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# **Demonic Trade: Debt, Materiality and Agency in Amazonia**

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This article examines Amazonian Urarina engagements with the system of debt peonage in light of the conceptual and ontological premises of the traditional subsistence economy. It argues that to view debt as a mechanism for harnessing indigenous labour is inadequate for comprehending the wilfulness with which Urarina indebted themselves to outsiders today, which should instead be considered in terms of local theories of agency and an aversion to immediate, market-style exchange. This relational and hierarchically distributed view of agency is further implicated in ideas surrounding industrial goods, which are ascribed to the Devil as their putative maker and owner, and the source of their power over people in this life and the next. If this brand of commodity ‘fetishism’ expresses moral ambivalence towards capitalism, it also mediates otherwise contradictory forms of production and exchange, repudiating the possibility of total rupture between persons and things.

Early one afternoon in the dry season, on his way downriver to the city of Iquitos, Don Arturo Avilar’s enormous, ramshackle craft ran aground on a sandbar, split apart, and began to sink. One of the most feared and powerful of the *mestizo* traders who contract Urarina labour along the upper Chambira river in Peruvian Amazonia, his boat at the time was heavily overloaded with a record haul of palm hearts, freshly extracted from the forest by his legion of loyal indigenous clients. Desperate to save his boat, Arturo had little choice but to order his workers to throw the palm hearts overboard, one by one, and dismally watch his profits sink slowly to the murky bottom of the Marañon river. Chuckling heartily with my Urarina assistant Lorenzo when told this story, I suggested that it probably served Arturo right, for greedily attempting such large-scale extraction. But Lorenzo had a different explanation, one I soon learned was shared by others in the community: ‘It was all his merchandise that caused his boat to sink,’ he confidently assured me. ‘Too much exploiting the Urarina. So his merchandise had their revenge.’ I enquired further, interested that the cause of the accident might be the rather meagre quantity of petty commodities Don Arturo

had brought from the city to trade, rather than the mountain of heavy palm hearts spilling out from his lower deck. The resulting explanation was deceptively simple: all the merchandise brought by traders really belongs to the Devil, and commodities contain within them the fire of hell. Why should they not be capable of sinking a boat?

Over time I came to hear a great deal about the close association between the merchandise of traders and a mysterious, capricious being known as Moconajaera, widely equated with the Christian Devil. The spirit 'Mother' and personification of fire, Moconajaera is also the 'true owner' of all industrial goods, from fish hooks to flip flops<sup>1</sup>. The souls of Urarina who buy and use these goods are said to be punished severely when they die, burned and 'purified' in his celestial fire. The invocation of devil imagery in the context of nascent capitalism has been widely documented in Central and South America, particularly in the Andes (e.g. Nash 1979; Nugent 1996; Gordillo 2002), though the most influential analysis remains Taussig's (1980) discussion of devil beliefs among Colombian sugar plantation workers and Bolivian tin miners. Inspired by the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism, Taussig saw the Devil as a potent and particularly apt symbol of the alienation experienced by peasants as they entered the ranks of the proletariat. Brought by European imperialism to the New World, the Devil blended with pagan deities and came to mediate a tension between the traditional subsistence economy and the mysterious, ultimately demonic capitalist forces seeking to penetrate and supplant it. Widespread myths telling of pacts with the devil to ensure worldly wealth were thus an indictment of unjust wage labour, and a literal manifestation of Marx's claim that money and commodities, once abstracted from their social relations of production, inevitably come to take on a life of their own and exert a power over people.

Taussig's arguments rested on a distinction between use-value and exchange-value orientations, or between gifts and commodities, that has since been extensively critiqued in the anthropological literature (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Miller 1995; Parry and Bloch 1989; Nugent 1996). Parry and Bloch (1989) argued that monetary or market relations are likely to be represented as the antithesis of bonds of kinship and friendship only in a modern society where the economy has been disembedded from social relations. They singled out Taussig as culpable of a romantic idealisation of the world of gift exchange, falsely construed as non-exploitative, innocent and transparent, and directed attention to how easily gift and commodity exchange may each evolve into the other. Concluding that fetishism is as likely in a pre-capitalist economy as in a capitalist one, they rejected Taussig's attempt to distinguish the peasants' traditional beliefs in nature spirits from the looming presence of the Devil and the 'magical halo' attaching to commodities, which he had argued arose from the unity or split respectively between persons and the things they produce and exchange.

Largely as a result of these critiques, more recent writing has tended to emphasise the compatibility of western commodities with traditional values, and to underscore the cultural continuity that characterises their appropriation by indigenous peoples. Hugh-Jones (1992) has contrasted Western and 'green' critiques of materialism with the apparent avaricious greed he often observed among native Amazonians, and argued further for a 'continuity or 'fit' between capitalist institutions and Indian exchange practices' (*ibid.*:44). Ewart (2002) has proposed that the Panará's marked interest in and desire for industrial goods is a continuation of a long-standing proclivity for interacting with 'what lies beyond' and appropriating, where possible, the material culture of 'enemy-others'. Changes arising from their presence are therefore merely 'material' rather than 'social' in nature. Killick (2008) has more recently argued that Asheninka assimilate present-day commercial traders to their

traditional indigenous *ayompari* trading partners, as a way of ensuring a balanced and mutually beneficial relationship.

In this paper, I seek to build on these useful efforts to locate new forms of exchange within pre-existing frameworks of value and meaning, while maintaining that the articulation of western commodities with traditional items of exchange - and the relations through which each are acquired - may be more complex and fraught than these authors allow. The invocation of the Devil, I shall argue, is part of a broader conceptual strategy through which the receipt of commodities under the system of *habilitación* comes to reflect the logic and structure, not of traditional forms of trade or barter - as most authors have assumed - but rather of the real and symbolic exchanges through which wild animals are acquired. The possibilities thus afforded by *habilitación* are largely why this system is still preferred to direct involvement in market exchange. While recognising the need to resist any simple moralizing of commoditization and consumption as either liberating or destructive (cf. Miller 1995:148), I shall in this way refocus attention on the crucial issue of how connections or boundaries between persons and things may be recognised and valued.

In showing how practices of hunting and shamanism condition indigenous perceptions of the commodity economy and the means by which they seek to participate in it, this paper also seeks to moderate one of the most persistent assumptions in the literature on *habilitación* and related institutions, namely that debt is used by unscrupulous *patrones* as a mechanism for harnessing indigenous labour. Fisher (2000:145), for example, while emphasising continuities between new and old forms of wealth, comments that the Xikrin are 'straightjacketed into relationships with extractivists through the coercive use of credit'. Dean (2009:18) writes of 'involuntary servitude based on...indebtedness to creditors', while Hugh-

Jones (1992:54) asserts that in the Vaupés area, modern cocaineeros ‘continue to press merchandise onto unsuspecting Indians to create the debts which give the creditor exclusive rights to the coca-leaves and labour of ‘his’ Indians’. While deception and violence were often central features of earlier relations with labour bosses, neither coercion nor lack of alternatives are adequate for explaining why Urarina wilfully indebted themselves to outsiders today.

To argue that trade relations are voluntary is not to argue that they are free from marked power inequalities or moral condemnation. The submissiveness and occasional resentment that characterise Urarina attitudes to traders might distinguish them from the Piro or Asheninka, whom Gow (1991) and Killick (2008) respectively have argued also work willingly for labour bosses, but in the absence of a strong sense of hierarchy<sup>2</sup>. Urarina do not tend to strive for equality with traders, and to do could be contrary to their aims. Through acts of solicitation, Urarina enter into relationships that fashion them as actors in a number of possible ways. Requests for food or other items may sometimes imply an assertion of equality, while at other times an overtly ‘pitiful’ or ‘helpless’ demeanour is adopted as a means of eliciting paternalistic benevolence. When interacting with ‘outsiders’, from fluvial traders to supernatural agencies, people tend to prefer the latter strategy. In both cases, however, the agency of the asker and receiver is clearly expressed. In interpreting what I suggest may often amount to a form of voluntary subordination, I detach power from notions of coercion and draw instead on understandings of agency as a specific and contextual capacity for action that such relations of subordination create and enable (Butler 1997; Mahmood 2005)<sup>3</sup>. In this view, which owes much to the insights of Foucault (e.g. 1980), the subject is formed as an effect of power and as such remains ‘passionately attached’ to its own subjection, because therein lies the possibility of its continued existence as a coherent identity.

Agency must likewise be located within structures of power and in particular ways of inhabiting norms, and cannot be understood merely as resistance to external forms of domination or as the capacity to realise an autonomous will. From such a perspective, the continual assertion by Urarina people of their own agency and autonomy in and through transactions with traders need not be opposed to highly asymmetrical, even hierarchical forms of relationship; on the contrary, the former can be seen to emerge from the latter. A similarly relational view of agency also prevails in the case of industrial goods and game animals, implying that the Devil does indeed come to mediate otherwise contradictory systems of production and exchange, albeit not quite in the way envisaged by Taussig. This brand of commodity ‘fetishism’ may in fact shed new light on understandings of Amazonian ‘animism’ and ‘perspectivism’.

### **Extractive Economies and the Urarina**

The Urarina are a group of around four to six thousand hunter-horticulturalists who occupy the banks of the Chambira river and its tributaries in the region and province of Loreto, Peru<sup>4</sup>. The river itself, which discharges into the Marañón, is meandering and slow-flowing, its lower reaches inhabited by a series of mestizo or *ribereño* communities and its upper reaches, and primary affluents, populated by some two dozen Urarina communities, dispersed over a relatively large geographical area. The data presented here was collected among inhabitants of the river’s uppermost reaches, where contact with fluvial traders is slightly less intensive than is the case with more downstream communities.

Practising shifting cultivation combined with seasonal fishing and gathering expeditions, Urarina are traditionally semi-nomadic, though the establishment of formal schooling and official Native Communities has led to increased sedentarization over the past two decades. Uxorilocal post-marital residence is the norm, with brideservice lasting up to

several years. Speaking an isolated language, Urarina are also culturally distinct from their closest neighbours, contact with whom today is negligible. Ethnohistorical data points to their longstanding victimisation by Candoshi raiding parties, often in search of women or slaves, while Urarina themselves have always been relatively peaceful and submissive, and still prefer flight to confrontation<sup>5</sup>. Thus while their neighbours promptly prepared for war at the early approaches of whites, the Urarina are said to have received their first missionaries graciously and benevolently, to the point of appearing obsequious and servile (Izaguirre 2004:615).

Since the time of their earliest appearances in Urarina territory, manufactured goods have remained inextricably associated with hierarchical relations of domination. The supply of such goods was controlled first by the warlike Cocama, and subsequently by the Jesuits, who entered the Western Amazon in the seventeenth century and quickly came to dominate regional exchange (Reeve 1993). The Cocama were also used by the Jesuits to ‘pacify’ the Urarina and to assist with proselytization, and while Urarina experience with missions was fairly moderate compared to the former, the lingering presence of sublimated Christian motifs in the mythology and ritual language – including the incorporation of the Devil as a key figure – suggest a complex if largely forgotten period of missionization and accompanying syncretism.

The economy of Loreto was long characterised by the lack of a free labour market and a chronic shortage of disciplined workers (Santos Granero and Barclay 2000:34). Following the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767, the missions were replaced by a variety of other systems of labour recruitment. Unlike the infamous Putumayo case also described by Taussig (1987), notable for its ‘economy of terror’ in which white dominators and Indian subordinates simultaneously despised and feared one another – the situation in Loreto involved a more complex mix of persuasion and coercion (Santos Granero and Barclay 2000:35). Though



rubber was not tapped along the Chambira river itself, several Urarina were captured and relocated, and many were otherwise mistreated, sometimes brutally. In contrast to the slave raids used to capture tribal Indians, catechized Indians such as the Urarina were generally recruited through a system known as *enganche* (hooking), in which they were persuaded to accept manufactured merchandise as an advance for a given service. In some cases, debts escalated and became effectively un-repayable, and the threat of violence was deployed by *patrones* to prevent flight to the remoter headwaters. This remained a key strategy for avoiding the worst excesses of indentured labour, provided people were willing to live without the merchandise upon which they had grown increasingly dependent.

By 1943, the Urarina were described as being ‘submissive’ to whites and quite willing to work for *patrones* (Kramer 1979:15). While the economic power and authority of old-style *patrones* was beginning to diminish, protracted economic dependency had already left its mark. In some parts of Loreto, former peons whose *patrones* could no longer outfit them sometimes simply opted to migrate elsewhere in search of a new *patron* (Santos Granero and Barclay 2000:266). Fluvial traders increasingly dominated commerce along the Chambira, as elsewhere in Loreto, though this new generation controlled labourers only indirectly, and the more coercive debt-peonage system gave way to the less constraining (but equally effective) debt-merchandise system, which though structurally similar involves far greater autonomy for the labourer (Santos Granero and Barclay 2000:266).

In 1960, a missionary couple from the Summer Institute of Linguistics began living and working with the Urarina, which may have reinforced earlier associations between trade goods and apparently Christian themes of sin and damnation. The S.I.L. missionaries facilitated women’s participation in the commodity economy, teaching them how to make and dye palm fibre netbags of sufficient quality and regularity for commercial purposes (Ron Manus, personal communication). In recent decades, petroleum exploration has brought new

migrants into the region and spurred the development of a local lumber industry and increase in commercial agricultural production. Although lumbering is viewed positively by Urarina as a potentially lucrative activity, it is undertaken only sporadically due to the lack of equipment and capital. In 2006, the most important commercial activity was the extraction of edible palm hearts, supplemented by other forest products such as tortoises, animal skins, latex and copaiba balsam. For some Urarina, small-scale livestock production and rice cash-cropping were an additional, if minor, source of income.

The extraction of palm hearts takes place along broadly similar lines to hunting: husbands and wives often set out together, with the wife as the primary carrier; slightly less often, younger men accompany their fathers-in-law. Unlike hunting for subsistence purposes, however, the extraction of palm hearts, along with most other commercial activities, takes place only in order to repay debts incurred against goods previously advanced by a trader. These men, of whom there are a handful in total, make periodic journeys from the city of Iquitos and wind their way slowly up the Chambira river, a journey lasting around two weeks in total. At each settlement, prospective clients – always men – request the merchandise they desire, which the trader hands over one by one while announcing the cumulative total owed both in Peruvian currency and in the equivalent number of palm hearts<sup>6</sup>. The process continues until either the client decides he has reached the limit of palm hearts he is willing or able to extract before the due date, or the trader decides on his behalf, based on his past performance and reliability. No cash enters into the transactions. No-one is obliged to receive goods, and traders often simply wait in their boat after docking for willing workers to approach them. Each client is clearly advised of the exact day on which he will be expected to repay the entire amount owed, in full; usually in up to a week's time. The trader continues upriver to the furthest community to which he is willing or able to travel, usually around 6-7 days from Iquitos, then makes a hasty return, pausing only to collect the products owed to

him. Clients who have collected less than the agreed amount, thereby requiring an outstanding debt to be brought forward to the next journey, might be verbally reprimanded and, should they be repeat offenders, may expect to have their credit limit reduced.

### **The Allure of *Habilitación***

Travelling upriver on Don Ricardo's boat, laden with trade goods, we arrived at an isolated homestead just upriver of the community of Santa Carmela. Business as usual, I wandered inside together with Ricardo, three of his workers, and his brother Marlo. We were immediately greeted by two slightly inebriated men, making their way slowly through a large bucket of manioc beer. Each in turn shook hands with Ricardo, then with Marlo, then with me, greeting us with *Buenos dias*, or the ever-popular *Estas surcando?* ('You're heading upriver?'), to which the only answer, expected or possible, is a simple affirmative. Some small talk was made about the level of the river, which happened to be quite low. Before long a woman wordlessly served bowls of manioc beer to each of us in turn, following the same order as the handshakes. Consistent with norms of propriety, she stood at the maximum possible distance from us, head turned and eyes averted, stretching out her arm and entire body as she offered the bowl, and forcing us to do the same in order to receive it. Silence descended. Two small children affected sleep near the far wall. After a while, one of the men began a solicitation I had heard verbatim countless times before. 'Excuse me, sorry, Don Ricardo, sorry...' he began. 'Excuse me, sorry...do you think...couldn't you perhaps extend us some credit for a few items...'

'Damn! I don't know...', said Ricardo in a regretful drawl. 'I don't have a date yet for my return trip, I don't think I can...'

'Just a few things,' the man continued, undeterred. 'I just need a couple of things...just...' He lowered his voice to a near-whisper. 'Just...one pair of batteries. Nothing more.'

'Okay, fine,' said Ricardo, conceding.

'And two shotgun shells. That and nothing more.'

Another round of manioc beer was served. The woman said something to her husband, which I understood to be a reminder to buy matches. Soon another, elderly woman stepped up to the doorway of the house and told him to buy kerosene. After a short while, Ricardo led the two men out to his boat to sort out their account, while the rest of us stayed in the house to drink more beer. 'And don't forget to buy some more cane liquor!' cried out one of the men's wives after him.

The shopworn notion that traders ply unsuspecting Indians with goods in order to bond their labour falls well short of grasping the realities of present-day exchange on the Chambira. It is, moreover, the diametric opposite of how Urarina themselves perceive the nature of the transactions: traders must be sought out and persuaded, if necessary, to extend credit; several times I have witnessed the latter refuse it. Pushing one's credit limits is an ongoing challenge, and the traders I spoke to were reluctant to advance goods with a total value exceeding that

likely to be repaid within a week or so, when they return downriver with their palm hearts to Iquitos. While eager to maximise their profits where possible, keeping clients in a state of perpetual indebtedness is precisely what most traders today seek to avoid, and in order to do so must be alert to each individual client's reliability and capacity for work. If anything, it is the Urarina who seek to keep themselves in debt.

Eagerness to participate in *habilitación*<sup>7</sup> reflects, in the first instance, a very high demand for foreign goods, which is in turn largely a function of internal or intra-community dynamics. Foreign goods are densely woven into the fabric of contemporary social life because, like meat, they are central to the mediation of relations between spouses, and to a lesser extent other kin relations (see Walker in press). Even gender-neutral items that are predictably in regular demand, such as salt, kerosene, and the like, serve a social role not reducible to their use value, narrowly defined. Thus men often say they must 'work' for *patrones* in order to acquire foreign goods with which to 'maintain' their wives, as is their duty; inability to provide clothing, glass beads and cooking equipment is the ultimate failure of conjugal responsibility. When men go hunting, they similarly often explain that their wife (or child) wants to eat meat. The similarities to meat are more marked still in terms of procurement strategies, for industrial goods are viewed as resources to be appropriated much like any other in the local environment. Life histories narrated by informants were often structured around an oscillating movement between resource patches, to and from the main course of the Chambira where traders and their goods were most readily available. People would stress how animals were plenty and life was good along the streams and headwaters far from the main river, until the lack of foreign goods necessitated a return to the routes plied by *patrones*, and entry again into debt. When all goods received were paid for, they would withdraw once more into the remoter headwaters. Urarina invariably portray themselves in

these accounts as the initiators of *habilitación*, guided by their own needs and desires, and far from the passive victims of domineering *patrones* in need of cheap labour.

Despite peoples' eagerness to deal with traders, complaints abound concerning the high prices charged for merchandise, usually two to three times higher than shops in Iquitos. At first, I could not understand why people did not bypass traders altogether and take their produce directly to Iquitos, a long and admittedly uncomfortable but far from impossible journey, with considerable financial reward. Amidst the many possible answers to this question are a pervasive individualism that militates against the formation of collectives; poor financial literacy; the perishable nature of certain forest products; anxieties surrounding urban life and customs; and an aversion to immediate, anonymous, market-style exchange. I was often told that Iquitos was a 'wicked' place because no-one shared food. 'In Iquitos, nobody invites you to drink manioc beer, not even banana drink, nothing! Without money, you can't do anything, you can't even eat.' While not downplaying the importance of these and other considerations, I shall focus in what follows on how the system of *habilitación* resonates with hunting and shamanism as traditional vehicles for the expression of male agency. This begins with the concept of debt, which, seen from an Urarina perspective, is more accurately described as the activation of credit.

### **The Mastery of Solicitation**

It was many times made clear to me that it is Urarina themselves, and not traders, who insist on receiving goods in advance and refuse an immediate, market-style exchange. If debt was once used as a mechanism to bond labour, it is now seen as integral part of a healthy commercial relationship. Don Ricardo laughed bitterly when I first suggested to him that the structure of *habilitación* worked in his own favour, exclaiming, 'How much easier it would

be if they would be willing simply to exchange their produce directly, or work without advances!'. One of my first insights into the Urarina view of credit came one morning while working on translations with my associate. Emboldened by a few bowls of his wife's manioc beer, Lorenzo reiterated an earlier request for a small radio in exchange for his assistance. I had already tentatively agreed, thinking of it more as a return 'favour' with which I would express my gratitude. This time, he explained that he wanted it in advance, because that is the 'correct' procedure: 'What you should do is say to me, "Look, here is your radio, now, let's work – you will work for me." And then I will happily work.'

When I asked Lorenzo to explain why he insisted on receiving payment before working, rather than afterwards, he launched into an explanation of the importance of *inanacaa*, which might be translated as 'what we see', or 'that which has been made visible and tangible'. In a commercial context this refers to the payment itself, always in goods in advance, and for Lorenzo clearly expressed a principle of equity, namely that work has 'recuperation', i.e. remuneration. 'You might want to ask someone, "for what *inanacaa* are you working for that *patron*, what has he given you to work?"' he explained, before offering a couple of different examples of how the term is used in other contexts: when the moon at night suddenly appears from behind the clouds; or the process of extracting a tiny thorn lodged in the sole of a foot, which often requires a small amount of skin or flesh to be cut away in order for it to 'appear'. It refers to the moment of revelation, the appearance of something that was always there, but inaccessible or hidden from view. *Inanacaa* shares semantic space with the term *janoaa*, 'to clear up', in the sense of dawn, daylight or sunshine, and both terms are sometimes translated into Spanish as *aclarar* ('to clarify', 'to clear up').

The concepts of ‘advancing’ and ‘clarifying’ are both central to the way shamanic action is conceptualised. Far from being the restricted province of just a few specialists, Urarina shamanism is highly democratized, and most men of middle age or above drink psychoactive preparations of ayahuasca or brugmansia on a regular basis for a variety of ends. Prominent among these is the desire to ‘see’ and therefore know events by ‘advancing’ or by ‘bringing forward’: ascertaining whether an imminent childbirth, for example, or journey to the city, will be free of trouble. Men also aspire to bring about fine, sunny weather, characterised by clear conditions and high visibility: weather directly opposed, in short, to the cold, rainy, overcast conditions generally associated with the apocalypse, which is always held to be imminent. This kind of ‘clearing up’ or ‘clarifying’ is seen as a way of temporarily postponing the catastrophic collapse of the world into darkness and despair.

The end of the world is further associated with, and evidenced through, an ever-increasing scarcity of game animals in the forest. Drinkers of psychotropics thus also seek to replenish the supply of animals by soliciting the supreme Creator (*Cana Coaaunera*) or their spirit ‘masters’, ‘mothers’ or ‘owners’ (*ijjaene* or *neba*) to release their souls from the invisible, celestial pen or enclosure in which they are kept. Hunters often make similar appeals while walking out along hunting trails, imploring the merciful Creator to take pity on him and help him to feed his wife and children. The process of release is also one of ‘making appear’, and the animal thus becomes available for appropriation through a kind of divine gift to humans, for which gratitude is expressed in short speeches at the end of a satisfying meal.

The traders themselves are often referred to as *ijjaene*, the same term used for the spirit masters and owners who control the release of game animals into the forest<sup>8</sup>. Sometimes *cojoaaorain* is also used, referring to a spirit guardian who takes the form of a small bird and

protects game animals against dangers or approaching predators. In the context of a discussion about hunting, Martin once explained the distinction between *ijjaene* and *cojoaaorain* by drawing an analogy to the trader Don Arturo, and his deputy and right-hand man, Marcial, who often came to the community on Arturo's behalf:

Marcial is Arturo's employee and envoy. Arturo himself is like the owner. The envoy is *cojoaaorain*. For example, the folk around here talk about 'our animals' *cojoaaorain*', a bird who is the envoy of Our Creator, who sings 'tititon, tititon'. The people solicit the bird for game animals, itemising them: deer, peccary, tapir...

People request traders for goods in a similar manner, itemising the goods they require, and as they do so they adopt a shy and above all deferential demeanour that seems entirely at odds with the jocular assertiveness characteristic of comments made about traders when the latter are not present. I had the distinct impression that this performance of submissiveness, whilst embodied and probably involuntary, is also seen as a desirable means of obtaining a favourable outcome, and constitutes a particular and historically conditioned expression of agency that cannot be figured simply as 'resistance'. In a range of other contexts too, eliciting a benevolent, nurturing or giving disposition in others by emphasising one's neediness or helplessness is a key strategy for achieving one's ends. People sometimes self-deprecatingly refer to themselves as helpless 'pets' or 'orphans', for example, in good-humoured attempts to win the affections of others<sup>9</sup>, or acknowledged their own feelings of 'pity' when acceding to subtle, often unspoken requests for food from onlooking neighbours. All such food is in any case a gift from the Creator, who 'watches [over] us all with pity' (*caichaojoai cana coaranejate*).

The fact that a slain animal is generally also considered the result of successful solicitation – rather than merely a predatory appropriation - is thus of particular significance here, and relates directly to the question of why Urarina insist on the extension of credit. The



skill of the Urarina hunter is seen to lie not only in tracking and marksmanship, but also in the ability to persuasively solicit a ‘gift’ from benevolent divinities. The procurement of trade goods is similarly less a form of ‘taking’ than a form of ‘causing to be given’. The term used in this context (*raa*) means literally ‘receive’, not ‘take’, and emphasises the movement of an object toward the self, rather than any transfer of ownership. In fact, trade goods and game animals share the property of being the inalienable possessions of non-human Masters, which Urarina may use or consume but never truly ‘own’ outright - an important point discussed further below.

Maintaining a steady flow of goods is hard work, requiring persistence and humility. Traders are expected not only to advance goods on credit, but also to supply additional ‘gifts’, such as bottles of cane alcohol. Both are equally seen as signs of goodwill. Don Ricardo once told me, ‘We’re always giving them things, it’s what you have to do...When you are giving, giving, you are a good person; but as soon as you stop, you are a bad person. That’s how they are.’ Ricardo’s brother Marlo concurred, adding, ‘They never feel any shame in continually asking for things. Just the other day I overheard them talking amongst themselves. One of them wanted something from me and the other said, “Just ask for it, what have you got to lose? If he turns you down, so what?” So you see? I would be embarrassed, wouldn’t you?’ We both agreed that Urarina didn’t seem particularly troubled by any potential loss of status implied as a recipient of such ‘gifts’. They do not consider themselves inferior to traders on a moral level, yet the latter are described as ‘strong’ and ‘powerful’ in a way that Urarina are not, and this strength can be fearsome as well as useful. As one man put it, ‘I have to go to work for my *patron*, he’s like my boss, like my father.’

Traders who regularly make available their goods, whether on credit or as a ‘gift’, are sometimes described as *edaatiha*, or ‘tame’, but incorporating a more specific sense of

readiness or availability for appropriation. A monkey or other animal is similarly said to be 'tame' when it approaches the hunter or 'passes right by' him, rather than fleeing. Its opposite, *edaaetoha*, means 'wild' or 'shy' but also 'clever' or 'elusive'. In the community of Nueva Pucuna, Ricardo and his brother Marlo were said to be 'wild', on the grounds that 'sometimes they don't want to come, and even when they do come, sometimes they're stingy with their merchandise'. This also applies to the merchandise itself: after receiving some cane liquor from a trader as a 'gift', for example, I once heard a man proudly describe it as 'very tame'. Like game animals, industrial goods are moreover the focus of an extensive repertoire of standardised interpretations of dreams and other omens, such as birdcalls. The screech-owl (*Otus sp.*), for example, portends the imminent arrival of a trader's boat, while a certain kind of bee sting means one will soon be drinking cane liquor.

In sum, traders and their merchandise are engaged through a set of attitudes and dispositions that pertain less to the domain of traditional trade items than to hunted animals and their spirit masters. Such attitudes are probably not unique to the Urarina; Erikson (2009:179), for example, notes that for some time following first contact, the Matis treated foreign goods like pets, 'requiring a phase of seclusion on the outskirts of the village before being fully incorporated and gradually being allowed to follow their new master wherever he or she may go.' Of central importance here is the fact that industrial goods are quite distinct from anything produced locally, or exchanged through pre-contact trade networks, in that their coming into being is relatively obscure. The techniques employed in the manufacture of a traditional artefact may be readily discerned in the finished object itself: a basket, for example, embodies in its form the visible trace of the weaving movements used in its production. Even an item such as a blowpipe is produced by techniques that are at least familiar to everyone, if not practically mastered by them. Commodities such as glass beads,

axes or shotguns, by contrast, are the result of industrial manufacturing techniques that are entirely unknown or opaque to people. Moreover, the materials used bear little or no resemblance to anything found in the local environment. These items appear in the landscape ready-made, as it were, much as animals do. Yet amidst the similarities lie some important differences, and industrial goods alone are said to belong to the Devil, wherein lies their unique source and destiny.

### **Into the Furnace**

The often intense desires expressed for industrial goods sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside the widespread discourse linking them to the Moconajaera, whose name means literally ‘the Burner’ or ‘he who burns’, and is widely considered identical to the Christian figure of Satan. Certain similarities as well as differences between the two are readily apparent. Some say that when the world ends, Moconajaera will come to earth to collect those people who ‘follow’ him, as well as ‘sinners’ who don’t believe in God, taking them away to the sky to be punished by fire. Yet as the ‘mother’ and ‘owner’ of fire (*usi neba* or *usi jiaine* respectively), he is also the putative owner of industrial goods, responsible for their manufacture in his celestial ‘factory’. Insofar as any such object is considered to have force, power or the ability to do work of some kind, this is understood to originate with Moconajaera or to be an expression of him. The ability of a wristwatch to move its hands, for example, is ascribed to the ‘fire of Moconajaera’ (*moconajaera busi*) within it, a property deemed analogous to the life force or animating principle (*neura*) associated with trees, plants, or artefacts made from them, such as woven fans. In the case of items such as shotguns or gasoline, this underpins their ability to burn or explode:

Gasoline has *Moconajaera busi*, because it has a lot of force, it helps the motor. *Busi* is like its force, like its food or nourishment. Human beings have manioc beer, and machines also need their nourishment. The battery is the *busi* of the radio, the *busi* helps it. If these things didn’t have a Mother, they wouldn’t have any force at all.

Metal objects boast *moconajaera caje ocona*, literally ‘light from Moconajaera’, related to their distinctive ability to glisten and gleam in a way few local materials can. Defining *ocona* as ‘similar to Moconajaera, that which came out of hell’, Martin elaborated as follows:

*Moconajaera busi* refers to shotguns, clothes, kerosene, whatever. It’s just like the women have the flame of their hearth and their firewood, and when they’re going to cook they put in more firewood so it can make the pot boil faster. Moconajaera is just like that, with all his shotguns and other things. The shotgun is like Moconajaera’s firewood. Don’t you see how fiercely the petrol burns when you light it? That’s why the people say *moconajaera busi*. Because it’s iron. That’s why an axe or machete, which has *moconajaera caje ocona*, when it cuts, it cuts without fear. See how it enters the flesh? Because it belongs to Moconajaera.

Other phrases express more explicitly proprietary relationships. Shotguns are ‘Moconajaera’s blowpipe’, while shells are his ‘darts’, emphasising that these goods continue to belong to Moconajaera even as they are used by Urarina. ‘Moconajaera is the owner of everything. He controls everything, shotgun shells, shotguns...’. Such items remain the inalienable property of Moconajaera and always return to him eventually, either at the end of the world, which is always held to be imminent, or at the individual death of their user. At this time, Moconajaera not only reclaims his goods from the deceased, but punishes them in accordance with the quantities they consumed, by burning their heart-soul (*suujue*) in his tremendous, celestial fire, admonishing them all the while for their use of ‘his’ possessions.

Lorenzo related the following:

When our clothes wear out, they go to their Mother [i.e. Moconajaera], where they wait for their owner. At their owner’s death, the Mother scolds them: ‘So many clothes you have worn! Right here I will punish you! I am the mother of all clothing, which you have worn willingly! I caused these clothes to appear!’ And he has everything written down in his notebook. ‘You wore sandals, and a watch, like the *mestizos*!’ he says, preparing his hearth. ‘Jump onto the fire!’ he tells you. Afterwards, when you are exculpated, he releases you. Wherever you wore a watch, the Mother puts a big band of gold. It’s heavy, one kilogram. In place of the sandals you wore, or the rubber boots, he puts ten kilograms of gold – on each side!

Such comments point to a number of mostly implicit and unremarked-upon analogies between Moconajaera and the itinerant traders who are the purveyors of his property. The use of a notebook in which all outstanding debts are impassively recorded is a striking example. Like the supreme Creator, Moconajaera dwells in the sky - itself said to resemble 'a great city, like Iquitos' - but the two live apart, and Moconajaera maintains his own 'office' and 'shop'. The source of such imagery seems clear, and yet there is a further important association with the goods themselves.

### **Materialising the Devil**

The distinctiveness of industrial goods is expressed by Urarina above all in terms of the materials from which they are fabricated, and metal is the prototypical foreign material<sup>10</sup>. This was almost certainly true since the first appearances of industrial goods in the region, as iron tools were always the most coveted trade items (Reeve 1993:119). The Urarina word for metal, *coetaa*, is today used to refer to all forms of steel, aluminium, and even the plastic used in radios and similar items. Even kerosene and petrol are spoken of as a kind of metal, their fiery flammability recalling the way the latter glistens uncannily in the sun.

The invocation of the Devil in relation to metals such as iron and gold has parallels throughout the Andes, where gold and silver have been intimately linked to the fearsome power of elites and ruling classes since pre-Inca times. As Sallnow (1989:223) notes, gold and silver became state monopolies under Inca rule, dedicated to the glorification and controlled delegation of state power (*ibid.*:221). After the Spanish conquest these symbols of political power were transmuted and fixed upon as emblems of the global commodity-currencies of mercantile capitalism. The mining of precious metals, particularly gold but also silver, tin, iron, lead, zinc and copper, has subsequently long had a dubious moral status in

the region, as ‘an illicit, amoral and ritually dangerous activity, in which the successful prospector may well pay for his new-found wealth with his life’ (*ibid.*:209).

Although Urarina had no direct exposure to mining itself, it is possible that associations of this kind spread along lines of cultural influence extending from the Andes. The notion that the Devil punishes people in part by adorning them with burning gold rings echoes the use of gold as body ornaments by the Inca elite, and as a symbol of evil, he could have seemed an apt source of the iron goods whose arrivals into Urarina territory were so often accompanied by oppression, violence and terror. However, as for some Andean peoples (e.g. Harris 1989: 251), the defining character of the Devil is not straightforwardly evil or malicious; he sometimes appears in traditional mythology as an almost comic character<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, the sinking of Don Avilar’s boat was after all essentially a retaliation, on behalf of the Urarina, for his unjustly high prices. Moconajaera’s appearance in a range of discursive contexts, not all of which treat colonial, mercantile or Christian themes, suggest that his association with commodities may amount to more than a moral evaluation of their material constitution.

To explore this further, let us consider Gell’s (1992; 1998) argument that one’s attitude towards an art object is fundamentally conditioned by one’s notion of the technical processes that gave rise to it: ‘It is the way an art-object is construed as having come into the world which is the source of the power such objects have over us - their becoming rather than their being’ (1992:46). Though he was not primarily concerned with artefacts as such, let alone mass produced commodities, Gell certainly recognised the wider applicability of his theory. Any artefact, he suggested, ‘by virtue of being a manufactured thing, motivates an abduction which specifies the identity of the agent who made or originated it.’ (1998:23). Gell takes the art object to be an index in the Peircean sense of a ‘natural sign’, or entity from which the

observer can make a causal inference of some kind – in particular ‘an inference about the intentions or capabilities of another person’ (*ibid.*:13). Abduction is the term he uses for this cognitive operation through which an explanatory hypothesis is generated and accepted on the grounds that, if true, otherwise mysterious or inexplicable circumstances become a matter of course. Simply put, all manufactured objects are seen as ‘caused’ by their makers, just as smoke is caused by fire, and for this reason these objects are indexes of their makers.

Unlike artworks or artefacts, most industrial goods are not easily traced to the actions of a maker, especially by one unfamiliar with modern manufacturing techniques. While no Urarina would think of these goods as ‘alive’ in quite the same way as animals, I have suggested that their similar appearance in the environment ready-made, as it were, underpins broadly analogous strategies of appropriation. Yet whereas the facts of progeniture are well-known to everyone – and while animals themselves first came into being through the volition and goodwill of Our Creator (*Cana Coaunera*) – the provenance of industrial goods remains rather more mysterious<sup>12</sup>. To the extent that they register as artefacts and thus presuppose, or index, a maker, Gell’s theory makes clear why Moconajaera is such a good candidate. Metals are not only forged in fire but linked to the explosive force of shotguns, the fearsome power of knives to cut through flesh, the glistening of metallic surfaces in the sun, the flammability of kerosene, and so on. While it may never be possible to know for sure, my suspicion is that Moconajaera is a pre-contact personage whose characteristics facilitated an identification with the Christian Devil, rather than an Amerindianized version of him. Either way, as the personification of fire he remains the logical outcome of a process of abduction through which the capacities of the aforementioned goods become more readily explicable. If commodities can even cause boats to sink, it is likely because they transmit his intentions and

ability to act in the world. To use Gell's terminology, industrial goods index the agency of Moconajaera, as both the artist and the prototype; they are a part of his distributed person.

Such a situation is not vastly different in the case of game animals, said to be created by Our Creator but guarded by their species-specific Owners in a complex three-way relationship which recalls that pertaining to *habilitación*. Gell's arguments are particularly relevant in Amazonia given that a conception of both human and animal bodies as themselves artefact-like is increasingly recognised as widespread in the region. As Santos Granero (2009:4) has emphasised, it is craftsmanship rather than childbearing that provides the model for all creative acts, endowing Amerindian cosmologies with a 'constructional' character that contrasts strongly with the 'creationist' emphasis of other cosmologies, such as the Judeo-Christian. According to the Urarina, all entities, be they humans, locally made artefacts, animals or trees, have a Master, Owner or Mother who figures in some way as their source, guardian or controller. In the case of foreign goods, such a being is logically necessary, though not readily discernible, and not supplied by the indigenous cosmology. In short, Moconajaera's association with foreign goods renders these more immediately consistent with other kinds of entities.

### **Inalienability and Exchange**

One of the distinctive claims made about industrial goods is that, while offered by traders for use by Urarina, they will eventually return to their true 'owner' and maker. This putative inalienability fits with the Urarina view that goods advanced on credit resemble a kind of 'gift', albeit one effectively solicited through their own agency. The traders themselves figure as intermediaries or envoys of Moconajaera, analogous to the spirit Masters and guardians of game animals, which were created for human sustenance by Our



Creator (*Cana Coaunera*) and whose souls eventually return to his celestial pen to await rebirth. This three-way relationship irresistibly recalls the now-classic discussion of the *hau* of the gift by the Maori informant Ranapiri (Mauss 1954:89), in which the return for a valuable given from A to B to C must eventually arrive back at A. As Godelier (1999) has pointed out, the third party is necessary in this exchange because the ‘indelible presence of the giver’ in the object given does not actually become visible until it circulates beyond the simple exchange of gifts between two people.

According to Godelier, the controversial idea that a part of the original donor is present in or attached to the gift is essentially a translation, to the level of indigenous representations, of the essential fact that he does not ever forfeit his rights over it, regardless of the number of times it may change hands. Subsequent recipients, even though they may in turn may become donors, merely enjoy rights of possession or use, which are alienable, temporary and transferred with the object. If the permanence of the original donor’s rights are expressed by Urarina in terms of the return of all industrial goods to Moconajaera, and the return of all game animals to Our Creator, this formulation is readily reconciled with Gell’s by acknowledging that the production of the gift object - whether through creation or craftsmanship - is necessary and sufficient to establish inalienability. Such an idea is readily found in Urarina practice, and is partly why there is such a strong moral imperative to make one’s own possessions rather than resort to borrowing them from others, and why legitimate ownership is contingent upon participation in at least the first stages of manufacture (see also Erikson 2009:174). The connection between a craftsman and his product persists even when the latter is sold or exchanged - as I once discovered first hand when my canoe, bought from a local schoolteacher, went missing while I was away in Iquitos. It transpired that the canoe had been ‘borrowed’ by its original maker, who had earlier sold it to the schoolteacher.

Although Urarina witnesses to the event immediately recognised my proprietary rights, it is significant that of all the people to pass by and be tempted by the canoe during my absence, only the builder himself had felt enough claim to it to attempt such a daring act of appropriation.

Erikson (2009:177) has suggested that for the Matis, the lack of any clear maker of foreign goods means that they are (or were) never really 'owned' by anyone as intrinsically as home-made items. For this reason, whereas it is unthinkable to use someone else's blowpipe or bead-collars, borrowing their shoes or machete is perfectly acceptable, precisely because their 'owner', having not made it in person, has no intimate relationship to it and so no right to be stingy. It is this anomalous status of foreign goods, arising from their lack of a visible maker or owner, that I suggest Urarina - familiar with such objects for much longer than the more recently contacted Matis - have effectively rectified by invoking Moconajaera. Even if foreign goods continue to be identified with the particular trader from whom they were obtained, the Devil remains the ultimate source and inalienable possessor; the trader is merely the third party who makes this clear. The idea that labour can be fully alienated, in the sense that producers can be fully separated from their products, is hardly welcomed by Urarina, and so Moconajaera remains a fitting expression of their insistently personalised take on gifts and commodities alike. As Taussig pointed out, the connections between producers and between production and consumption are directly intelligible in the pre-capitalist mode of production; in a capitalist system, by contrast, it is essential that the embodiment of the producer in the product be 'exorcised'. The Urarina recognise this logic but are not compelled by it.

The imputed inalienability of commodities via the invocation of Moonajaera helps to further reconcile *habilitación* with the logic of traditional exchanges by subtly altering the nature of the reciprocity involved. To take the example of a gift of meat between co-residents, the driving motive of a future return is not to repay the debt incurred with an item of equivalent value, but to restore the balance between exchange partners and thereby prolong the relationship itself, which the meat symbolises and makes tangible. Following Godelier (1999), one could argue that the debt cannot be cancelled because the food was never really given: rights of use, rather than ownership, are all that is transferred to the hunter at the moment of appropriation - which I suspect underlies the strong moral imperative to share meat within the community as widely as possible. The meat is not 'returned' to the original donor so much as 'given again'.

When traders expect and pressure Urarina to repay debts, in full, within the duration of a single journey, they are insistently shifting the emphasis away from the equivalence of transactors and towards the equivalence of the goods exchanged. If Urarina often repay slightly less than the full amount outstanding, this could be interpreted as a strategy for prolonging the relationship rather than terminating it. Yet by invoking Moconajaera, the distance between these two modes of exchange is bridged even more. His background presence as inalienable owner implies that the original prestation of goods was never really given, and hence the debt incurred is never fully cancelled - at least, not until after death, at which time payment is finally extracted in the form of punishment by fire.

An abiding sense that the counter-prestition should be oriented towards the relationship itself rather than the things exchanged - which of course runs contrary to the logic of market exchange - is present in most transactions carried out between Urarina. For example, I once

asked my neighbour, Damian, to clear away the scrub near my house when I was away, in return for which I agreed to pay him a length of cloth. When I returned, the job completed, Damian demanded additional payment for his two daughters, who had apparently helped him with his task. Suspicious he was trying to swindle me, I laughingly told him it was not my responsibility to compensate his daughters, but his, given that he had taken it upon himself to subcontract them. His subsequent anger suggested that his own, quite different, reasoning was not just a ploy. A similar misunderstanding arose when I asked a young man to bring me a certain amount of firewood, in return for which I agreed to give him one of my t-shirts. Several hours later, he returned with his friend, bearing between them the amount of firewood I had requested. However, each now wanted a t-shirt. It would seem that the understanding they (but not I) shared was more strongly informed by elements of gift giving. This was not really a form of demand sharing, because they recognised my debt to them and sensed their efforts should be compensated for, though the emphasis in the transaction was not on making equivalent in value their labour (or its products) and a particular quantity of goods, but rather us as transactors. There was little sense that their labour or its products had a fixed exchange value as a commodity.

## **Conclusion**

According to Hornborg (2006), the distinction between fetishism and animism, as ‘strategies for knowing (or not knowing) the world’, can be understood as alternative responses to universal human problems of drawing boundaries between persons and things. Whereas Marxian fetishism – an ideological illusion underpinning capitalist political economy – involves attributing agency and subjectivity to inert objects detached from their social contexts and origins, animism is a condition of ‘phenomenological resonance’ based on the ‘quite reasonable’ assumption that *‘all living things are subjects*, i.e. equipped with a

certain capacity for perception, communication, and agency' (2006:29). Whilst I am sympathetic to Hornborg's intentions, the material presented here suggests a more complex situation. One problem with his view, arguably shared by much writing on Amazonian animism and perspectivism, is that it seeks to locate such categories as 'life', 'subjectivity' and 'agency' *within* things or as immutable attributes of them - as given, for example, with the presence of a 'soul'. Yet the ethnography often points to a more relational view, in which the apparent subjectivity or agency of non-humans is intimately bound up in an asymmetrical relationship to a 'master', 'owner' or 'mother'. Rather than being mere expressions or 'hypostatisations' of an entity's spiritual essence or vital principle, as Viveiros de Castro (1998:471) would have it – a view which conflates the two beings rather than problematising their relationship – the ubiquitous 'owner' figures appear as conceptual preconditions for the emergence of agency, implying a view of the latter as a dimension and consequence of certain kinds of asymmetrical relationships, often involving a subjection to power (see Walker 2009). Beyond the straightforward encounter of 'predator' and 'prey', this relational dimension is absent in perspectival interpretations. The issue is further complicated by the 'constructional' or 'artefactual' emphasis in Amerindian cosmologies, in which rigid distinctions between 'living beings' and 'inert objects' are difficult to sustain. As Descola (1994) has insisted, Amerindian notions of 'subjectivity' are far too encompassing to leave much room for a native theory of 'objects' *per se*.

Urarina people recognise, in their own way, the 'unnaturalness' of the commodity form, in which connections to producers have been severed and the emphasis in exchange is on the objects themselves rather than the social relationship. Their attitudes to commodities are not fetishism in the Marxian sense, however, even if characterised by intense desires, because any extraordinary powers are seen to derive not from their inherent nature, but from the

imputed maker whose agency they index<sup>13</sup>. An insistence on this intrinsic relationship is part of a broader strategy for reconciling the appropriation and distribution of commodities and game animals, each central to masculine agency and responsibility. While there are good grounds for being wary of simplistic tropes of ‘resistance to the market’ as a way of explaining local responses to market expansion (cf. Nugent 1996), new emphases in constructions of exchange, promoted by traders and others, nevertheless require the mediation of indigenous representations in order to reassert the unity between producers and their products, and the priority and continuity of interpersonal relationships. Although the invocation of the Devil is hardly free of moral connotations, it remains less a condemnation of commodities *per se* than a particular variant of widespread and diverse strategies for resocializing commodities in the process of consuming them. If there is ‘resistance’ at work here, it might as well be construed as a stubborn focus on the indexical relationships of persons and things as a way of countervailing the ‘semiotic abstraction’ that characterises modernity (e.g. Hornborg 1999:150).

If Urarina actively seek to engage traders on what may appear to be unequal terms, spurning in the process any involvement in markets, this should be interpreted in light of their own theories of agency and subjectivity. As Mahmood (2006:186) has emphasised in the context of an Islamic women’s piety movement in Cairo, the meaning and sense of agency ‘cannot be fixed in advance but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity.’ What may appear to be mere passivity or docility to an outside observer may actually be a form of agency, yet one that is comprehensible only from within the particular discourses and structures of subordination that create the possibility of its existence. The absence of coercion should certainly not be taken to imply an absence of power, because an attachment to subjection is

one of the most pervasive forms power takes (Butler 1997), and a possible legacy of the Urarina's long history of domination by powerful outsiders. In the Urarina's own relational view, a submission to power is a precondition of many forms of effective action, among which the solicitation of gifts looms large: it is the agency of the receiver, rather than the giver, that they tend to prioritise. This is at odds with Western liberal assumptions of autonomy and freedom, and elides oppositions of domination and resistance, or subordination and subversion. There are echoes here of what Knauff (2002) designates 'recessive agency', discernible among many marginalised peoples in rural areas who are essentially active agents in the service of what amounts to, in structural terms, their own passivity and subordination. Far from being antithetical to the 'egalitarian' tendencies of social life, as it is lived between members of a residential community - and therefore something to be avoided entirely - this kind of hierarchical ordering is, arguably, its very precondition. Power and hierarchy are never eradicated, but may be continually projected outwards to the peripheries of social space<sup>14</sup>. Conversely, I would argue, it is the looming presence of powerful others that helps recreate insiders as 'equals'. Urarina do not solicit gifts from each other with anything like the same intensity, and for the same reason traders will always be quintessential outsiders. It is by virtue of their intermittent engagements with more powerful 'others' that Urarina have long maintained a sense of their own identity, and perhaps paradoxically their status as subjects and agents.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The pan-Amazonian figure of the spirit ‘Mother’ should not be taken to imply a gender framework; it is in fact gender-neutral, and encapsulates generic generative capacity and protective, nurturing tendencies.

<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding Bodley’s (1973:595) earlier observation that Campa treated their *patrones* with particular deference and respect, a key difference here may be the absence among Urarina of anything resembling the (Arawakan) *ayompari* system of formalised trading partners.

<sup>3</sup> As Clastres (1987) pointed out, an absence of coercion tends to conceal the nature of political power in Amazonia, although the productive effects of the latter (*pace* Foucault 1980) might nevertheless be traced in the constitution of subjects.

<sup>4</sup> A more detailed account of the history of Urarina participation in debt peonage is provided by Dean (2009).

<sup>5</sup> One typical myth, for example, tells of the capture of two siblings who are taken back to a Candoshi village and raised as pets, where the local children plead with their parents to fatten them up in order to devour them.

<sup>6</sup> In 2005, one palm heart was worth 0.50 nuevo soles, or roughly £0.10.

<sup>7</sup> While it might be suggested that the Spanish term *habilitación* (‘fitting out’) does not strictly apply to all the forms of deferred exchange discussed in this paper, I find it appropriate because it connotes a notion of ‘empowerment’ that well suits my basic argument, and is moreover still used by many fluvial traders themselves.

<sup>8</sup> The term *ijjaene* appears to connote ‘whiteness’ as well as ‘power’, perhaps through a semantic relationship to the kapok tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), *ijia*.

<sup>9</sup> See also Surrallés (2003) and Gow (2000) for similar examples among Candoshi and Piro.

<sup>10</sup> Albert (1992) points out that the Brazilian Yanomami construe the power of the whites’ technology and manufacturing economy in terms of the ‘fumes’ or ‘fragrance’ exuded by metal goods.

<sup>11</sup> In one myth, for example, a canny Urarina shaman escapes the punishment awaiting him by throwing banana skins under Moconajaera’s feet and further humiliating him as he slips repeatedly, until the shaman is finally begged to leave.

<sup>12</sup> While number of myths recount a transformation from a universal (proto) human form into the present-day animal form, none describe how animals are actually made or constructed.

<sup>13</sup> For a more extended discussion of the factors underwriting consumptive desires, see Walker (in press).

<sup>14</sup> A similar suggestion was made by Clastres (1987) in relation to chiefly authority. My argument is also compatible with Lorrain’s (2001:270) observation that relations between members of different social categories are most likely to be characterised by hierarchy in Amazonia, while relations between members of the same category are typically egalitarian.