People of the Centre and how it is employed as a teaching tool for a male person. It is clear that it is not only the substance itself and the effects it may have on the metabolism that matters; but rather, the acquisition of proper thoughts/emotions through its managing and processing. In this sense it is *alchemy*, inasmuch as the labour on the matter - the substance of coca - is a working on the Self of the Worker. The person, through the technical gestures embodies the thought/feelings that make him into a proper man.

It is the processing as much as the consumption that is at stake here. It is noteworthy that the myths about the origin of coca center on the appearance of the technical processes mentioned above, and not on the appearance of the plant itself. The coca plant is represented as a woman from another tribe, who is the daughter of a cannibal and murderer. It is by processing the woman - and the heart of the father-in-law - that coca became a plant of humanity.⁴

Likewise we could exemplify this with the processing of tobacco, whose teachings and substance are also used for the formation of a male person (see Echeverri 2015); while the growth and processing of manioc and all other cultivated plants are the teaching substances for the formation of a true woman.⁵

The Processes

It is processing that renders substances edible, and it is the technical processes that constitute the true alchemy of substances into persons. *Finode* is the Witoto verb that expresses the concept of ‘processing’. It means, literally, “to make, to prepare” - as for instance in the expression *guiye finode* “to prepare food”. The result of processing is “to sweeten up” (*nai menaite*). Bitter manioc has poison; however it becomes edible through processing and coca and tobacco are also strong substances that need processing to render them humanized.

The three main kinds of actions involved in all culinary processes are heating, pounding and filtering. The *beating* action can be burning with fire (*jobaide*), roasting or toasting over fire (*yikide*), cooking (*zote*) or desiccating (*naaide*, *orede*) on a griddle or in a pot. The *pounding* action can be horizontal (*dobede*) in a canoe, vertical (*dute*, *guate*) in a mortar, or grating (*tiide*) with a grater. The *filtering* action can be straining (*izirite*) or sifting (*daitte*) through filters. Two complementary actions may also be involved: combining and separating (see below). This set of actions is present in all culinary processes in different orders and modalities and all of them resemble bodily processes.

One prepares manioc bread by softening the manioc tubers in water, pounding them in a canoe, squeezing (filtering and separating) the mass to extract the poison, and roasting the dry mass over a griddle. Coca powder is prepared by roasting the coca leaves over a griddle, pounding the roasted leaves in a mortar, combining the pounded leaves with ashes, and straining the mixture with a strainer. The same set of technical processes is present in the preparation of both substances but in different order: manioc is pounded, filtered, separated from the poison, and roasted; coca is roasted, pounded, combined with ashes, and filtered (see Table 1). The technical and symbolic symmetries between coca powder and manioc bread have been pointed out by several researchers (Gasché 1971; Hugh-Jones 1979; Hugh-Jones 1995; Karadimas 2005). Coca powder is “men’s manioc bread,” writes Gasché (1971:322–323).

Chilli sauce is a derivative of the processing of manioc bread. The poisonous juice, squeezed from the mass of manioc, is put to boil until it thickens, then it is combined, first with chillies, and afterwards with ants, insects, mushrooms, or other wild foods. Tobacco paste is prepared by cooking the tobacco leaves, filtering them to separate the juice, combining the filtered juice with a gum from a wild species as a thickening agent, and seasoning it afterwards with vegetable salt (the vegetable salt is prepared by burning various parts of selected plant species, filtering the ashes with water, and desiccating the obtained brine by boiling). The symmetries between tobacco paste and chilli sauce are remarkable (cf. Hugh-Jones 1979:231–234): tobacco and chilli are the only cultivated plants reproduced by seeds; the chilli sauce and the tobacco paste are both processed by boiling, filtering, and a double seasoning process; both are seasoned with wild substances, and both have the consistency of a thick spicy syrup. “Chilli sauce is women’s tobacco paste,” is a common expression.

Manioc starch drink is obtained by grating the manioc tubers of a special variety, filtering the resulting mass with water, separating the starch from the filtered liquid, and adding hot water and finally, flavouring the resultant starch with fruits or honey. The *manicuera* drink is elaborated by grating the tubers of manicuera manioc, filtering the mass with water, separating the starch from the liquid, and boiling the liquid to evaporate the poison it contains. Manioc starch drink is an everyday drink, and manicuera drink is a ritual substance. Their processes of preparation are the same, except that the varieties of manioc used for each one are different, and, in the final step, what is used for the manioc starch drink is the starch whilst for the *manicuera* drink, it is the liquid.

Men hunt game from wild sources and catch fish, and women prepare them by boiling or grilling. Meat may be seasoned with chilli peppers while cooking, nowadays (mineral) salt is served as a condiment as well.

<i>Substances</i>	<i>Heat</i>	<i>Pound</i>	<i>Filter</i>	<i>Combine</i>	<i>Separate</i>
Manioc bread	4: roast	1: horizontal	2: squeeze		3: poison
Coca powder	1: roast	2: vertical	4: sift	3: ashes	
Chilli paste	2: boil		1: squeeze	3: chillies/ wild food	
Tobacco paste	1: boil		2: filter	3: gum/salt	
Vegetable salt	1: burn 3: boil		2: filter		
Manioc starch drink	4: hot water	1: grate	2: filter	5: flavouring	3: liquid
Manicuera drink	4: boil	1: grate	2: filter		3: starch
Meat	1: roast, cook				

Table 1. Culinary processes of the main ritual substances and everyday foods. Numbers refer to the order of the processes.

Heating, in any of its forms - boiling, burning, roasting, cooking, desiccating - is the key action in all culinary processes. It is fire that detoxifies (*ñnode*) and sweetens up (*naiñenaite*) the substances. As Elder Enokakuiodo explains: “This is fire. This is the true mother. This heart of fire, this heat, is fire of abundance, fire of humanization. I sleep by this fire. This fire feeds me” and he adds: “This is the heart of fire. This heart of fire is immensely sweet, because it was formerly seasoned”. As we will see below, (Table 3) the proper seasoning and combination of foods is central in its consumption. However, the seasoning, which Enokakuiodo is referring to in the latter quotation, is a most radical one. Fire is seasoned because it transforms all sorts of evil things into pure ashes, and it is the one that chemically transforms the substances. Pounding and filtering are physical transformations.

Fire transforms a wild patch of forest into a cultivated plot and fire processes food and renders it edible and healthy. For the preparation of coca powder, the processes involving fire are the most crucial: the slashing and burning of a plot to plant the seeds, a predatory and foundational action (fire is the Mother), and the roasting of the coca leaves over fire, which is parallel to the formation of a creature in its mother’s womb (fire is the Mother). In the invocation to roast the coca leaves, the clay griddle where they are roasted is named with sweet and cool words: “This griddle-world is fresh clay; this griddle-world is made of the sweet herb *naimeki*; this griddle-world is made of the juice of manicuera manioc” (Echeverri and Pereira 2005:160, trans. by A. Ortiz). The griddle (*bikaño*) is conceived of as a womb that contains all humanity; if a leaf falls off the griddle, the Word of advice says, it is like a human being falling out of the world.

The processes involved in the preparation of vegetable salt may help us to illustrate how the technical culinary processes are conceived of as bodily processes. Of all the heating actions in the culinary space, the most radical one is that of burning plants to produce salt. Burning is a purifying and transforming action:

Now then, at that point, he throws all the filth and all the evil onto the fire; there, it burns. He processes, he goes burning everything in the fire: the filth around here, the annoyance around here. ‘With the heart of fire’, [says the Creator] ‘I process, I burn, so that the future generations have life, so that the future generations do not get confused, for them not to get disheartened, for their word to be well seasoned’. (Echeverri, Román-Jitdutjaño, and Román 2001)

All the collected vegetable material goes to the pyre. The Creator burns the illnesses in himself (prototypes of the future natural entities) to teach humanity how to obtain the true food of life and how to have a morally correct behaviour, which will lead to clear knowledge.

The burning process separates the inorganic substance of the vegetable matter that contains impurities and illnesses. This purified mineral substance, the ashes, is named as the semen of the Father Creator and the milk from the Mother. But that food/semen/milk is still in disorder, it stills need to be achieved in order for it to give life. Filtering the ashes is insemination; to filter is to fecundate:

This is filtering. At this point, now, this earth is salty earth, is life. On this earth, with the same substance—milk from the breast, salt—the trees, the ants, the animals, the fish, the former generations, formerly, with the same essence, they had life. (Echeverri, Román-Jitdutjaaño, and Román 2001)⁶

The brine that drips from the filter is like semen that fecundates life in the cradle (the pot that receives the brine). The Creator fecundates itself; his creation, more than the creation of ‘nature’, is the creation of his own nature. Furthermore, it is the fecundation that takes place in the woman’s womb that is also the fecundation of the maker of salt’s own consciousness. The discourse that explains the process of filtering becomes itself a *dripping*. In the original Witoto text, of which the above is a translation (see note 6), each slash is a pause: the words are uttered one by one; this form of speaking is called *daibiriya uai* “Word of dripping”. As the drops of brine fall into the receiving vessel, the dripping words instil into the vessel of the hearer’s body/mind.

The boiling of the brine, in order to desiccate it into salt, is the technological image of the forming of the embryo. This phase of the process makes visible the product of the whole labour. The “little seed” that coalesces is an image of the world and of the formation of the human creature:

At his point, it coalesces as a little seed. The Creator settles his breath down, this breath of salt he settles down. At this point, the Creator becomes thick, he regurgitates; the Creator coalesces as a salt crystal. In what space? On this space, space of humanity, space of life, space of feeling; there, it coagulates. (Echeverri, Román-Jitdutjaaño, and Román 2001).

This text simultaneously refers to the technical process of making salt, to the events that happened to the Creator *in illo tempore*, and to the formation of a creature in the womb. What happens to the brine during the desiccating - it thickens and regurgitates - is narrated as if it was happening to the Creator and is an image of the formation of the embryo. All this happens in a space of formation, which can equally be the pot where the brine desiccates, the space in which the world is formed, the womb, or the Self of the salt maker.

What I want to show with the technical process of making salt is that, as Enokakuiodo narrates, it is not merely a technical procedure. Its own concrete technical materiality resonates in the discourse about it - the discourse on filtering proceeds like dripping - and is an image of the formation of the world and of a creature in the womb. By making salt the Maker of Salt embodies this thought/emotion and the achievement of the salt crystal is also the achievement of his bodily capacity to fecundate. It is parallel to the process of making coca: a man, by making coca learns how to take care of his family and children. Likewise, each culinary process is an image of the bodily and moral processes involved in becoming a male and female person respectively: men through the processing of coca, tobacco and salt; women through the processing of manioc, the cultivation and processing of chilli sauce and by all the capacities she carries out with cultivated plants.

Women and men consume these processed foods both in ritual and everyday. We now turn to the combinations of processed substances in their consumption, which further elaborates the interrelationships between substances and persons.

The Combinations

Fire, the founding technical action of the culinary processes (fire is the Mother), is “seasoned” - a key concept of the culinary space. During their processing, substances are likewise seasoned: tobacco is seasoned with gum and salt, coca is seasoned with ashes, the manioc starch drink is seasoned with fruit juices, and the chilli paste is seasoned with chillies and wild food. These seasoned substances are furthermore combined during their consumption, and those combinations are images of proper social relationships and of the adequate conformation of a true person.

There is a set of Witoto verbs that refer to the combinations of different and contrasting substances or entities, which activate, fecundate, detoxify and make tastier. These combinations range from culinary processes to social and bodily ones: the adding of ashes into the coca powder (*imuide*, *jaikuiñote*), the seasoning of tobacco paste with vegetable salt (*ñnote*, *jaikuiñote*, *birñnote*), the fecundation of male and female substances (*ñnote*), the mixing of female voices in men’s songs (*aiñiya*) and the marriage of persons of different origins (*jaikuiñote*). The combination of male and female substances or voices and the creation of affinal ties by marriage on the one hand, complement the use of seasoning agents of wild origins with a cultivated product on the other: salt-tobacco, ashes-coca, gum-tobacco, wild food-chilli sauce, wild fruits-starch drink.

There are two sets of verbs that refer to combinations: the combinations that take place during the processing of the substances, and the combinations of prepared substances during consumption. The chilli sauce is seasoned (*jedonote*) with wild food (ants, mushrooms, etc.); the manioc starch drink is mixed (*kavenote*) with the juice of wild fruits or honey; the tobacco syrup is “fecundated” (*ñnote*) with vegetable salt; the coca powder is combined (*imuide*) with ashes. These combinations take place during the processing of the substances. Now, the manioc bread is dipped (*mutade*) into the chilli sauce, and is complemented (*fikade*) with meat, when actually eaten; and coca and tobacco accompany each other (*nabaide*) during their ritual consumption. Table 2 and Table 3 summarize these verbs; these tables also show the wild and cultivated sources of the combined substances and the gender roles in their acquisition or production.

FOODSTUFFS	WILD		CULTIVATED	COMBINATIONS
	MALE	FEMALE	FEMALE	
Chilli sauce <i>iyibi</i>		Ants, Mushrooms	Manioc juice	<i>jedonote</i>
Manioc bread <i>taingoji</i>			Manioc	<i>MUTADE</i>
Meat <i>yikie</i>	Game, Fish			<i>FIKADE</i>
Starch drink <i>jaigabi</i>	Fruits/honey		Manioc starch	<i>kavenote</i>

Table 2. Combining verbs for the processing and consumption of everyday food. Verbs in **SMALL CAPS** are those that name the combinations during consumption.

RITUAL SUBSTANCES	CULTIVATED		WILD	COMBINATIONS
	FEMALE	MALE	MALE	
Tobacco paste <i>yera</i>		Tobacco syrup/Gum	Ash salt	<i>ñnote</i>
Coca powder <i>jiibie</i>		Coca leaves	Ashes	<i>imuide</i>
Manicuera drink <i>juiñoi</i>	Manioc juice			<i>NABAIDE</i>

Table 3. Combinatory verbs for the processing and consumption of ritual substances. Verbs in **SMALL CAPS** are those that name the combinations during consumption.

The leftmost column contains the names of the processed substances, both everyday and ritual; the three following columns display the substances from which those are processed, which are in general the combination of a wild and a cultivated product; and the two rightmost columns give the verbs that name the combination of those products during the processing of the substances (in lower case), or the combination between processed substances during their consumption (in small caps). The verb *jaikuiñote* encompasses the verbs *ñnote* and *imuide*. Everyday food is founded on cultivated manioc produced by women, combined with wild food acquired either by women (the seasoning of the chilli sauce) or men (game and fish). Ritual food is based on male-cultivated tobacco and coca, seasoned (*jaikuiñote*) with ash (vegetable) salt and ashes—that is, with fire-seasoned wild stuff.

Everyday food is based on the complementation (*fikana*) of female-produced manioc bread and male-sourced meat; ritual food is based on the seasoning (*jaikuiñoga*) of cultivated tobacco and coca with wild, fire-processed salt and ashes. It is noteworthy that both meat, the main male contribution to everyday food, and manicuera drink, the main female contribution to ritual stuff, are both unseasoned substances. They are seasonings by themselves: meat is the *complement* (*fikana*) of manioc bread, and manicuera drink is the *companion* (*nabai*) of the male ritual substances. Both of them are placed on the two opposite extreme of the wild-cultivated continuum: game meat is the wildest food imaginable, whereas the manicuera drink is conceived of as the most domesticated milk of the mother's breast.

Fikade refers to the adequate complementation of wild substances (mostly meat) with cultivated ones (paradigmatically manioc bread). This verb has no straightforward translation into English or Spanish; it means to eat meat together with non-meat food. Meat is never eaten alone; it should always be the *complement* of non-meat stuff.⁷ This complementation is attached to the proper construction of a person. When I lived in the Caquetá River, there was once a lot of smoked fish in the house; I arrived home hungry and sat down happily to eat fish. When the owner of the house arrived, looked at me with the face of person witnessing a true scandal: “Only animals eat like that, a true person must *complement* meat”; that is, I should eat the fish with at least some *farinha*, rice or bread—never without *complement*.⁸

This culinary verb is the basis of key expressions that refer to being a full person. For example, the expression *uai fikaka izoide* (literally, “his word is like a well *complemented* food”) means that a person inspires trust, that his/her word is complete; that is, that he or she can speak before the public. Sometimes, such an expression is completed by saying *iza uai ñi ua kinenamo jata kotaja izoie* “his words are like an axe cutting into a *miriti* (*Mauritia flexuosa*) palm”. This expression stresses the fact that such a person is complete and the proof of this is that his words resound like an efficient axe hitting the hard trunk of the *miriti* palm. Such *complementing* is also a protection; for example, the expression *fikaka daina* literally “like *complementing*” is used to denote the application of a vaccine in the body.

To be well *complemented* is also to be well purified: *ñiëna fikaka, ñiëna ikoje* “it is well *complemented*, it is like a strainer”. Straining separates and purifies; the bottom of a strainer, charged with purified substance, is a conventional image for knowledge and experience; the pairing of *combining* with *straining* reinforces the idea that the notions of combining construe the most culturally elaborated and fully processed products - *persons*.

The verb *jaikuiñote* (“to combine, to mix, to season”) may be employed to describe the mixing of tobacco and salt (*ñnote*, literally “to fecundate”), and the mixing of ashes into coca (*imuide*). If *fikade* is the adequate complementation of bread and meat that make up a complete person, *jaikuiñote* refers to the combination of substances that have the power to fecundate. All food is seasoned-fecundated, and we, human beings, have also been fecundated. Enokakuiodo states: “Thinking about this, [the Creator wondered:] What is it that was not fecundated (incorporated)? Everything is fecundated, the manioc bread is fecundated, the chilli sauce is fecundated, the coca is fecundated, and we were also seasoned.”

The seasoning of salt to make consumable tobacco paste is an image of the fecundation of female blood (tobacco) with male semen (salt): “At this point, this [salt] is seasoned into tobacco [woman]. Likewise, the seasoned word is tasty. So it was said”. The same verb (to

fecundate-season) is employed to refer to the seasoning of a substance, to the fecundation of the female, and to the seasoning of the human word and person. Everything needs to be incorporated and seasoned to be tasty, to be good: “Seasoned things are tasty, but if they are not seasoned they do not come out well. It is tasty because it is seasoned. For this reason the works of the people are always well seasoned”.

Enokakuiedo, in his discourse, places several of these combinatory verbs together, as in two following excerpts: “One *fecundates*; what is *fecundated* is, in other words, *seasoned*; it is truly *complemented*”; “At this point it is gratifying, because it is already incorporated [*ĩinoga*], after incorporation, it is seasoned [*jedonoga*], and then afterwards it continues to be combined-mixed-seasoned [*jaikuiĩnoga*]”. The concept of fecundation (*ĩinote*) is modelled on the sexual intercourse; the concept of seasoning (*jedonote*) is modelled on the preparation of chilli sauce; and the concept of mixing (*jaikuiĩnote*) is modelled on the combination of ritual substances. The semantic fields of these verbs crosscut, but point to a set of notions that underline the deep interrelationships between substances and persons.

The paradigmatic model of *seasoning* is sexual intercourse, the combination of female and male substances, and its closest correlate in culinary space is the mixing of the pure tobacco pastes with vegetable salts. The verb *ĩinote* also means ‘to believe’: as the tobacco incorporates the salt, semen fecundates the woman’s blood, and a person believes in the good council they have received because she has them incorporated. It is not only combination but also a transformation: the seasoning activates and fecundates.

The verb *jedonote* means to season, and by that, it means to render things edible and palatable. Tobacco, coca and manioc are toxic, but they become good by their processing, transformation and seasoning. Seasoning is about not only adding flavour and taste, but also about transforming and purifying. The undesirable properties that the seasoning process eliminates or purifies are poison (*jukuirede*), itchiness (*kiorede*), hotness (*uzirede*), astringent taste (*jichenide*), bitterness (*erirede*).

Jaikuiĩnote may also be used to denote a person of mixed blood: “If it is not seasoned, it is tasteless. For that reason, things are seasoned. From this, it was born the mixed-blood person”. The creation of affinal ties through marriage is what regenerates society. Such as food is mixed and combined, society is likewise a process of combination. What is single has no taste. Everything has a complement, has a seasoning, and has a partner.

If *jikade* refers to complementation of contrasting substances that construct a proper meal and a proper person, and *jaikuiĩnote* to the fecundation of male and female substances, *nabaide* refers to the pairing of partners. Tobacco is a “friend” (*nabai*) of coca, and the *Cecropia* leaves’ ash is the “friend” of coca (cf. Román-Jitdutjaño and Echeverri 2010:320). *Nabai*, from which the verb *nabaide* derives, means “friend, partner, mate”. Enokakuiedo states, “When the Word of the Father was uttered, the Word was born with a *companion*”.

There are a succession of combinations with tobacco and coca. Tobacco is first complemented with the thickening gum, then seasoned with vegetable salt; coca is seasoned with ashes; seasoned coca and tobacco complement each other as friends, and upon taking them, a man dialogues with his partners.

To have a mate is foundational; it is a structural trait of life. Enokakuiedo thus says: “So then, since the beginning everything did come about with a *partner*. Right from the beginning, nothing (nobody) was born alone”. In the Discourse on Salt, Enokakuiedo narrates how all the mythological beings of the beginnings were born together with a mate, and concludes with a teaching for the future generations:

Then, at that point, one looks around and wonders, where was I born? Then, thinking about the place of birth, one receives his *mate*; he no longer looks elsewhere. This is my life; this is the word of *befriending*, of incorporating, of mixing, of making to coincide, of demonstrating, of looking forward; it is the word, truly, of having an insignia, it is a word of giving power.

To “have an insignia” means to have children, and “giving power” means that he (for a man) already has a mate and offspring. To have a mate (*nabaide*) is a concept that encompasses most of the other culinary and technical combinations and complementation of substances. One form of complementation, which also expresses the concept of gender

complementarity, is the harmony of male and female voices in singing, called *aiáya*. When men sing the ritual chants, women accompany by singing several tones higher. Enokakuideo thus says: “Then at that point, they sing in female voice; they do befriend”, and “Then, such is the female singing; it is seasoning, it is befriending”. The verb *aiáide* (to sing in female voice) is put together with *nabaide* (to befriend) and *ñnote* (to fecundate).

Conclusion

The culinary processes we have described are true alchemical processes, inasmuch the labour on the matter - the substances - are at the same time workings on the Self of the Maker. The young man who learns to plant and process the coca leaves embodies the thought/emotions of a true man, which enable him to take care of his family. The technical process involved in producing consumable coca is not merely a means to obtain the substance. Rather, it is this very process, in its concrete materiality, that teaches the coca maker's body about caring for and nurturing a future family. The maker of salt goes through the processes of burning, filtering and desiccating, which are images of the formation of an embryo in the womb, a narrative of the former workings of the Father Creator, and the idioms of his own sexual capacity to fecundate - a ‘sexual education’. These technical processes resonate in the discourse itself, which replicates the material form of the process in the verbal uttering of the words, as in the ‘word of dripping’, where the words drip one by one while naming the filtering of the brine.

The main technical actions of the culinary space—heating, pounding, filtering, combining and separating—are bodily images. Heating is the transforming power, which purifies substances, as the body processes and transform what is ingested. Pounding in the mortar or canoe is like chewing with the teeth. Filtering is replicated in the body in its several filters: the mammary glands, the kidneys, the liver, and the testicles. The culinary space is an extension of the human body. But it is the actions of separating and combining that most strongly resound in the formation of persons and society. These technical actions are closely related to both the complementarity and the antagonism that exists between the wild and cultivated spheres, and the female and male genders.

The main combinatory concept is that of manioc bread and meat, which is encompassed by the Witoto verb *fikade*: woman-processed manioc bread, obtained from the cultivated fields, must go together with male-obtained meat from the forest or river. This complementation is an idiom of being a full and complete person. The everyday gesture of combining meat with bread is an image of the fullness that needs to be achieved to become a proper woman or man.

The second combinatory concept focuses on the fecundation of male and female substances, encompassed by the verb *jaikuiñnote*, whose paradigmatic image is the seasoning of tobacco with vegetable salt, and the sexual intercourse between female and male persons. A ‘seasoned person’ speaks with seasoned words. This concept resonates in the creation of affinal ties that combine persons of different origins, and it also speaks to the harmony achieved when male and female voices sing together.

The third combinatory concept is the way to encompass the other. It is the concept of pairing (*nabaide*). This concept resonates with the whole world. Everything in this world has a mate; even the mythological beings of the beginnings were never alone; each one had its partner. Tobacco is the partner of coca, and the female-produced manicuera drink that sits along with them in the ritual space is befriending them. Woman and man are partners, and the substances of the ritual and everyday spaces go along together in their technical processes: the process of preparing manioc bread employs the same technical actions as that of male-produced coca powder; the female-produced chilli sauce follows the same technical procedures as that of the tobacco paste; and the two main drinks of the ritual (*manicuera* drink) and everyday (manioc starch drink) spheres are prepared in the same manner.

It further stresses the remarkable gender-complementarity of this culinary space. Women and men apply the same techniques in their own culinary spheres; male-acquired substance is the necessary complement of female-produced food, as female-produced drink is the necessary complement of the ritual substances. Plant species may be gender-specific

(manioc and chilli female, coca and tobacco male) but their gender attributions also get mixed up, such as when tobacco is attributed a female character in ritual discourse.

People are made of substances. Processing and consuming are vehicles to becoming proper persons. But persons are also like substances, and Enokakuiodo makes this plain when he states that the *true* tobacco is the daughter, and the *true* coca is the son. They are the ones who speak the word of tobacco and the word of coca.

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Notes

¹ See Table 2. for an explanation of the processing of these substances.

² In native ideology, ashes and salt are equated with meat and game in a very literal sense (cf. Echeverri 2015:119).

³ All the quotations of Enokakuido, cited in this paper without any reference, have been translated by me from the Witoto. They are taken from the Discourse on salt, a lengthy transcription of texts collected between 1995 and 1991 in Araracuara (Middle Caqueta, Colombian Amazon).

⁴ One version of the myth of the origin of coca for the Witoto can be found in Echeverri and Pereira (2005); another version is in Román and Echeverri (2010). The Muinane have a different version, as the one collected by Fernando Urbina (Urbina 1992:57–62). The myths of the origin of coca of the Eastern Tukano and Arawakan-speaking groups to the north do focus on the appearance of the plant and its relation to the structure of the unilineal descent groups, as noted by Christine Hugh-Jones (1979:228ff) for the Barasana, and Maria C. van der Hammen (1992:157–158) for the Yukuna.

⁵ For manioc, the most outstanding ethnography is that of Christine Hugh-Jones (1979) among the Barasana, an Eastern Tukano group.

⁶ *aakî / daibiriyano / aakî ðinori / jaa aiyi / bigîni / iáirue / nagîni / komuîya / mameki / iidî / daaje / monoîbi / iaîbi / amena / rakîngo / joyámîkî / rigakî / manótofe urukî / jááedî / dáájeri / abî / dáájeri / komuide* (my trans.)

⁷ This complementation is paradigmatic. In the myth of coca, narrated by Enokakuiodo, the spirit that helped the hero Jumayuema warned him that he was about to fall into a trap set by his father-in-law Nuiomaraí, by forecasting: ‘You are already the *complement* of Nuiomaraí’s manioc bread’ (Román-Jitdutjaañó and Echeverri 2010:319). That is, he was about to become Nuiomaraí’s meat.

⁸ Stephen Hugh-Jones remarks the same among the Barasana people: ‘Those who eat fish or game without manioc bread are severely reprimanded and told that they must combine meat and bread together’ (Hugh-Jones 1995).

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