

5 All alike anyway

An Amazonian ethics of incommensurability

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To be powerful is to resist comparison. To be great is to resist the ladder of sizes. Blessed be the one who lives in the new space which is not ravaged by the relation of order.

Michel Serres, *Detachment* (1989: 92)

People everywhere constantly compare. But do they compare in the same way, or to the same ends? On some level, comparison is intrinsic to the process of thought: without it, abstraction and generalisation seem impossible. As we scale up to everyday social interactions, and to the ways in which people compare those around them – to themselves, and to each other – new uncertainties emerge, and the act of comparison often takes on a moral valence. It also becomes more emotionally laden. According to social psychologists, there is in all of us something like an innate drive to evaluate our own opinions and abilities by comparing them with the opinions and abilities of others, especially those close to us (Festinger 1954). This is something we do constantly; and it has far-reaching consequences. Generally speaking, people strive to reduce discrepancies between themselves and those others, leading to various forms of competition and cooperation. The effects of this process on self-esteem has been particularly extensively studied: ‘upward’ comparisons are thought often to promote a sense of inferiority or anxiety, for instance, potentially lowering self-regard (though occasionally promoting inspiration to improve), while ‘downward’ comparisons are thought to have positive effects on subjective well-being (even if also fostering arrogance). Either way, attention to how we differ from those around us is held to be a major source of self-knowledge.¹

For all their purported ubiquity, however, such forms of comparison seem almost studiously avoided – publicly at least – among the Urarina people who inhabit the banks of the Chambira river and its tributaries in Amazonian Peru. In my experience, it is rare to hear people explicitly making the kinds of comparisons that focus attention on differences between the entities being compared in ways that could imply, or facilitate, some sort of value judgement. The exception to the rule is clandestine gossip, where

negative judgements of others are rife, but which is also a type of behaviour that is itself broadly construed as wrong. The kinds of comparisons that anthropologists routinely make – between groups or cultural practices, or forms of life – are rare. Instead, many explicit comparisons in everyday life assert general equivalences or draw attention to similarities between things and persons in ways that elide obvious discrepancies. There are, to be sure, times when comparing one person to another in terms of some relevant quality is virtually unavoidable; and people almost certainly compare themselves – and their opinions and abilities – to others in private, in order to get a sense of how they stack up in some relevant measure of value. All the more so, perhaps, in recent years, given the steadily increasing presence of externally manufactured commodities that can so visibly mark out differences in wealth. Yet for now, at least, such differences remain small. There is little material inequality in the average Urarina village; even abilities and opinions do not, on the whole, exhibit marked divergence. In theory, being surrounded by a community of similars could make social comparison even more prevalent – especially to the extent that group belonging is important to people. But Urarina people tend to be quite individualistic, and group identities are weak. What, then, should we make of an apparent reluctance to compare? How, why, and to what ends might some people resist comparison, at least in some of its guises? Is it possible to identify an ethics of non-comparison? To what kind of thinking, or social practice, might alternative ways of comparing give rise?

Life in a world of others

When I first arrived in Urarina territory in 2005, making pains to convey my well-intentioned interest in how Urarina people lived, I must confess that I expected many questions in return about myself and about life in my home country. I imagined piquing peoples' curiosity about all kinds of things I presumed they had never experienced or even heard of, from kangaroos to traffic jams to ocean waves. In time, once people got to know me and felt more relaxed – not only about asking questions, but also about revealing some of the limitations of their knowledge of life in far-flung places – they did indeed express some degree of curiosity about these things, and much else besides. On the whole, though, the many questions I expected never arrived.

The situation I encountered could thus hardly be more different from that described by Radhakrishnan (2009), whose regular visits to India would always see him and his local friends pose a series of heated questions to each other comparing life in India and in the United States, as they tried to get a handle on the many intriguing differences. Almost inevitably, he notes, such comparisons would turn into evaluations of relative superiority: his auto rickshaw driver is intensely interested in driving and road conditions in their

respective countries; and soon they are arguing over the relative merits of safe, orderly traffic lanes versus ‘creative’, free, proactive driving.

What starts out as a neutral and disinterested comparison of modes inevitably turns into a comparison between life worlds and ways of being. Where and how does one draw a critical line between ways of being and ways of knowing?

(Radhakrishnan 2009: 453)

At times, I wondered if the reluctance of Urarina people to ask me about my home country was due in part to some fear of embarrassment, that their naïve questions might reveal the extent of their own ignorance. After all, asking coherent and meaningful questions does require a fair amount of background knowledge. I also wondered, I must confess, if they were simply too self-centred to care much about how they compared to others, preferring just to get on with doing their thing, as it were. For they similarly seemed reluctant to indulge in comparisons between themselves and neighbouring ethnic groups, of whom they did, I believe, have some reliable knowledge. At the same time, the significance of the ‘other’ in Amazonian cosmologies is very well-established, a well-worn theme of the regional ethnography, and it is surely the case that Urarina peoples’ senses of who they are and their place in the world comes through some form of reflection – not least in myth – on the position of the other. And yet in everyday life, at least, my Urarina interlocutors simply did not appear willing to make statements of the kind that would compare themselves, as Urarina, to other peoples such as the Cocama or Candoshi, or the mestizo population, or even the gringos.

There were occasional exceptions to this, for instance, in the form of offhand remarks in response to my leading questions about neighbouring groups, such as the Candoshi, who figure prominently in stories from the old times, routinely depicted as wild and dangerous warriors who arrive by stealth in Urarina villages to steal women and children and objects of value. Such discourse, it seems to me, frames an implicit comparison of sorts and arguably an implicit evaluation of the Urarina’s own moral superiority. One man told me, with a possible note of envy and regret, ‘Oh, the Candoshi? We don’t fight them anymore Now they’re all professionals!’ By this, he meant they worked for a salary; Urarina people, as we both knew well, did not do this. In 2006, when this conversation took place, their subsistence lifestyles revolved around hunting, fishing and slash-and-burn cultivation, interspersed with occasional work for local mestizo bosses under the system of *habilitación*, through which they obtained access to manufactured goods. Other than the schoolteacher, no one in a typical Urarina village had any cash money. So I pressed for more details on why Candoshi were different to Urarina, and apparently wealthier, or at least lived in different circumstances. But my interlocutor appeared to retreat from the implicit

comparison he had just drawn. ‘*¡Igualitos son!*’, he insisted. ‘They’re the same’. This was an expression I came to hear a lot, as it happened, in many different contexts. Sometime later, however, I heard another remark that further complicated this scenario. I was accompanying José and his wife and son in their garden, receiving instruction on how to plant manioc stems. ‘Do it like this’, he told me, demonstrating a gently curving motion as he slid the stem into the loosened soil, bringing the far end around upwards so it lay at a more oblique angle. ‘Why not just push it straight in?’ I asked. ‘The Candoshi do it that way’, he told me curtly, ‘this is how we do it’.

Knowing little about manioc cultivation, I have no idea whether this comment reflects a genuine difference in farming practice or what if any the consequences might be, though I suspect they are probably trivial. Nevertheless, manioc cultivation is no small part of Urarina lifeways and the production of manioc beer in particular enables festive sociality. The ostensible difference in planting styles might stand in metonymically for some sense of ethnic and cultural divide. It should be pointed out that the grounds of ethnic difference are not at all ambiguous in this part of the world, largely because of the utterly different languages spoken, which make identification of a person with a group a relatively straightforward matter – at least in places as yet unaffected by language loss. And yet, precisely what the notion of the ‘ethnic group’ means for the Urarina is far from a straightforward question.

The relativity of ethnicity

Like so many other Amazonian peoples, the Urarina position themselves at the very centre of the cosmos, as the quintessential ‘real people’ (which is the meaning of their auto-ethnonym, *cacha*). They appear more or less to take for granted that their way of living is the best possible, and most representative of ‘true’ human existence. Those who live elsewhere, and do otherwise – eat different foods, for instance – are in some important sense less than fully human. They exemplify, we might say, the ‘ethnocentric attitude’ according to which ‘[h]umanity is confined to the borders of the tribe, the linguistic group, or even, in some instances, to the village’ (Lévi-Strauss 1952: 11; see also Viveiros de Castro 1998: 474–75). After all, as Lévi-Strauss pointed out, ‘the concept of humanity as covering all forms of the human species, irrespective of race or civilisation, came into being very late in history and is by no means widespread’.

As such, Urarina ethnocentrism (for want of a better term) differs to that found in some other parts of the world – such as the well-known Japanese genre of popular literature known as *nihonjinron*, for example, literally ‘theories/discourses of Japaneseness’: closely associated with a pervasive ‘myth’ of national uniqueness (e.g. Goodman 2008), discourses of this kind are quite different, not least because they assume a stable, bounded group (viz. ‘the Japanese’), one kind of human being among many, and represented as to a considerable extent internally homogeneous, which is

to say, all members possess some characteristic in more or less to the same degree. The *nihonjinron* literature is thus sometimes accused of ignoring regional variation within Japan (usually in order to compare ‘Japan’ to an essentialised ‘West’), along with the presence, in other Asian countries, of those characteristics thought to be uniquely Japanese. It is hard to imagine an analogous discourse of Urarina uniqueness – not only because the relevant comparisons are mostly downplayed, and left implicit; but also because of widely divergent underlying premises. Viveiros de Castro (2004) has argued that anthropological-type comparisons, which would compare one culture or people to another, are predicated on a historically specific ontological configuration that presupposes a plurality of ‘cultures’ superimposed on the metaphysical unity of ‘nature’. The Amerindian conception posits instead (as he puts it) ‘a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity – or, in other words, one “culture”, multiple “natures”’. The idea of common humanity – which essentially underpins the project of cultural comparison as we know it – dissolves in the face of this natural multiplicity, coming to mean something very different indeed: ‘Any species of subject perceives itself and its world in the same way we perceive ourselves and our world. “Culture” is what one sees of oneself when one says “I”’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 6). The perspectival mode of comparison focuses not on how some phenomenon, or aspect of a single underlying reality, is culturally represented and understood, in different ways in different places; but rather on how ‘different kinds of bodies “naturally” experience the world as an affectual multiplicity’ (2004: 7).

For my purposes here, I am less interested in exploring possible ontological divergences of this sort, than in how particular forms of comparison become more or less ethically laden. Nevertheless, the above does helpfully raise the question of how and why the salient axes of comparison might vary: that is, where and how Urarina people themselves might draw the (to them) more significant or interesting lines of difference. If the regional ethnographic literature is any guide, the more salient distinction is perhaps not between different ethnic groups, but between humans and nonhumans (acknowledging that other ethnic groups may also fall into the latter category). Yet here, too, to be clear, there is nothing resembling a discourse of direct or systematic comparison – even if Urarina do make disparaging remarks about, say, the disrespectful tendencies of jaguars. In fact, insofar as all beings are thought to share a common set of humanlike (mental or spiritual) attributes, many Amazonian peoples appear not to make a strong distinction between humans on the one hand and other species of animals or plants on the other. This is a processual and anti-essentialist ontology, where the distinctions between kinds of beings can be slippery and uncertain (in stark contrast with the essentialist and primordialist visions of discourses like *nihonjinron*). Descola (2001: 108) put it as follows:

the multiple entities inhabiting the world are linked in a vast continuum animated by an identical regime of social and ethical rules. Their

internal contrasts are defined not by any essentialist assumption as to their natures but according to their mutual relations as specified by the requirements of their metabolisms.

Such contrasts between kinds of being effectively eclipse those between human males and females, which is why gender is not a salient differentiator in the region (in the way it is in, say, Melanesia). Membership of relevant groupings (such as species) is dynamic and (according to Descola) defined less by intrinsic properties than by relative position in a series of contrastive sets. What is needed is a more general analysis of the kinds of contrasts that become salient to people:

The language of affinity qualifies relations between generic categories – man and woman, insider and outsider, congener and enemy, living and dead, human and natural kind, humanity and divinity – at the same time that it establishes the frontiers of these categories, that is, their relative content. Now, each culture appears to emphasize a small cluster of these contrast sets to the detriment of others, the outcome being that the actual diversity of cultural styles is subdued by the unifying effect of an underlying system of relationships.

(Descola 2001: 106)

Among the Jivaro, according to Descola, the significant contrasts are human/nonhuman and congener/enemy, which results in a series of structural homologies; among the Araweté, by contrast, the contrasts between living/dead and humanity/divinity are especially meaningful and productive, while the Arawakan peoples meanwhile draw a salient distinction between highland peoples and lowland peoples. In short, the contrasts between categories of being that are significant to people can vary, and only in some cases does the category of the human cultural or ethnic group become the significant contrastive element. To return to the Urarina, it may well be the case that there are certain distinctions that overshadow any comparison they might be inclined to make with neighbouring peoples such as the Candoshi: between themselves (as ‘people’, *cacha*) and mestizos (*aansairuru*), for instance, or between ‘civilized’ people and ‘savages’ (*taebuinae*, a category of which jaguars might be seen as exemplars). Yet even these contrasts are not clearly delineated, for reasons we must now explore.

Wither the third term?

Descola’s analysis drew from the intellectual legacy of Claude Levi-Strauss, who sought to demonstrate that juxtaposed binary oppositions underpin Amerindian myth in particular, and (somewhat more controversially) human thought in general. Yet the binary nature of the contrasts points also to another reason why Urarina might resist comparisons of people or groups,

regardless of putative differences of ontology. As noted above, Urarina are in fact willing to make cultural contrasts between themselves and other groups, or kinds of being, even if (apparently) minor or even trivial: in terms of how they plant manioc, say, or treat their relatives. In other words, two-way analogical comparisons of what we ourselves might refer to as cultural differences do seem to exist. What appears to be absent, instead, is a common backdrop for the comparison of contrastive elements which could potentially extend to three or more: not necessarily 'nature' or 'humanity' specifically, but anything that could constitute common ground: a third term for rendering the other two terms equivalent and commensurable. A meta-physical benchmark, as it were, or transcendental horizon.

Comparisons made using a third term, or *tertium comparationis* (to use an expression from comparative literature), are associated with a stable and encompassing frame of reference and readily give way to forms of ranking or hierarchy. This is because they enable commensuration, through which different qualities are transformed into a common metric. At some level, like comparison itself, commensuration is crucial to how humans everywhere categorise and make sense of the world; and yet, it is clearly not deployed in the same way everywhere: Weber linked commensuration to rationalisation and thus to modernity, while Marx linked it to labour as a measure of value, and ultimately to money – the ultimate standard of equivalence in capitalist societies. As Espeland and Stevens (1998: 315) observe, commensuration is often taken for granted, to the extent that we forget just how much work, organisation and discipline it requires. How, in which ways, it permeates social life is an empirical question: '[w]e need to explain variation in what motivates people to commensurate, the forms they use to do so, commensuration's practical and political effects, and how people resist commensuration'.

It may be significant, in this context, that when I first began fieldwork in 2005, very few, if any, Urarina people possessed any cash money. This began to change just a few years later, with the introduction of the Peruvian government's conditional cash transfer programme, *Programa Juntos*. People had nevertheless for some time been familiar with money as a medium of value, because of how prices were used by the riverine traders who for decades have contracted Urarina labour under the system of *habilitación*. The standard local price of everyday items like machetes, shotgun cartridges and the like was thus well known to everyone; moreover, in many situations – pooling items together to form the minimum entry bet in local football tournaments, for example – people had no trouble rendering quantities of such items equivalent through the medium of money, even if they had never actually laid their hands on cash in their lives. Nevertheless, what Deleuze and Guattari (1983) referred to as the deterritorialisation of desire by capitalism was still only incipient: that is to say, many goods were sought out for use in specific relationships or situations, which were socially 'coded': gifts of cloth and glass beads from a man to his wife, say. Moreover,

some items were generally exchanged with specific other items, with little concern for their precise monetary value. The exchange of a good hunting dog for a canoe, for example, seemed to be fairly common, and widely recognised as appropriate and fair. As Marx (1976[1867]) demonstrated, capitalism creates a system of equivalencies, or exchange-values, between commodities such that they become abstract and quantifiable, detached from their individual use-value; at the same time, they become ever less embedded in the conventions or social ‘codes’ that guide their distribution. Limits to exchange are broken down, as people come to experience their desires as insatiable.

Comparison against a common benchmark or standard is also the kind of comparison that enables categorisation, and especially categories that are hierarchically ranked or nested within each other. Of relevance here, perhaps, is the striking shallowness of the taxonomies that comprise Urarina ethnobiology and ethnobotany. Like many other hunter-gatherers and hunter-horticulturalists, Urarina know and use a vast array of specific terms for individual species of animals and plants. Yet, there appear to be relatively few terms for higher-order categories that would correspond to the Linnean taxonomic ranks found in Western scientific biology: genus, family, order, class, phylum, and so on. There is no word in the Urarina language for ‘tree’, or ‘animal’, or ‘fruit’. This is probably not unusual: life-form categories such as ‘tree’ do tend to be of low salience for people in small-scale societies (e.g. Witkowski, Brown and Chase 1981), and the taxonomies of hunter-gatherers do tend to be shallow with little evidence of subclassification (Brown 1986: 5). Hunn and French (1984) write, of the folk biology of the Sahaptin of the Pacific Northwest, that they *coordinate* taxa in direct contrast with each other, rather than *subordinate* less inclusive taxa to those more inclusive. Durkheim and Mauss (1963) famously argued in *Primitive Classification* that the conceptual recognition of hierarchy in a taxonomy is predicated on a prior experience of social hierarchy. Whether or not this is the case, it should be made clear that neither shallow nor hierarchical taxonomies are more closely associated with abstract thought or the capacity for it. What I want to emphasise here is that the formation of higher-order taxonomic categories would appear to be predicated on, and enabled by, precisely the kind of comparison involving (and in this case creating) a third term by virtue of which the equivalence and commensurability of two other terms is established.

In praise of likeness

Let us return now to examine in a little more detail how Urarina do actually go about making – and avoiding – comparisons in their everyday lives. I mentioned earlier my (mostly frustrated) expectations that my interlocutors would exhibit great interest in my home country, bombarding me with questions that in truth never came. To help satiate their curiosity,

I had brought with me a small hardcover book full of colour photographs of Australian wildlife, which (unlike its companion volume of Australian cities and cityscapes) attracted very deep and widespread interest. Children especially would crowd around, turning the pages together, commenting on each photograph in turn: almost invariably ‘naming’ the animal depicted; by which I mean naming its closest local relative. Thus a photograph of a saltwater crocodile would elicit cries of *dzakari!* (‘caiman’); the wombat would without hesitation be named ‘capybara’; the sugar glider ‘red squirrel’; and so forth – despite the glaring differences between these species found on different continents. People might comment appreciably on, say, the impressive size of the teeth of the saltwater crocodile but would not voice any explicit comparison with the teeth of (what they deemed) its local equivalent.

It is interesting to note that there is, in fact, no morphological comparative in the Urarina language. There is no term equivalent to ‘more’ and no way of modifying an adjective in the way speakers of English can add the comparative suffix – *er*. In fact, there is no underived class of adjectives at all. Concepts that are typically represented by adjectives in other languages – age or colour, say – are expressed by nouns or verbs, respectively.² Accordingly, all comparisons are made through derived forms of verbs, such as ‘exceed’, ‘be less’, or ‘be like’. In each case, the parameter of comparison is expressed by a clause, rather than an adjective, or word referring to quality. Thus to indicate that Jorge is bigger than Manuel, one could say for example, ‘Jorge is big, exceeding Manuel’.

Yet, while there are a few different strategies that people can use to compare qualities, it seems quite rare for people to make comparisons that imply superiority or inferiority. This was not just my impression: the linguist Knut Olawsky (2006) found none occurring naturally in his text database and had to elicit examples from informants in order to study how the comparative works. I was struck that in everyday speech people rarely seemed to give voice to comparisons such as ‘as good as’, ‘better than’, ‘the best among’: what Radhakrishnan (2009) refers to as ‘the positive, comparative, and superlative degrees of calibrating value within a single but differentiated world’.

What we do find, however, is a very large number of comparisons that liken or equate one thing to another. Indeed, there are many strategies for comparing in ways that involve equality: the suffix */-ni/*, for instance, means ‘as ... as’ (as in ‘Manuel is as big as Jorge’; cf. Olawsky 2006). People can also use a reciprocal form, using the reciprocal marker */ita/*, as in: ‘Manuel and Jorge, they are old (men) each other’. Still, more common is to use one of several comparative verbs that express ‘be like’. These include *tokuania*, *rihiitca*, *rihitooa* and *rihitokoaka*: all transitive verbs which differ slightly in terms of being based on different kinds of perception (looking similar, sounding behaving similar, tasting or smelling similar, having a similar effect, and so on). Such verbs are exceedingly common in everyday speech. They also pervade ritual language: the songs of shamans, for example, sung

during healing sessions under the influence of psychotropics and (mostly) voiced from the perspective of the spirits who control them. These make very frequent reference to those who lived and drank these plants long ago, the ancestors esteemed for their expertise in shamanic practice: ‘Just as they did it before, defending the living, so you too shall do it’. These assertions of equality take place against the backdrop of eroding cultural knowledge and a strong sense that, in actuality, the shamans of the present are but a pale shadow of their illustrious and powerful antecedents. When difference is taken for granted, claims of equality have rhetorical force.

Yet this is not just a question of grammatical structure compelling their use: as Olawsky (*ibid.*) also observes, ‘[c]omparisons that refer to equality are much more frequent, which implies that this concept is more significant than other types of comparison, in terms of cultural values’. Further evidence for this would be that such assertions of equality are also very prevalent when people are speaking in Spanish. Needless to say, this makes certain lines of questioning difficult for the anthropologist: thus whenever I asked after the difference between one thing, or practice, and another, as a way of trying to deepen my understanding, I would get the generic reply, ‘*¡Igualitos!*’, ‘they’re the same!’.

Drawing assertions of comparative likeness, often through the creative use of similes and metaphors, are exceedingly common in the light-hearted teasing interactions that form a core part of everyday sociality. I will give a couple of brief examples by way of simple illustration. One day, I was sitting in José’s house with a couple of others, drinking manioc beer when Napoleon walked past, wearing shoes, which was unusual, and essentially ignoring us. ‘Martín Inuma!’, called out José – that being the name of the local schoolteacher, and the only person in the village to regularly wear shoes. Or, to take another example: Antonio once cleared his throat overly loudly, emitting a rough growling noise that made those around him laugh. ‘Howler monkey!’ said someone casually – invoking a species of monkey notorious for its throaty call. Such use of creative analogies in joking interactions has been beautifully described by Rogalski (2016) among the Peruvian Arabela; the following is one of many examples that Urarina people would certainly also have appreciated:

Artemio came to the abandoned house where I was staying. From my house we noticed the mosquito net of his brother and my neighbour. In spite of it being rather late in the morning, it was still out. His brother is an enthusiastic *masato* drinker and *minga* worker but he always needs a lot of time to recover from drinking. Artemio made a joke saying that Venancio was like an arowana fish. He explained to me that arowana – although of a considerable size – is one of the first fish to become stupefied once poisonous *barbasco* (*Lonchocarpus urucu*) juice is spread into the water. Immediately, he prompted me to call Venancio shouting *arowana!*

Such jokes rely on what we might, after Fogelin (2011), refer to as ‘figurative comparisons’: metaphors or similes which essentially state that ‘a is like b’ in some relevant but context-dependent way, and where the comparison can all too easily seem false: on standard, literal criteria, Venancio is not like the arowana fish at all. This mismatch is of course part of the incongruity that generates the humour: ‘Figurative meaning arises, *in general*, through a (mutually recognised) mismatch of literal meaning with context, and, more specifically, this is how the figurativeness of figurative comparisons arises’ (2011: 32; italics in original). Indeed, to the extent that such comparisons are figuratively true, they are typically literally false. Most importantly, figurative comparisons of this kind depend on canons of similarity determined by the context, and this is constantly shifting. The result is akin to a puzzle, insofar as listeners must arrive at the result themselves: in Fogelin’s words, there is ‘a transparent incongruity (oddness) that admits of resolution’ (2011: 94). To say merely that Venancio looks like an arowana fish – whether true or false – would be to invoke a stable canon of comparison that is neither innovative nor context-dependent. In the figurative comparison above, by contrast, the remark ‘arowana!’ encourages listeners to scan the relevant feature space and select those features of the arowana fish (the referent) that are applicable to Venancio (the subject), given specific (unspoken) details of the context (cf. Fogelin 2011: 84). The context must be ‘trimmed’ so that it fits with the utterance, because the framework of similarity is not conventionally established. The comparison is thus a mode of inventiveness: playful, creative and humorous, involving carefully timed coordination with an audience.

As Olawsky (2006) observes, the Urarina language has a number of different strategies for expressing comparisons, but these mostly focus on equality, rather than indicating that someone or something is of higher or lower rank than others. I noted earlier that people tend to avoid making comparisons of the kind that result in hierarchy, or a process of ranking. This means, for instance, that people would generally abstain from making evaluative (and especially appreciative) comments about other peoples’ abilities or capacities. I cannot imagine someone making a statement (even in Spanish) along the lines, ‘Antonio is a good hunter’ (let alone ‘Antonio is a better hunter than Manuel’). I got only at best half-hearted assent to my own probing assertions along such lines: ‘Oh, Victor is good at football isn’t he?’, or ‘Jorge is a good public speaker.’ This may be in part a way of downplaying accomplishments – both one’s own and those of others – as for instance people often reportedly do in societies characterised by a so-called egalitarian ethos: a hunter, for example, will tell people he only managed to catch a small and skinny animal, even if it’s large and meaty, and his comrades will agree. Yet, I also think it reflects a more general reluctance to assume or assert knowledge of the capacities of others: a kind of evaluative abstinence, as it were, that could readily be interpreted as a form of showing respect to others (see Walker in press). This goes hand in hand with a sense

that it is wrong to essentialise, to turn a particular deed or even skill into an intrinsic attribute of a person. Thus, the only evaluations of ability tend to be negative and not made lightly: for example, describing someone as a poor or luckless hunter (*afasi*, in the regional Loretan Spanish dialect) is liable to cause serious insult, and to stick. I was present once when the daughter of my neighbour Pedro hooked up one night with a young man who was visiting from a neighbouring village. That they were still together the following day indicated their intention to marry. At first, Pedro consented to the union, but word soon reached him that the boy was *afasi*. No one wants an *afasi* son-in-law, and he voiced his opposition so vehemently that his daughter relented and returned home.

Similar kinds of tendencies appear to surround descriptions of other things, such as material objects. While people may scoff at an object made poorly, or express admiration at something made beautifully, it is rare to hear one compared directly with another. It is not even particularly common for people to express their appreciation openly: ‘that’s a beautiful canoe’, or ‘that’s a nice house’, for instance. Instead, people seemed more likely to comment on their acceptability, their basic conformity to an accepted standard or model. Not an endless series of more or less beautiful canoes, so much as a cluster of acceptable canoes around an ideal type. To the extent that some might be judged closer to, and others further from, that ideal, there might be grounds for arguing that there does in fact seem to be a standard of sorts emerging, a basis for value judgements. Yet, many evaluations appear fairly generic and binary in nature (conforming or non-conforming), and thus do not seem to result in the kinds of explicit comparisons that would entail relative value judgements by virtue of proximity to an ideal (‘this one is better than that one’). Where such a comparison seemed inevitable, it might be left implicit: ‘That Soldado was a good dog, he hunted well’, someone might say while gazing at their new replacement dog, patently inept when it came to hunting. It is similarly rare to hear people express preferences for certain kinds of things: no one is likely to talk about their favourite foods, for instance. When I once tried asking someone which kind of meat they liked best, my question was received with a kind of mild incomprehension – rather as though all kinds of meat were equally good, and to be received with gratitude. Expressing a preference might even be seen as ungrateful, and for similar reasons, perhaps, food preferences among children, or dislikes of certain foods, are not tolerated in the slightest. People might express a fondness for certain popular musical ensembles (Peruvian cumbia is by far the most popular genre), but they would not be likely to voice a preference or relative evaluation, of the kind, ‘Armonía 10 are better than Los Mirlos’.

Ultimately, the way material objects are evaluated for general acceptability through conformity to an ideal type seems the way evaluations of persons take place. It is a matter of general or common knowledge what the capacities of an adult male or female Urarina person is or should be; and

people either meet or, in a few very rare cases, do not meet, these generous and rather flexible criteria. This would seem to explain, among other things, the sense of easy interchangeability I detected when people spoke about finding a spouse, whether for themselves or for their children. That is, people seemed unconcerned about finding a spouse with particular characteristics or someone who excelled in a particular way. When I asked what people were looking for in a spouse, they would usually give a vague answer along the lines, 'Oh, anyone will do' – provided, of course, they meet the minimum criteria of acceptability. Similarly, when a friend told me I should find myself a wife, no doubt taking pity on me for having to cook for myself and sleep alone, I asked him good-naturedly who he thought might be a good candidate. 'Oh, just grab anyone, it doesn't matter!' he told me, quite seriously. This is an inclusive attitude in some ways. If there is a flipside, it might take the form of relative or apparent indifference to excellence. There are also unmistakable limits to peoples' tolerance, and when people fail to meet basic minimum criteria, they will be judged negatively, and refused: a very poor hunter; a woman whose handiwork is ugly. Having some other skill or talent, outside the expected (conventional) spheres of expertise, is unlikely to be seen as adequate compensation.

The question arises: do Urarina therefore see people and things as genuinely and fundamentally alike? That is, does the propensity to compare on the basis of likeness, rather than difference, imply some kind of fundamental sense of underlying unity? The answer, I think, is no, for a number of reasons. Firstly, as noted, many judgements of similarity depend on a shifting frame of reference, and are fleeting. They are also not transitive: if a is like b, and b is like c, then a is not necessarily like c. Thirdly, judgements of similarity are commonly asymmetrical and non-reversible: to say that a is like b is not to say that b is like a. To return to the earlier example, Venancio may be like an arowana fish, but an arowana fish is not like Venancio (consider the claim 'This man is a lion': it is quite different from saying 'This lion is a man', cf. Fogelin 2011: 61). Finally, I suspect that it is in fact precisely because the things of the world are ultimately incommensurable that people are prompted continually to draw out surface similarities and likeness. A relation of difference is taken for granted, as it were: presupposed by the statement that 'this is like that', its logical precursor – just as comparison based on the orderly evaluation of difference is predicated upon an underlying unity, a stable common ground on the basis of which difference can be ascertained.

Desingularisation and the state

This insight helps us to understand the relatively fluid notion of the ethnic group. When people possess the regular range of capacities and behaviours, they are humans by definition; once they start to deviate from this implicit standard, their essential humanity is called into question. Hence, a certain

sense that Jivaroans and other neighbouring groups, for all their similarities to Urarina people, are still somewhat less than fully human. As noted above, Urarina do not have a strong sense of themselves as a people, or ethnos; no one really talks about Urarina identity or culture as something to be proud or ashamed of, displayed for others, conserved and so forth. In this, it should be noted, they are probably unlike most other indigenous peoples in lowland Peru, many of whom have a long history of mobilisation around their indigenous ethnic identities. To the best of my knowledge, the Urarina are the only sizeable ethnic group with no representative political organisation; attempts in the past few years to found one appear to be floundering. This corresponds to a general lack of interest (for now at least) in political struggles, campaigns and protests, again in stark contrast to neighbouring groups such as the Awajun, who have been involved in direct and sometimes violent confrontations with outsiders in recent years and are accustomed to leveraging their own ethnic identity to pursue their claims and demands.

I do nevertheless have the impression that a certain sense of belonging to a coherent, recognisable ethnic group is beginning to emerge among Urarina people. One reason for this is likely to be increased contact with outsiders, including small numbers of tourists who, over the past few years, have begun to arrive in Urarina villages, often expressing an interest in purchasing items of Urarina 'culture', such as woven baskets or fans. Another reason is likely to be a deepening understanding of the logic of the Peruvian state and its various institutions, which officially recognise 'the Urarina' as a coherent ethnic group.

To this extent, it is important to bear in mind how the very idea of the ethnic group already presupposes some larger, encompassing entity, namely the state. It is quite well established that the reification of tribal boundaries happened in many parts of the world as a result of colonialism, whereby the imposition of relatively neat systems of ethnic classification led to the reification of what were often quite subtle and shifting distinctions between peoples. As Vogt (2019: 38) put it, 'tribes with relatively fluid boundaries and varying degrees of internal cohesion became standardized, socially organized entities with relatively clear territories ... European colonialism turned existing cultural communities into self-conscious ethnic groups'.³ Rubenstein (2001) has similarly shown how colonialism in Amazonia often hinged on the transformation and multiplication of sociospatial boundaries: 'Whereas the precolonial spatial, social, political, and economic boundaries that characterised Shuar life were multiple, partial, and overlapping, colonial boundaries are organised hierarchically'. Echoing Eric Wolf's argument that geographically uneven development in the wake of European mercantile expansion has generated racial designations such as 'Indian' and 'Negro', Rubenstein shows how the expansion of the Ecuadorian state gave rise to the new categories such as 'Indian' and 'Shuar'.

A similar process has been described cogently by Terence Turner (1991), who shows how the pressures of contact and coexistence with the Brazilians

and missionaries imposed a number of changes on Kayapo life and culture. When he first began fieldwork in around 1962, they had no notion that their received customs, practices, values and institutions constituted a ‘culture’ in the anthropological sense, considering these simply the prototypically human way of living. Over time, as they were incorporated into an inter-ethnic social system, they came to understand their ‘culture’ as something that served to define them as an ‘ethnic group’ distinct from those around them: they came to see themselves, not as the prototype of humanity, but as one ‘Indian’ group among others, united through their common confrontation with the national society (Turner 1991: 295–96).

A similar process appears to be taking place among Urarina, aided in many respects by outward-looking local leaders who work hard to produce a sense of collective identity, at the level of the village and, ultimately, at the level of the newly minted ‘ethnic group’. In their speeches at regular village meetings, specific grievances are ‘desingularised’ (Boltanski 2012), that is, scaled up and made commensurable with other, similar grievances, leading to the possibility of righteous action around a common framework of justice. The recent ingress of tourists and oil companies has begun to accelerate this process. The groundwork for a comparative approach to culture and ethnicity is being laid.

Conclusion

Comparison is essential for making meaning and producing understanding, of both oneself and of others. Yet there are different ways of drawing comparison, and they differ in their political and ethical implications. I have argued that the kinds of comparisons where one form of life is implicitly or explicitly compared to another, perhaps using some notion of ‘culture’ or ‘ethnic group’ as a basis for the comparison, are relatively rare among Urarina people of Amazonian Peru. This kind of comparison is arguably predicated on a multiculturalist ontology, and we might further associate it with the logic of the state, which produces boundaries around groups at various scales, and thus effectively produces the possibility of their comparison.

Comparison across cultures requires a specific form of social consciousness, a meta-cultural awareness that inevitably relativises one’s own position and worldview. This can be empowering, insofar as it undermines claims to universality and thus the inevitability of the status quo. As Stanford puts it,

Comparison across cultures defamiliarizes what one takes as natural in any given culture... To learn through comparison that others see things differently is to recognize the constructedness of one’s own frame of reference. ... In other words, one effect of comparing cultures is to call into question the standards of the dominant precisely because it is unveiled as not universal.

(Friedman 2011: 756)

But comparison can also, of course, be disempowering, not least for those subjected to the comparative gaze; and it can be uprooting of local meanings and specificities:

comparison identifies similarities and differences, commensurability and incommensurability, areas of overlap and of discontinuity. In so doing, comparison decontextualizes: that is, it dehistoricizes and deterritorializes; it removes what are being compared from their local and geohistorical specificity. Consequently, one reason *not* to compare is the potential violence such removals can accomplish, the damage they can do to the requirements of a richly textured understanding of any phenomenon in its particularity.

(Friedman 2011)

I have argued that Urarina refuse or at least publicly abstain from various kinds of comparison in which we commonly indulge; above all those that measure, rank and evaluate. Instead, where they do compare, it is often on the basis of equality or likeness: the idea that one thing, person or group is like another in some relevant way. Such assertions of similitude are in no way claims of identity or sameness. The notion of identity is misplaced here: to reduce likeness to identity would be a grossly inappropriate imposition. What people are concerned with is not identity but ways of sorting things together: clustering in networks of reciprocal belonging, through a kind of free association. Contrasting and differentiating also have their place, and can play an important role in generating understanding – what Levi-Strauss termed the ‘science of the concrete’. Such analogical comparisons do not need a third term, a common standard of measure, to be effective. In both cases, we are dealing with an essentially juxtapositional mode of comparison: setting things side by side, not necessarily with any common standard of measure, in the form of the commensuration that allows people ‘to quickly grasp, represent, and compare differences’ (Espeland and Stevens 1998: 316).

Urarina peoples’ lack of interest in comparing themselves to other groups is not common everywhere in Amazonia. It is perhaps instructive, then, that those areas where inter-group comparisons seem especially pronounced – in the Xingu park in Brazil, and in the Upper Rio Negro system (Hugh-Jones 2013) – is where objects have come to play a key role in mediating relations between people of different ethnic and linguistic origin, and where one also finds relatively extensive regimes of equivalence, calculation and commensurability of values (Fausto 2016).

Is it a paradox, finally, that Urarina construe things as incommensurable, but then seem disposed to render everything equivalent? One possible line of interpretation – the ontological one – might point out that to declare apparently different people or things as ‘the same’ makes perfect perspectival sense: every being sees itself, and what it does, in the same way as every

other being; it is simply the world that it sees and acts on that differs. Thus perhaps Candoshi actually see themselves as planting manioc in exactly the same way as do Urarina (though their different bodies obscure this). I prefer, however, a slightly different explanation: that it is precisely because the things of the world are incommensurable and infinitely different from each other that people would be prompted to draw out their similarities and likenesses. As Mair and Evans (2015) have observed, the process of finding affinities that can overcome borders of alterity, is a powerful basis for ethics. The difference here, however, is that Urarina do not endorse commensuration, at least not in the terms they propose, as ‘a process that enables disparate elements to be brought together under a common standard of value, rule, or governance’ (Mair and Evans 2015: 213). The fluid, free association practiced by Urarina avoids precisely that, though it rests on an attunement to the poetic qualities of metaphor and analogy. Similarities and juxtapositions seem salient, and can be beautiful, odd or outright funny. Conversely, it would be the assumption of some underlying unity, some stable ground and advanced forms of commensuration that could potentially feed an obsession with the orderly evaluation and representation of difference.

Strathern’s (2017) reflections on internal versus external relations might help to explore this further. Kin terms offer a good example of the former: a relation is implied in the term itself. There is no father without someone whose father that is. External relations link people or things as more or less self-contained entities with their own intrinsic properties. They hold things apart and at the same time hold them in place: in other words, they sustain identities. Thus in ‘Euro-American cosmology’, she writes,

classificatory schemes commonly define entities in relation to one another according to their intrinsic properties that enable the classifier to commensurate—bring into a single relation—the sameness/difference of each with respect to the other. The (external) relation between them keeps the separateness of the terms in play. Tautology is evident: externality resides in the prior distinctiveness of the ‘different’ entities being related.

(Strathern 2017: 17)

Amerindian perspectivism, by contrast, does away with the contrast between relational and non-relational substantives, or internal and external relations. A fish or a tree, like a father, is defined through its relations to something else: it is what it is, in other words, not because of its intrinsic properties (its ‘fishiness’), but ‘only by virtue of someone else whose fish it is’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 472–73). We can see how in such a cosmos, comparison might be driven by a different set of concerns, other than seeking out external, contrastive relations between already existing entities, or a normative standard of measure by which the other can be known and judged. At the same time, the ways in which Urarina deploy ideal types (of objects as much as persons)

suggest a departure from Viveiros de Castro's analysis. All fish might be fish only insofar as they are fish for someone, but they are not all equally desirable or even equally fish from the Urarina perspective: some might be better exemplars than others. By the same token, potential spouses might on one level be 'the same'; but on another level, it cannot be denied that some deviate from the ideal (e.g. insofar as they are lacking in some gender-specific skill or form of prowess). There is, it seems, a standard after all – and it is here that ontology shades into morality. Jaguars might see themselves as human but they are simply not the moral equals of Urarina people: they lack respect. Similarly, the Candoshi's way of planting manioc might be right for the Candoshi, but from the Urarina perspective, it deviates from the ideal and is ultimately deficient. Recognition of the limits to perspectival exchange creates the space for moral judgement.

Despite or perhaps even because of their ethical burdens, explicit comparisons are for the most part avoided. While recognising the singularity of all persons and things, their absolute incommensurability, but also interdependency, Urarina are very quick to declare them absolutely alike. They prefer to compare for equality, to assert blithely, 'this is just like that', and so avoid bringing those two things together under a single, external standard, allowing their difference to be measured, reifying them in the process. This might amount to a form of respect, for things and persons and the limits to what can be known about them. The idea being not to judge, or rank, let alone establish dominance, but simply take pleasure in the way things cluster, if only for a moment.

Notes

- 1 See, inter alia, Buunk and Gibbons 2007; Suls and Wheeler 2000.
- 2 There are, for example, very many verbs referring to something's 'being white': to be a little white; to be very white; to become white; to move being white; to be white in various parts; and so forth.
- 3 Cohen and Middleton (1970) write:

At first centralized states are brought into new nations as already organized units...unable to organize as a pressure group within the new nation almost from the very beginning, thus creating the very basis for ethnic politics... During this same time, the acephalous society has no means of articulating a traditional administrative hierarchy into that of the nation...there is little sense of identity as a corporate unit or ethnic constituency among the acephalous groups....

(Cohen and Middleton 1970: 28–29; cited in Lentz 1995)

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