

## EXCHANGE AND CO-PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGES: REFLECTIONS FROM AMAZONIA

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[Editor's note: The authors have been listed in alphabetical order by their first names. While they have contributed equally to the conception and the writing of this article, the research that lies behind it was undertaken by Natalia Buitron, who carried out her doctoral fieldwork in the village of Kuamar, and by Grégory Deshoulliere, who also spent extended periods of time in Kuamar and carried out his doctoral fieldwork in the same region.]

7 July 2018. Kuamar, a small Shuar settlement in Ecuadorian Amazonia. Four anthropologists from the London School of Economics are sponsoring a public event for the whole community. Two of the anthropologists, Natalia Buitron and Grégory Deshoulliere, are well known to the people of Kuamar, as they have carried out extensive periods of fieldwork among them between 2010 and 2013. The other two, Rita Astuti and Sasha Flatau, are new comers. They have spent two weeks in Kuamar alongside Natalia and Grégory, as part of a research project on Justice, Morality and the State in Amazonia.<sup>[1]</sup> It is at the end of Rita and Sasha's stay that the public event takes place.

The event has been planned well ahead of time by the president of Kuamar, Manuel Maiche, in consultation with Natalia. In addition to a feast, consisting of abundant food and manioc beer, Manuel suggests that the anthropologists explain to the community what anthropology is and what its value might be. He also wants the event to be “an exchange of knowledges” between the people of Kuamar and the anthropologists.

In this paper, we give an account of what came to be known as *El primer evento internacional de intercambio de saberes y antropología* (The first international event of exchange of knowledges and anthropology). This story should be of interest to anthropologists for a number of reasons.

First, because we describe how the people we work with engage with anthropology: with what we do and the knowledge we create. Wherever they decide to conduct fieldwork, most anthropologists will strive to make their extended presence acceptable to those they live with. To do this, they establish relationships that make sense to their hosts; this might entail turning themselves into their hosts' friends, fictive kin, godparents, colleagues, traders, or whatever else. But what we describe here goes beyond this process of insertion into the lives of those who are generous and tolerant enough to let us work with them. What we describe is a more challenging process of engagement which involves coming out into the open – out of the closet, as it were – to explain to the people we work with what exactly it is that we do as anthropologists when we study them. This process not only requires taking responsibility for explaining our craft and how our knowledge is produced, but also for responding to the various ways in which our interlocutors might then decide to engage with what we do and what we produce.

Readers might be thinking that the event in Kuamar was a kind of collaborative ethnography. Motivated by the desire to challenge the colonial legacy of our discipline, some anthropologists have proposed to transform the asymmetric relationship with their “informants” by embracing methodological and writing practices that aim to shift them from the position of “reading over the shoulders of natives” to that of “reading alongside natives” (see, e.g. Lassiter 2005). This kind of collaborative ethnography often involves anthropologists designing research programmes, devising action plans and writing ethnography with the people they work with. Our work in Kuamar did not involve this kind of intensive design-to-product collaboration. However, by responding to Manuel's suggestion that we explain what anthropology is to the villagers of Kuamar and by engaging with them in their own terms, we arguably went a long way towards “reading alongside each other”.

Second, to come out in the open quite in the way we did requires some careful thinking, and in the telling of the story we explain how we did that thinking, together with the people of Kuamar. Our discipline is predicated on the assumption that we strive to understand the people we work with *in their own terms*. But, as we have just explained, for an event like the one that took place in Kuamar to succeed we had to do more than this, since we had to explain

to our audience how exactly we do this. As we shall see, the approach we took was to treat them as we would any other audience, that is, we assumed that they could and would understand our explanation of what anthropology is. We thus gave them a lecture on comparative anthropology, introducing them to the Vezo, a fishing community in Madagascar. With this, we managed to get the point across about what anthropology is and what its value might be. Finally, this story should be of interest to anyone required or motivated to engage in “knowledge exchange and impact” (KEI), as conceptualized in university settings in the Global North. By providing an account of how the exchange of knowledges looks like in a small village in Amazonia, while engaging critically with the requirements of KEI (especially as envisaged in UK universities), we hope to inspire others to take on the challenge of exchanging knowledges with the people they work with.

### ***The background***

Before we start telling the story of the Kuamar event, we shall briefly sketch out the broader historical and political context in which this event came to be conceived by Manuel, his co-villagers and the anthropologists involved. We will focus on the Shuar’s long-standing involvement with outsiders (for more details see Buitron 2016, Rubenstein 2001 and Taylor 1995), as well as on a more recent engagement of Shuar leaders and educators with foreign anthropologists. We provide this background to suggest that it is not all that surprising that the people of Kuamar wanted to learn more about anthropology and its potential uses. This is because, throughout their recent history, Shuar have been keen to cultivate – and turn to their advantage – relations with all sorts of external actors, ranging from missionaries to state functionaries, activists, as well as anthropologists.

In the Makuma region, where Kuamar is located, the first systematic effort to evangelise the Shuar was undertaken in the late 1940s by a group of North American Evangelical missionaries. Acting as indirect envoys of the state, they created the first mission in the area. The missionaries promoted a strategy of sedentarisation and community-development centred on cattle cooperatives and on the creation of public infrastructures. The success of the mission, however, was ultimately in the hands of a few Shuar *uunt* (great men) who were willing to establish productive alliances with the missionaries. In fact, as recorded in oral histories and in missionary chronicles, the first Shuar men to relocate around the mission did so with the idea of establishing trading partnerships with the missionaries, whom they considered as equal ceremonial friends (on friendship see Taylor 2015).

The fact that, from the start, Shuar people got so directly involved with the mission had the significant effect of redefining the role of the cooperatives. From “civilising” instruments of control, the cooperatives in Makuma were turned by the Shuar into a model for the creation of one of their most important federations. This federation opposed state-led territorial encroachment and its leaders played a central role in securing land titles, even if this meant people’s relocation to villages called *centros* (literally, centres), which are nowadays recognised by the Ecuadorian legal apparatus.

Since the creation of the federation, membership in these *centros* has mediated Shuar access not only to land but also to state services and funding. And while reliance on the state has increased in the last decades, partly as a result of the non-viability of forest livelihoods in sedentary villages, the Shuar have only accepted it reluctantly. If anything, this reliance has intensified their confrontational stance towards the state, which they see as undermining local autonomy and their general wellbeing. In recent years, for example, Shuar have mobilised against the government’s decision to licence oil blocks and to allow the intensification of open-pit mining fields in the province. Pressed to defend their livelihoods and territories from the intrusion of an extractive state, while also relying more and more on state resources, Shuar have been enthusiastic participants in the pro-indigenous political party “Pachakutik” (for a recent overview, see Deshoulliere 2016). Among other factors, this involvement has led to unprecedented victories in regional elections (especially in 2009), helping Shuar to place their own candidates in strategic offices of the whole province, which previously had been occupied by *mestizos*.

In sum, faced with people interested in their souls, lands and votes, Shuar have consistently responded by trying to take control over the terms of their engagement with outsiders. They have done so in an effort to equalise their relation with them, if not to outcompete them at their own game, whether by redefining the role of the cooperatives or by winning in political elections. And when anthropologists have appeared on the scene, the Shuar response has been similar. But there has been a key difference: at least in principle, anthropologists have *assumed* the equality that Shuar have worked hard to establish with all other outsiders, even if what anthropologists take to be equality is often quite different from what the Shuar take it to be. For them, equality is about creating difference, not sameness. This is because equality is the precondition for agonistic competition, and agonistic competition is one of the main preconditions for achieving exceptionality, the defining feature of Shuar individualism (see Taylor 2018). Still, it is probably because of anthropologists’ basic assumption of equality that Shuar have detected the beneficial potential of their discipline and have been particularly keen to turn them into their allies.

This was clearly in evidence in a recent international congress entitled “*Yapánkam: the voices of research in the Upper Amazon*” which, as we shall see, was an inspiration for the event in Kuamar. The congress took place in the rural parish of Sevilla Don Bosco, Ecuador, from 19 to 21 April 2018. It was organised by a group of Shuar leaders and French anthropologists (see [here](#) for the full list, which includes Grégory Deshoulliere) and was intended to

provide an open space to discuss how Shuar and anthropologists might achieve equality in the production of anthropological knowledge. The congress was attended by scholars, schoolteachers, leaders, shamans and whoever else wanted to participate, and received extensive coverage in the local and national press.

Divided into five thematic panels with about 40 speakers in total and punctuated by lectures, ritual songs and greetings, film projections, public interventions, photographic exhibitions and theatre performances, the congress gave rise to a range of debates far too extensive to be summarised here. One topic, however, stands out as particularly relevant to the public event that was to happen in Kuamar a few months later. It centred on the question, raised by a section of the Shuar contingent, of how social science knowledge on Shuar society could be locally produced by Shuar people so as to counteract the existing Christian and scientific interpretations of their traditions. It was suggested that these interpretations have prevailed just because of the economic and technical domination of missionaries and anthropologists, but ought to be challenged by those produced by the Shuar themselves.

Two opposed positions emerged about this: on the one hand, a minority – we might call them “the purists” – advocated a central independent body, managed exclusively by Shuar *juakmaru* (a neologism for “knowledgeable”), who would be responsible for producing written descriptions of local customs, for collecting and repatriating previous publications by non-indigenous people, and for evaluating and correcting all the existing international works that claim to be about the Shuar. In their view, such a body would produce a more accurate account of local customs and would redress the mistakes made by foreign researchers and the uneducated Shuar informants on whom they typically rely. On the other hand, the majority – we might call them “the mutualists” – challenged the very premise of the question and advocated instead an international partnership in the service of symmetrical anthropology (a term used throughout the congress). They envisaged sending Shuar students to Europe and the United States to be trained in anthropology at the best universities. But the point of this would not be to get them to become good ethnographers of the Shuar; rather, the point would be to get them to study European and American worlds and ways of life. This would enable them to capture the knowledge produced in Europe and the United States and to challenge the asymmetry between, as they put it, “the researcher and the object of study”. This strategy would achieve something quite special: beating non-Shuar anthropologists at their own game.

Manuel, who was at the Congress, aligned himself with the mutualist side of this debate. And it is likely that by participating in it, he gained a number of new insights into anthropology and its practitioners: first, that anthropologists are not just individuals who embed themselves in people’s domestic life – as Natalia and Grégory had done in his – but that they can have a public role, with political agency; second, that anthropology can be of use to the Shuar as a way of discovering different ways of organising social life; third, that by engaging with anthropologists, he and his co-villagers (and especially Sunur, his daughter, who dreams of becoming an anthropologist) could learn about the anthropologists’ craft, just like the anthropologists learn about the crafts of the Shuar by participating in their everyday activities.

With all this in mind – the long-term history of how Shuar have engaged with outsiders and the more recent instantiation of this engagement at the *Yapankam* congress – it makes sense that Manuel should invite the four LSE anthropologists to engage, on equal terms, with the whole Kuamar community in an exercise of exchange of knowledges, including anthropological knowledge, the outcome of which was to be presented in a public event. It is to the description of this event that we now return.

### ***The event***

Days before the event was due to take place, the men of Kuamar gathered early in the morning to cut the long grass around the communal house, the largest and most imposing construction in the village, and to repair the shaky supports of its roof. With no walls but a tin roof, the communal house hosts all the public activities of the community, from assemblies to religious meetings, to theatre and dance performances and all manner of celebrations.

On July 7, at around 6 am, several women gathered to start the collective cooking. They brought the food that had been bought the previous day in Macas (the not too distant market town) and large quantities of food grown in the gardens of Kuamar. By 11 o’clock, all the food was cooked and was to be kept warm in the large pots in which it had been prepared until the end of all the activities planned for the day. The feasting only started at 5 pm.



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As the day progressed, the communal house got more and more crowded with men and women, young and old, children of all ages, dogs of all shapes and sizes and the occasional pet monkey and coati. The atmosphere was joyful and relaxed as people waited for the official opening of the “programa”, the cultural programme put together by Manuel and his co-villagers. The programme had been sent to various local and more distant authorities as part of the formal invitation and was followed with impeccable accuracy. The proceedings were opened by Manuel, who presented the programme and gave a passionate speech to explain the nature and importance of the event. This was followed by: the singing of the national anthem, greetings from various local authorities, a presentation by the anthropologists, talks by Argentinian activists Tania and Nataly Laurini on alternative education, traditional dances, festive singing, school children’s performance of the English songs taught by Sasha, a performance by the Kuamar’s theatre group, a demonstration of traditional healing, a presentation of the knitting project led by Rita with the women of Kuamar, manioc beer offering, and the final feast.

In what follows we describe only three of the activities of the day, starting with how we went about explaining what anthropology is and what its value might be.

### ***What is anthropology?***

We spent some time discussing among ourselves how best to approach the task that Manuel had set for us. Of course, we could have taken a number of different approaches, ranging from acknowledging the colonial entanglements of anthropology, in the region and beyond, to focusing on how anthropologists have represented the Shuar and other Amazonian peoples. We did not pursue the first option because we felt that the people of Kuamar know more about colonialism than we could possibly reveal to them; in addition, it was clear that Manuel was interested in the potential benefits of anthropology, that is, in a future-oriented story in which the villagers could be actively in control, rather than a past-oriented story that would have cast them as victims. We did not pursue the second option because, taking on board Manuel’s mutualistic spirit, we did not feel that focusing on the Shuar would have satisfied the curiosity of the villagers of Kuamar. We surmised that they would be more interested in learning about anthropology as a comparative exercise. So, in the end, we decided to tell a different kind of story. To an attentive audience, we started our presentation by explaining that anthropology is the study of how people live their lives in very different ways in different parts of the world, including our own countries. After mentioning differences in livelihoods, beliefs in gods as opposed to spirits, or ways of raising children, we illustrated the point with the following example: here in Kuamar, men can marry more than one woman, preferentially two sisters; but in some parts of Nepal, women can marry more than one man, often two or more brothers. As intended, this example caught everyone’s attention and nicely got across the idea about difference. With this in place, we went on to suggest that there is an intrinsic value in knowing about difference because it makes one curious about other people and, hopefully, it makes one understand them better and respect them more.

But then, we said, it is also the case that anthropologists, while studying difference, also discover that there are striking similarities across all these different ways of living and believing and marrying. For example, they have noticed that everywhere people tend to care about their own family and kin more than they care about unrelated people and strangers (notwithstanding the fact that what counts as family and kin can vary from one place to the next). We chose this specific example because this is a highly relevant issue for the people of Kuamar: as documented by Natalia in her work (Buitron 2016), the people of Kuamar have been working hard to create a community that transcends kinship ties, to motivate themselves to care for the common good through communal work and assemblies, and to imagine themselves and their neighbours – at least in some contexts – as just *socios*, that is as legal members of their community. And so, we suggested that the value of discovering such similarity is that one can take it into account when one tries to understand why some institutions work better than others, and when one tries – just as they have been doing – to create political and civic institutions that work despite the strong, and sometimes divisive pull of kinship.

We moved on to explain why anthropologists work in the way they do, that is, why they choose to live for long periods of time alongside the people they work with. We made the point that, unlike other foreigners who come to tell them how to think, what to believe, how to develop, anthropologists come to learn with and from them. This way of working, when it works, enables anthropologists to know people intimately, for example, to know what makes them laugh and cry, what makes them angry and happy, and what they really want. We elaborated this last point with reference to *desarrollo* (development), addressing the concern that the people of Kuamar had discussed with Natalia many times before: why is it that development always ends up being just a matter of copying what the *mestizos* and *gringos* do? Well, by learning from and with people, anthropologists can try to understand what kind of *different* development people might want for themselves, for their children, for their forests and their rivers.

We ended our presentation with a story about the Vezo of Madagascar, the people Rita has done fieldwork with, just like Natalia and Grégory have been doing with the Shuar. To give some context to the story, from early on in the day we had exhibited 26 photographs from Madagascar, showing Vezo women, men and children carrying out a variety of daily activities. The photos had generated a lot of curiosity and all sorts of questions about the type of fishing nets, the size of the fish, the size of the ocean, the women's habit of carrying buckets on their head, and so on. With this as background, we told the Vezo story to illustrate several points we had just made about anthropology: that people around the world are very different, as shown in the photos; that anthropologists get to know people intimately by way of long-term fieldwork, as demonstrated by the fact that Rita had followed the Vezo story over 30 years; and that people who are very different — like the Vezo and the Shuar — do nonetheless share things in common, as our listeners in Kuamar were quick to point out.



[Click to enlarge](#)

The story was about the increasing depletion of fish stock which is affecting Vezo livelihoods and which, in large part, is due to the unregulated extraction of fish by large commercial vessels. And yet, it is the Vezo whom the local government goes after, by imposing regulations on the fishing they are allowed to do and by confiscating their fishing nets. Vezo people respond to the threat to their livelihood in various ways: for example, they migrate to find new fishing grounds; in the process, they enter into new relationships of dependence with traders and with each other;

and they try to get a better education for their children in the hope that they might become teachers or police officers. But all along, they worry for the future. Without fish in the sea and connections in the offices of power, their children's future looks bleak.

We concluded by asking the assembly for any advice that villagers might have for the Vezo, and we received quite a lot of it! The first person to speak was Rafael Cuambra, who goes by the nickname of '*El Científico*' (The Scientist). Rafael started by saying: "I now know what anthropology is." He then offered the following message for the Vezo: "Here too the same thing is happening. The government has proposed a forest scheme supposedly for the conservation of the environment. This scheme forbids us from working in the forest. There are also schemes that prohibit the use of water and the use of land resources. We have the same problem here with these schemes." He then exhorted the Vezo to have courage, to have strength and ended with "*Iruntrarik kakarmaitji*" ("Only together we are strong").

In another intervention, Miguel Ankuash reminded the audience that "in the past, the Spaniards came. They wanted to take our land, so that today we would be slaves. But that did not happen. Now our children and grandchildren are educated, they go to college, they will go to university, they will speak English, and for that we are strong. My children, my grandchildren must be strong. You, children, you must become strong! Let the Vezo also be strong!" After that Manuel added: "Here too the previous government prohibited us from doing many things. For example, it forbade us to have shotguns for hunting. It persecuted us a lot. Many of us were persecuted for many years. It seems that the same thing is happening to the Vezo brothers [...] the Vezo have to fight back."

In the interest they showed and in the commentaries they provided, the villagers of Kuamar demonstrated to us that they *are* indeed our equal interlocutors. They not only analysed the Vezo story to find similarities between the Vezo predicament and their own, but they also felt confident in suggesting their own particular solution to the common problem they had identified. And the solution, which they have pursued throughout their recent history, is: fight back!

### **The film**

To explain what Kuamar villagers actually mean when they say that the Vezo must "fight back" we are going to take a short detour. A few weeks after the public event, when people in Kuamar were still talking about the Nepalese women who marry multiple brothers, the size of the fish caught by the Vezo and the threats to their livelihoods, a group of children, Targelia and Carmen (their mothers) and Manuel (their father) made a short film with Grégory.



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The film, entitled "*li pujutairi*" ("Our rooted life"), was the result of long brainstorming sessions, aided by copious amounts of manioc beer. As Sunur (Manuel's oldest daughter, aged 18) put it, the film was to send a clear message "to those who have such an appetite for the Amazon", that is, first and foremost to the extractive multinationals and to the Shuar and non-Shuar politicians who grant them the rights to appropriate indigenous territories.

The film consists of nine scenes, in which a young protagonist speaks directly to the camera in the language of his or her choosing, either Shuar or Spanish. This specific format was chosen by them to fulfil their desire to be clearly perceived as the enunciator of their own words. The content of each spoken scene was agreed after long and animated conversations among adults and children, which included discussions of how best to challenge some of the stereotypical representations that foreigners have of the Shuar (for example, that they are poor and needy). With these stylistic decisions in place and the content of the scenes agreed and memorised, all that was left for Grégory to

do was to explain some basic constraints imposed by the camera and do the filming (see <https://vimeo.com/309832099>).

There is no mistaking the tone of the end product: it is serious and threatening. This was a deliberate choice of the protagonists, which is manifested in a number of ways. Take the tone of voice, which is stern and demands attention; in this the children were encouraged along by their parents who would say, for example, "Shaana, are you speaking to your mummy or to the enemies? Talk stronger!" Similarly, the facial painting, which happened spontaneously and was not discussed with Grégory ahead of filming, adds an agonistic dimension to the threat, in line with the use of such painting in a range of combative contexts. And the statement in the last scene about the fact that the protagonists take psychotropic plants is an additional warning: apart from demonstrating that these young people are courageous (because it takes a certain amount of courage to endure the effects of ayahuasca or *datura*), it is a tacit affirmation of their determination to overcome and to dominate their opponents. Finally, the choice of the music over the closing credits is significant: it is a genre of ritual songs called *ujaj*, which in the past was always associated with warlike confrontations.

All in all, the tone of the film epitomises the conviction that, in Manuel's words, "respect is not something to be begged for, it is something that has to be imposed". And the overall aim of the protagonists is clear: it is not to arouse pity or to present themselves as victims, but to affirm individual and collective strength and dignity. In effect, this was the same message that Kuamar villagers had invited Rita to take to the Vezo: fight back!

### **Some reflections**

Before we move on to describe other parts of the day's programme, we shall bring together some of the points we have explored so far. In our response to Manuel's request to explain what anthropology is, we relied on our discipline's comparative tradition and stressed both differences and similarities, choosing examples that would resonate with the experience of our Shuar audience. In doing this, we not only relied on our discipline's conceptual instruments but also on a very particular way of transmitting knowledge, which we routinely use when we teach university students. That is, we lectured the people of Kuamar who, used as they are to this mode of communication in their own assemblies, performed masterfully in their role of students: they were strikingly attentive and did not miss one word of what we had to say. But our audience did more than enact the student role, in its passive iteration, for they responded to our lecture by becoming analysts on an equal standing with us. They thus took the comparative exercise we had suggested to them in their own hands, finding similarities between their predicament and that of the Vezo and coming up with solutions (both orally during the event and later on through the film). They concluded that, whether in Ecuador or Madagascar, people should respond to the attempt to dominate them by looking at their enemies straight in the eyes and fighting back.

In sum, the people of Kuamar used our lecture to produce their own reflections on their and on others' historically specific condition; and they did so by positioning themselves as active interlocutors and fighters rather than as mere students or historical victims. As such, their response revealed their particular approach to relations with the outside. As we mentioned, Shuar try to equalise potentially asymmetrical relationships by engaging (and at times outdoing) others at their own game, be they colonisers or anthropologists.

In fact, this approach was in evidence not only in the way our hosts responded to the lecture about anthropology, but also in the way they conceived of the whole exercise of exchanging knowledges with us. They shaped the exercise so that it could never be just one-way. That is, having asked us to teach them what anthropology is, they then turned the interaction into a reciprocal and genuine exchange. As we are about to see, the people of Kuamar demonstrated a remarkable familiarity with anthropology, which they had attained well before the public event, possibly because of their long-term relation with Natalia and Grégory and because some of them had participated in the *Yapánkam* congress. In any case, in the way they shaped the exchange with us, the people of Kuamar made it clear that they too had something to teach us.

This was illustrated by the fact that for the two weeks preceding the public event, we were challenged to learn from them a number of tasks. The allocation of the tasks followed the common gender division of labour that prevails when feasts are being catered for. For instance, men are responsible for hunting, fishing and some foraging activities, while women are responsible for gardening and cooking, and especially for brewing manioc-beer. So, correspondingly, Grégory was asked to bring typical Shuar food to the event so that Natalia, Rita and Sasha could cook it, alongside other women. This meant that Grégory had to learn how to construct complex fishing traps and master the technique of harpoon and net fishing. He was also put in charge of felling several palm trees to supply palm hearts. The three female anthropologists were tasked with preparing their own manioc beer, which involved digging up the tubers from women's gardens and learning how to turn tubers into beer.

In what follows, we describe in detail only one of these activities, the manioc beer preparation, because it is the one that captures most vividly the way our hosts envisioned the exercise of exchanging knowledges with us. This is because if manioc, as the main staple of the Shuar diet, is perceived as the embodiment of self-subsistence, manioc beer is the social drink *par excellence* and for this reason it is always at the centre of any act of hospitality.

Understandably then, no exchange of knowledges can take place without sharing copious amounts of manioc beer, as indeed happened during the event in Kuamar.

### ***The manioc beer***

When the idea of sponsoring the public event was first discussed, our Kuamar hosts suggested that the three female anthropologists should be taught how to make manioc beer (*chicha*, in local Spanish). They should then demonstrate their newly acquired skill by bringing their own brew to the public event for everyone to share and judge. While the process of preparation is standard, one manioc beer never tastes like the next one, their distinctiveness being attributed to the mastery of their respective makers. From this it followed that to experience the preparation of manioc beer in the Shuar way, each anthropologist had to learn from one and one woman only. Thus, Natalia, Rita and Sasha were assigned a different female instructor who, 4 days before the big day, took each one of them separately through the process of manioc beer preparation, from soil to bowl.

The exercise was marked by our hosts' characteristic individualism, which meant that they did not miss the opportunity to turn this challenge into a competitive affair. To illustrate, when the worn-out strings of Natalia's basket broke, scattering her nicely washed manioc all over the ground just as she walked past the house of Diana (the woman who was teaching Sasha), Diana's daughters could not resist teasing her, suggesting that clearly her manioc beer was not going to turn out that well! Leaving aside this small accident, the three instructors took immense care to ensure that the preparation was impeccable and that it would produce the best of brews, noting at every step how a particular procedure, like mixing manioc with the juice of grated squash or sweet potato in the exact quantities, would achieve a superior quality.



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So, on the day of the event, everyone was expectant: how would Rita's *chicha* taste? Would it be better than Natalia's? After all, Rita had been instructed by Nunquichi, one of the ablest and oldest women of Kuamar. But Targelia, Natalia's younger instructor, was also a skilled beer maker and had won competitions on previous occasions. And Diana was not to be underestimated, since her *chicha* was usually quite delicious, so might Sasha's *chicha* taste even better? Would the *chicha* of a Colombian anthropologist (Natalia's) taste different from that of an Italian (Rita's) or an English (Sasha's)? Somehow, our nationalities added an extra dimension to the local flavours and the intensity of the competition. All of these questions were murmured by the villagers as we started sieving our brews and the master of ceremonies announced what was perhaps the most awaited moment of the day: "*Chicha* demonstration by the anthropologists instructed by the women of Kuamar". As we went around the communal house offering manioc beer to men, women and children, the joy and celebration were intense. We tried our best to follow every little gesture of the art of serving manioc beer and our hosts could not have been happier. Being the generous hosts that they are, they rewarded each one of us with special compliments: oh, your *chicha* is really strong! Hum, that is delicious! Yes, that's good, I'm going to get drunk at once... Aside from the sheer enjoyment of consuming the beer we had produced, the point of the manioc beer challenge was clear to all. For what better way of ensuring that the exchange of knowledges was reciprocal than for our hosts to teach us how to make their favourite and quintessentially social beverage. Still, as we are about to see, one of the day's acts was to take the exchange of knowledges one step further.

### ***The theatre***

A week or so before the public event, the Kuamar theatre group, composed of youths between 12 and 18 years of age, gathered every day at dusk in the communal house to rehearse a new play. Sunur, who was the oldest, took the lead in coordinating the group and directing the play. By way of background, theatre is not part of the traditional repertoire of Shuar performing arts. Kuamar youths first learned about it from an American actor and cultural writer named Brian Sonia-Wallace who visited nearby Makuma in 2012. Brian taught them forum theatre, a type of theatre which does away with the separation between actors and spectators turning both of them into active 'spect-actors'. Brian's idea was that this type of theatre would offer the youths a tool to involve the entire community in reflecting on its struggles.

The day before the public performance, Sunur, who by then had worked for a few weeks alongside Natalia as a co-researcher, mentioned to her that the group would perform a story familiar to her. What Natalia was soon to discover was that the reason the story was familiar to her was that it had been taken from her own methodological toolkit.

On the day, the group of young actors performed a play based on one of the vignettes that we had designed in London and that Natalia had been using in a series of interviews with the people of Kuamar. The interviews confronted people with a number of moral dilemmas based on a conflict of interest that pitted kinship loyalty against communal responsibility. For example, in the vignette that was performed by the young actors, a man had borrowed the generator that belonged to his community and that was used for communal feasts. During his own private party, he broke the generator and the question was whether the president of the community, who happened to be the man's father, was to summon him before the communal assembly to publicly reproach him or whether he should resolve the matter privately to avoid exposing his own father to public scrutiny.

The appropriation of our vignette did take us by surprise. It was amusing to see that, in their performance, the actors added ethnographic colour to the storyline of the original vignette by narrating in more detail the laborious political work that goes into pressurising this or that political authority to donate a generator to one's community. To do this, the youths who were impersonating the president and the secretary acted out their numerous and lengthy journeys to visit the prefect in the town of Macas in order to extract the generator from him. Similarly, those impersonating the community members acted out the cooperative work required to transport the generator from the endpoint of the road all the way across the river and up the muddy slope to Kuamar.

Most unsettling for us, the actors modified the logic of the story to the point of changing the nature of the dilemma. They did so by taking for granted that the man who had damaged the generator had to be summoned before the assembly so that people could decide on the issue collectively. In other words, for the young actors the real dilemma was not so much whether the man should be held publicly accountable – of course he must be – but rather how to go about this. Thus, instead of delving into the public allocation of responsibility, which the guilty man cannot escape, the play focused on figuring out what exactly was to be asked of the man who had damaged the generator. To do this, the actors first acted out a fictional assembly and then turned it into a real debate by opening the floor to everyone present and asking the audience for their suggestions. After listening to a few opinions, voiced by three men and two women, Sunur summarised the suggestions into three options that she brought back to the fictional assembly for consideration: the man could pay for the generator so as to have it replaced immediately; he could pay for it in

instalments; or he could try to fix it and then return it to the community. The consensus was that he should be asked to fix it, and the actor swiftly enacted the laborious repairs.

The play provided us with a most productive moment of critical reflection. Two of the modifications made by the actors proved particularly insightful. First, as part of our research protocol, we had taken pains to interview each participant in our study separately, so that we could analyse every response in relation to a number of independent variables. The young actors had obviously paid close attention to our research methods and they had their own opinions about them. By using theatre as their medium, thereby enacting the vignette in front of everyone, they undermined our way of going about thinking about moral dilemmas. Since they assumed that the discussion would happen in public, they turned what we had conceived as a matter of individual problem solving into a collective moment of brainstorming. Second, by discounting the possibility that the president might resolve the issue privately, they dissolved our moral dilemma – the tension between loyalty towards one's father versus the fulfilment of one's communal responsibility – and turned it instead into a public problem of procedural justice. In sum, the youths of Kuamar not only turned our carefully controlled one-to-one protocol into a joint enterprise, but they also forced us to question whether the vignettes we had spent so much time crafting back in London actually represented a moral dilemma at all for the people of Kuamar. They thus made an important contribution to our research and challenged us to critically reassess our assumptions and methods.

During the whole public event, villagers and anthropologists took turns in teaching to, and learning from, one another – we lectured about anthropology, they taught us how to make fishing traps or how to brew manioc beer. But the play by the Kuamar theatre group took this process of knowledge exchange one step further. It was a genuine moment of co-production of knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

The Shuar called this event an exchange of knowledges. In the UK, knowledge exchange and impact (KEI) has become an important feature of academic research. Academics are expected, if not required as a condition of funding, to engage with their so-called “non-academic research users”. This is to ensure that their research becomes more visible, that it is better understood by non-academics and that it is of benefit to them. Knowledge exchange and its positive impact have to be demonstrated and measured, using so-called Key Performance Indicators (KPI). Most British universities have produced guidelines on how to do knowledge exchange through careful planning, how to achieve impact, and how to measure success (for an example see [here](#)). In our conclusion, we want to use the Kuamar event to question some of the assumptions that underpin these guidelines, in particular with regards to what counts as success and how it is brought about.

There is no doubt that from the perspective of the people of Kuamar and from the perspective of the anthropologists involved, “The first international day of exchange of knowledges and anthropology” was a remarkable success. This is because, as shown above, we succeeded in exchanging knowledges on equal terms, in challenging the asymmetry between researchers and research subjects, and in co-producing new knowledge.

What is striking to us is that this success was achieved through a very different process than what is normally envisaged in KEI guidelines. First, their emphatic message is that to succeed, knowledge exchange has to be carefully planned in advance of engaging with one's non-academic research users. This means clearly defining one's research objectives, identifying and cultivating potential non-academic research users, and creating the conditions for these users' engagement with one's research. Second, knowledge exchange is always a matter of two clearly defined parties to the exchange: the researchers and the users (and the distinction remains even when the latter are called collaborators, participants, or similar). Third, the assumption is that successful knowledge exchange is the outcome of harmonious relations between producers and users, where neither challenges the position of the other. On all three counts, our experience in Kuamar was considerably different, and yet successful. Although in Kuamar we were involved in the planning of the event, throughout the exercise the villagers took the lead. As we saw, this sometimes led to unexpected outcomes that made us feel as if we had lost control of the situation. For example, when we realised that the theatre group was going to perform our vignette in front of the entire village, our first reaction was a mixture of disbelief and anxiety, because we feared that the performance would undermine our study by – as psychologists would put it – contaminating the participants we had yet to interview. However, as we explained earlier, for us the theatre performance was perhaps the most productive moment of knowledge exchange.

Doing knowledge exchange with non-academic research users who take the lead, as Kuamar villagers did, to the point of losing control, as we did, has the important implication that the distinction between researchers and research users becomes inherently unstable. While this is exactly what Shuar wanted, as clearly articulated at the *Yapánkam* congress in Sevilla Don Bosco, this instability cannot be accommodated within the logic of KEI. This is because all the metrics and indicators of success (e.g. how many non-academic partners one collaborates with) are predicated on a clear distinction between the two parties of the exchange: the researchers on one side and their non-academic research users on the other.

Finally, in the telling of the story, we might have given the impression that our knowledge exchange experience in Kuamar was an entirely pleasant experience. This, however, is not the case because exchanging knowledges, or anything else for that matter, with Shuar people is a highly competitive, rather than consistently harmonious, affair. As we explained at the start, when engaging with powerful outsiders, Shuar strive to equalise potentially asymmetric relations, and this often takes on a competitive quality which creates rivalry, mockery and confrontation. The Kuamar event was no different, and we were caught up in the competitive spirit – challenged, judged, teased, outwitted.

Let us be clear: by pointing out the differences between the KEI guidelines and the manner in which knowledge exchange was brought about in Kuamar, we are not advocating for alternative guidelines, for it is not as if the Kuamar event could be replicated in any other context. This is because, as anthropologists might expect, what happened in Kuamar bears the signatures of each of the protagonists of that exchange.

On the one hand, consider the distinctive emphasis on equality. The way our hosts engaged with us, by turning our potentially asymmetric relation with them into one of (often competitive) equality, stems from the specific Shuar approach to relating with outsiders. This equality in rivalry, as we mentioned, has shaped their recent history of interactions not just with anthropologists, us included, but with various other social actors that have appeared on the scene.

On the other hand, consider the role reversals that took place throughout the event. This was only possible because, since the start of their research, Natalia and Grégory have worked hard to find ways in which their interlocutors could engage with their craft, i.e. the doing of anthropology. For example, back in 2012, when Natalia was asked to teach in the local school she offered to teach anthropology, that is, what anthropologists do when they do fieldwork. More recently, Grégory was heavily involved in organising the *Yapánkam* Congress whose central aim, as we mentioned earlier, was to find ways in which Shuar could become producers of anthropological knowledge. This way of opening up for scrutiny what we do as anthropologists, avoiding the assumption that our interlocutors cannot understand it in any deep and meaningful way, was a pre-requisite for the back and forth between the teaching and learning of anthropology that we experienced in Kuamar.

Still, if there is one general point that we can derive from all of this and that we wish to contribute to any KEI guidelines is this: that there cannot be universal guidelines for knowledge exchange *prior* to that exchange taking place and form.



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