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**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Walker, Harry (2012) Wild things: manufacturing desire in the Urarina moral economy. [The journal of Latin American and Caribbean anthropology](#) . ISSN 1935-4932 (In Press)

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## **Wild Things: Manufacturing Desire in the Urarina Moral Economy**

*by*

Harry Walker

### ABSTRACT

Drawing on the case of the Peruvian Urarina, this article seeks to understand the present high demand for Western trade goods among native Amazonian peoples by situating it within a broader economy of desire with roots in historical experiences of colonization. The relations of ‘taming’ that have long been a feature of encounters with outsiders, mediating an opposition between ‘savage’ and ‘civilized’ states, have become a central part of the caring dynamic between husbands and wives. This is increasingly focused on the provision of commodities, which are construed as akin to wild pets in need of taming and whose acquisition is a quintessentially male pursuit, much like hunting. While exacerbating existing gender asymmetries, this process points to gender as a key point of articulation between the subsistence economy and a penetrating market, and exemplifies the ‘decoding’ effects of capitalism, through which spheres of exchange are conflated and desires intensified.

Keywords: Amazonia, consumption, gender, modernity, Peru.

### RESUMÉN

Tomando como referencia el caso de los Urarina de Perú, este trabajo investiga la demanda actual por artículos de consumo de los pueblos amazónicos, caracterizándola como una economía del deseo, la cual tiene raíces en las experiencias históricas de la colonización. Las relaciones de ‘domesticación’, que durante mucho tiempo, han sido una característica de los encuentros con foráneos, las cuales median entre salvajes y el estado civilizado, han llegado a formar parte central del cuidado dentro de la pareja conyugal. Esto es cada vez más acentuado en el suministro de productos básicos, visto como algo similar a las crías de animales silvestres, y cuya adquisición es una actividad esencialmente masculina. Este proceso incluye al género como un punto clave de articulación entre la economía de subsistencia y el mercado, y demuestra los efectos “decodificantes” del capitalismo, a través del cual las esferas de intercambio se confunden y los deseos se intensifican.

Palabras Clave: Amazonía, consumo, género, modernidad, Perú.

The demands expressed by native Amazonians for industrial goods have long constituted a particularly salient dimension of the fieldwork experience. As early as 1956, Robert Murphy and Julian Steward expressed their surprise—and also their disdain—at the Mundurucú's 'seemingly insatiable appetite' for the 'wares and trinkets of civilization', drawing attention to the inexorable process, seemingly intrinsic to capitalism everywhere, by which 'luxuries soon became necessities' (Murphy and Steward 1956: 344). These authors were not particularly puzzled by such developments, suggesting that the allure of trade goods lay 'more in their sheer utility than in their exotic qualities', while noting, for example, the vast improvements in efficiency made possible by steel tools. Yet in the wake of a burgeoning literature on the cultural dimensions of consumption practices, explanations articulated merely in terms of function or use value appear increasingly unsatisfactory. This article seeks to understand the present high demand for Western trade goods among native Amazonian peoples by situating it within a broader economy of desire with roots in historical experiences of colonization. It draws on studies suggesting that commodities can be socially productive in a number of ways, including as vehicles of kinship; according to Miller (1995), as people rely increasingly upon goods they do not themselves produce, the construction of social relations may be carried out through the practice of consumption, with goods eventually replacing persons as the key medium of objectification for projects of value. Moreover, consumption and commoditization are often closely linked to the nature of modernity as lived experience, as well as to the construction of a particular sense of tradition—in other words, they are part of people's creative imaginings of who they were and who they wish to become.

In Amazonian Brazil, Ewart (2002) and Gordon (2003) have argued that it is not utility but the exotic qualities of commodities that can be most appealing: present-day desires are a continuation of a long-standing proclivity to incorporate alterity, to invigorate society through interactions with the 'enemy-others' of which whites are, today, the best exemplars. Fisher (2000) has meanwhile pointed out that native peoples often appear not to distinguish between necessities and luxuries, and that the intrinsic attractiveness or the seemingly innate superiority of Western manufactured products cannot explain the relatively restricted types of goods desired, nor the quantities considered satisfactory.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Brazilian Xikrin discussed by Fisher, the high demand for commodities is driven less by need than by an internal, inflationary dynamic whereby chiefs need to redistribute wealth continually in order to maintain their power. Commoners come to see their household autonomy as dependent on alliances with chiefs, and chiefs recognize that their own authority depends on maintaining trade relationships with Westerners. According to Rubenstein (2004:156), this amounts to

what Deleuze and Guattari term ‘decoding’: the process by which people come to experience their desires as insatiable, as the social regulation of exchange is broken down. Formerly socially coded, insofar as specific situations or relationships call for specific exchanges, the introduction of all-purpose money and the commodity form means that desires are suddenly subject to inflation, as anything can be exchanged for anything. The need for trade goods, not only in production but in social reproduction, rapidly escalates, leading finally to the belief that one’s material needs are infinite.

Deep in the Xingu and under the protective gaze of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), the Xikrin’s access to foreign goods is often made possible through windfall payments made to chiefs by outsiders. Their case could be said to differ considerably from the situation facing many other groups, particularly outside Brazil, where access is often direct and unmediated by chiefs. I nevertheless concur with Fisher’s broader suggestion that we must focus on exactly ‘how such goods are acquired and incorporated into the lives and societies of indigenous peoples operating within different regimes of value and social structure’ (Fisher 2000:2). Moreover, a focus on the production of desire can and should be combined with an analysis of specific exchanges in terms of meanings and material flows. In pursuing some of these issues among the Urarina, it is useful to draw attention to another key aspect of the commodity trade that has received relatively little attention to date: gender ideology. In doing so, this work will build on the insights of Knaft (1997) and Seymour-Smith (1991), who emphasized that the gender relation is one of the critical instances of complicity in the nexus between the traditional ‘community-based’ or domestic mode of production and the penetrating capitalist market economy.<sup>2</sup> Frequently, as women become more desirous of trade goods, but are constrained in their extra-domestic activities for various reasons, they may act by demanding more commodities from men. Masculine prestige is increasingly contingent on the acquisition of foreign goods, and so commodity aspirations and gendered oppositions come to reinforce each other mutually. As Knaft aptly put it, ‘[m]odernity is masculinized and masculinity is selectively modernised’.

Though neither universal nor inevitable,<sup>3</sup> such a pattern is clearly discernible among the Urarina, a group of around 4,000–6,000 hunter-horticulturalists who inhabit the Chambira river area and its tributaries in Peruvian Amazonia. Despite their relative geographical isolation, their engagement in regional markets, often mediated through the system of debt peonage, has a long and chequered history. Tales abound of violence and exploitation at the hands of local labor bosses in times past, but Urarina today vigorously seek out opportunities to work in exchange for the manufactured goods they desire.<sup>4</sup> The process by which such

goods acquire value is not immediately transparent, nor is it explained by either their utility or their exotic qualities. This article argues that commodities are of crucial importance to Urarina in mediating relationships, not between chiefs and commoners, but between women and men.<sup>5</sup> Local ideas surrounding gender and trade intersect in the form of a pervasive ideology of ‘taming’ or ‘civilizing’ activities, to which Western commodities have been inextricably tied since their first appearance in Urarina territory. Relations with traders, missionaries, and other outsiders have recursively fed into local gender ideology, central to which is a notion that men must ‘tame’ women in and through matrimony, a task which in turn increasingly centers on the provision of trade goods. Material and sexual desires are not only manufactured in such ways, but controlled and channeled in particular directions as a means of creating or sustaining economic and emotional dependencies. A kind of vicious circle arises as gender identities are progressively objectified in the wake of these new patterns of consumption, which while problematizing traditional distinctions between gifts and commodities, or traditional and modern objects, are nevertheless directed at the production of individual difference as much as commonality and commensality.

### **Conjugal Love as Material Flow**

On the morning of Baltasar’s *minga*, or working party, everyone was in high spirits except for Antonio. A young and usually cheerful lad, he now seemed sullen, and worse, was fast becoming the butt of everyone’s jokes. He refused to answer my questions and only later in the day, after many more bowls of manioc beer, was I let in on the latest gossip. Baltasar informed me that the night before, Antonio had attempted to sneak uninvited under Aurora’s mosquito net; she was a young, unmarried girl and potential marriage partner. But unfortunately for his plans, the girl’s grandmother noticed, which was unsurprising, given that she usually sleeps just a few feet away. Waking instantly, she shouted and cursed until Antonio fled in terror, out of the house and into the night.

To make matters worse, it emerged in the morning that he had hidden away, amongst his meager possessions, two lengths of brand new cloth, which everyone immediately recognized as his enticement to marriage for Aurora. All through the *minga* the men kept teasing him about them and pestering him to put them to good use, either by offering them immediately to Aurora and effectively proposing, or to hand them over to his adoptive mother. He did neither, but given that he had neither a house nor even a garden of his own, the chances of Aurora accepting him were reckoned to be slim. A couple of months later,

Antonio entered into waged labor under one of the itinerant traders who ply their trade along the course of the Chambira river, in order to buy yet more commodities in a bid to prove his productive potential, and ultimately his desirability as a husband.

When asked about this incident, the men insisted that Antonio's plan, to enter discreetly but uninvited into a girl's bed while she slept, was not unusual; nor was his intention to win her over with gifts of cloth and other commodities. Many if not most marriages begin as informal, clandestine liaisons, and gifts of fabric are the hallmark of the illicit affairs that most people carry on throughout their adult lives.<sup>6</sup> Several times I was told that a length or two of fabric is the most important courtship gift, and is expected by most women.<sup>7</sup> Sexual jealousy is rife, no doubt partly as a result of the prevalence of this system of covert exchange. I remember well Baltasar's rage when he once accidentally discovered, amongst his wife's possessions, a length of cloth he could not remember having given her.

I learned a lot about courtship strategies while in the field, because my unmarried status was a matter of collective consternation. Although I appeared to be a fully grown adult male, I would often eat and sleep alone, or worst of all, cook for myself, an almost unthinkable tragedy. Taking pity on me, men would offer the culinary services of their daughters, instructing me to hand over my meat for them to cook. Unsurprisingly, the sexual connotations of this act would elicit mirthful giggles from onlookers, much to the embarrassment of my proxy 'wife'. Countless times I was asked when I was going to 'take a wife', and men would generally take it upon themselves to quietly offer me some advice on how to go about doing so.

"It's easy," Macusi assured me. "You just need to bring a *garrafón* [around 20 liters] of cane alcohol from Iquitos. Then you invite the girl's parents to drink. When they're drunk enough, they won't be able to refuse you." Although not strictly necessary, speaking beforehand to the girl herself was also preferable. In such situations, promises of material wealth and comfort were ascribed great importance. My friends' advice to me invariably centered on the provision of glass beads and fabric for making clothes, along with repeated promises of ample further provision of these and other industrial goods in the future. I remember being half-jokingly obliged to memorize, in Urarina, the exact words I should use to woo my chosen girl, whoever she might turn out to be. This roughly ran, "I will love you, I will give you everything you need, all your clothing, all your beads, pots and knives. We will live well, I will supply you well."

The most important phrase, according to Macusi, is *ii belairichaani*, literally, "I will love you." But the kind of love he was referring to was not the *eros* of mutual desire, as

between ‘lovers’, for this is known as *itajeriha*, literally, ‘they each want the other’. The verb *belaiha*, ‘to love’, directly implies the state of generalized reciprocity only achievable through marriage. *Belaiha* also means “to give as a gift”, and such gifts, be they meat or foreign goods, are figured as the material instantiation of love through concrete acts of giving. The concept epitomizes a strong sense that true, conjugal love must always be materialized in this way.

Without doubt, a strong sense of reciprocity characterizes the real and promised material flows upon which the strategies of courtship and the practice of conjugality are premised. The provision of cooked food and ample manioc beer is one of the central duties of a loving wife, but only men are expected to supply commodities. Although both women and men labor to produce goods for exchange, only men interact with the itinerant traders from whom the vast majority of such goods are obtained, under the system of *habilitacion*. To a significant extent, the virtues and desirability of men as husbands are assessed on the basis of their ability to successfully negotiate these transactions in order to acquire a steady stream of goods for their wife and family. As such, success in trade now rivals or even surpasses hunting prowess as a source of masculine prestige. I asked Rosa, a young Urarina woman, why she was so happy with her current husband; her reply could be deemed fairly typical:

He works properly, this man. I’ve always lived peacefully with this man. I prepare my manioc beer for him, and he invites his neighbors. I also invite my companions, and we drink among women. Thus I work peacefully. He in turn has maintained me with his work, and provided my clothes and other things. That’s why I wait for him, when he travels far away, even though I’m very hungry, and my children are also very hungry.

Clothes often figure prominently in accounts such as these. The bright fabrics used to make them are perhaps the quintessential trade good, and very highly valued—which is reflected in the fact that traders are able to sell them to Urarina at three times their cost price or more (most other items are generally resold at around twice their cost price). A similar point is made by Gow (2007:57), who describes clothing as “the primary form of the possessed object for Piro people”, and “a key theme in adults’ accounts of their earliest memories of care received.” All Urarina women dress alike, and are instantly recognizable in their navy blue skirts and bright red blouses, along with their elaborate glass bead necklaces, which husbands must also buy for them from traders at considerable expense, spoonful by

spoonful. Hallmarks of feminine beauty and prestige, these necklaces also index a wife's ability to mobilize her husband's economic power and resourcefulness in her favor. Conversely, men considered to be particularly lazy or irresponsible are denigrated with expressions such as, 'Their wives will have to go around naked thanks to them!' Such a scenario is the ultimate failure of conjugal responsibility. Needless to say, men's twin duties of feeding and clothing their wives are conceptually related in an Amazonian context, given that clothing can come to be considered an extension of the body (see, for example, Santos Granero 2009:485–6), while bodies are themselves virtually a form of clothing (see Viveiros de Castro 1998).

A woman who neglects to dress in the conventional manner would be considered neither fully 'beautiful', nor entirely Urarina. According to one man, "It's their nature to wear these clothes, one shouldn't interrupt it. I can't force my wife to continue wearing her traditional clothes, but she herself wants to wear them. In the city, a woman can change her clothes, no problem. But here in the Chambira river basin, they can't change their clothes." Women who are married to *mestizo* men, or who have had extensive contact with *mestizos*, are much more prone to dress in a *mestizo* style, which in turn reflects a sense that they are no longer themselves entirely Urarina (see Santos Granero 2009). "Those women want to change their life (*ichao*)," I was told, and their souls are said not to ascend to the sky to rest with other Urarina, but they are to be reincarnated in the form of a cow—the animal most closely associated with *mestizos*. One consequence of all this is that the very same items that are the visual hallmarks of femininity, on the one hand, and of Urarina ethnic identity, on the other, are all of decidedly foreign origin, and acquired by men through commercial exchanges with non-Urarina. Nevertheless, if there is a sense that certain forms of clothing can contain the potencies or affects of powerful others (e.g. Gow 2007), this is primarily a male prerogative.

### **Commodity Capture**

In terms of their role in mediating relations between spouses, industrial goods are similar to meat, whose importance in domestic economies of sex and desire is relatively well established (Gow 1989; Siskind 1973). This is unsurprising given that trade is largely a male prerogative, among Urarina, and is both practiced and spoken about in similar ways to hunting. People often spoke of their own life histories in terms of to-and-fro movements between resource patches, for example, from the main course of the Chambira river, to the more remote headwaters of the smaller streams and tributaries, where meat and fish are abundant but



commodities are scarce, until desires for salt, kerosene, and the like finally prompt people to return to the main river and indebt themselves to traders once more. The extraction of palm hearts (the principal forest products traded by Urarina) and the procurement of game animals take place along broadly similar lines: men take primary responsibility, although they are sometimes accompanied by their wives, who act as carriers. Both are quintessentially masculine activities, yet ones which a man would never ostensibly undertake on his own behalf: when about to set off hunting, a man will usually say it is because his wife or children are hungry and want to eat meat; similarly, men say they must ‘work’ for their *patron* in order to acquire the various commodities it is their duty as a husband (or father) to provide.

Industrial goods are themselves similar to game animals in that each are the focus of an extensive repertoire of standardized interpretations of dreams and other omens, such as birdcalls. A man stung by a particular kind of bee, for example, can take some solace in the fact that, according to this local folklore, he will likely find himself drinking cane liquor within the next three days. Revealingly, both game animals and commodities are liable to be characterized in terms of their position along an axis of relative ‘wildness’ or domestication. In the context of hunting, animals described as *edaatiha*—translated here as ‘tame’—are those which do not flee immediately, but offer themselves up to the hunter, as they should. Alternatively, the term could be used for the captured offspring of a game animal that has been carefully domesticated and kept as a pet. By contrast, an animal that flees from the hunter, thwarting his attempts at appropriation, might be deemed *edaaetoha*, meaning ‘wild’, ‘shy’, or ‘elusive’. Certain traders are sometimes similarly said to be *edaaetoha*, on the grounds that “sometimes they don’t want to come, and even when they do come, sometimes they’re stingy with their things”. But it seems ultimately the commodities themselves that are considered either wild or tame. For example, after receiving five bottles of cane liquor from a trader as a gift, I once overheard a man exclaim to his companions, “This liquor is extremely tame!” (*jataain edaatiha caa abariniti*).

Initially wild and elusive, commodities are literally ‘domesticated’ as they enter the ambit of the home. Like game animals, they are usually handed directly by a man to his wife, for processing and for further distribution if appropriate. Unlike meat, however, which is expected to be distributed widely amongst the hunter’s neighbors and kin, industrial goods are always owned by individuals. Once owned, they are rarely if ever exchanged, or made available for further distribution. This is reinforced by the fact that commodities are grammatically marked for possession in ways that indicate they are inalienable or long-term personal possessions—like canoes, houses, body parts, or kin relations—rather than alienable

or short-term possessions, like meat. Commodities are therefore in some ways more akin to (inalienable) pets, the captive offspring of slain animals that are similarly given by a man to his wife for domesticating. Such a view is probably not unique to the Urarina: Erikson (2009), for example, notes that during the first fifteen to twenty years following “first contact” with the Matis, manufactured items were not only symbolically but physically set apart, as in quarantine. Much like pets, goods such as metal tools, clothing, and shotguns were not allowed into the longhouse, but required a phase of seclusion on the outskirts of the village before being fully incorporated and gradually allowed to follow their new ‘master’ wherever he went.

### **Channeling Desires**

The Urarina describe the ongoing flow of commodities, always from men to women, in terms of an ongoing process of ‘taming’ or ‘raising’ (*irilaa*). Young and unmarried women are also considered to be ‘wild’ or ‘tricky’ (*edaaetoha*), though with continual guidance and much hard work by her husband, a woman will eventually become ‘tame’ (*edaatiha*)—which may be understood to mean that she will be diligent in her tasks, loving, and above all loyal, never running off with another man. As noted above, the concept of wildness incorporates a sense of shyness or reticence, and this is a quintessentially feminine disposition. As one man put it, “A woman who is ‘tame’ is a woman you can approach without her running away, one you can joke around with.” Such a disposition is rare in young women, who all learn from an early age to demonstrate ‘shame’ or ‘embarrassment’ (*necoejiha*) in their interactions with men, turning their backs to their interlocutors and refusing all eye contact. Such behavior is strongly linked to a sense of modesty and propriety. Newlyweds are not expected to speak to each other at all for at least several days following a marriage, until the wife’s extreme ‘shame’ is gradually worn down by her husband, in part through the gradual giving of commodities such as clothes, glass beads, pots, combs, mirrors, imported foods, and other items. The timing is considered crucial here, and a man should regulate this flow carefully, rather than give away everything he has all at once. Women need to be gradually and gently lured into a marriage, and kept desirous. One man explained his personal strategy, saying, “I don’t ever give the woman lots of things right at the outset, but over time, little by little.” Women’s desires for commodities are not automatically given, but should be cultivated, and at the outset of a marriage, the underlying aim of the steady stream of goods from husband to wife is to ignite

the latter's desires, while conjoining them with a certain dependency on her husband, as the one able to satisfy those desires.

The basic underlying principle here can be seen in another well-known taming strategy: the performance of the 'woman chant' (*ene baau*), a kind of love spell used as much on coy or reluctant mistresses as on fickle or capricious wives, particularly those suspected of infidelity. An experienced shaman breathes the words onto a large cigarette, which the husband later secretly lights up and smokes while his wife is sleeping, blowing the smoke over her head and body. The chant deploys a series of images of animal and plant species well known for being either tame and cute or full of sexual energy and desire, binding these qualities together in a series of metaphoric juxtapositions.<sup>8</sup> Of particular importance is the renaco tree (*Ficus trigona*), distinctive for its exposed, entangled roots, which wrap tightly around each other as they grow, providing the perfect emblem of inseparable, lasting union between lovers. The intended effect of the chant is thus to produce a similar kind of entanglement in the conjugal couple, igniting the woman's sexual drive while enhancing her dependency and eradicating her *colareba*, or 'terrifying aspect', which is a kind of force of repulsion associated with paralyzing fear. The experience of *colareba* is usually associated with the sight of an anaconda, said to so fill one with fear that one is simply incapable of moving any closer. A similar fear is said from time to time to grip a man who tries to approach a girl he otherwise fancies or desires and wishes to seduce.

Despite a husband's best efforts, women are never completely 'tamed', in part because they never entirely lose this 'terrifying aspect'. Yet it must be stressed that if the position of women is ambivalent, it is certainly not one of powerlessness. Indeed, while it may appear that the taming process is unidirectional, worked by male agents on female patients, such a picture would be misleading. Women sometimes self-identify as the potential 'pets' of men, in drinking songs for example, where they humorously emphasize their own helplessness, and their willingness to be protected, loved, tamed, and generally taken care of. It must be stressed that the role and structural position of 'pet' is far from a merely subservient one, nor is it bereft of agency. Pets are entirely expected to maintain a sense of their own willfulness and personality, and indeed strategies for eliciting a nurturing, benevolent, protective disposition in others could be said to be central to expressions of agency among Urarina people. It is certainly a feature of interactions between Urarina men and the traders with whom they do business; moreover, asymmetrical relations of taming and civilizing, often bound up in material exchanges, have in fact been a prominent feature of interactions with outsiders for centuries.

## Civilizing Exchanges

To an outside observer, one of the most striking features of commercial transactions between itinerant traders and their Urarina clients is the sudden change in behavior it occasions among the latter. Normally loud and boisterous men become meek in the presence of traders, demurely itemizing their requests for goods while anxiously accommodating their demands. In stark contrast to the cool respect for individual autonomy that characterizes normal everyday interactions, people dealing with traders put on a display of almost slavish obedience and deference. Urarina themselves admit they become ‘ashamed’ or ‘embarrassed’ (*necoejiha*) when dealing with outsiders—the same characteristically feminine emotion whose display is obligatory at the outset of marriage. Traders, for their part, behave paternalistically and authoritatively. They also readily acknowledge an expectation that they legitimize their position by regularly giving gifts as a show of good will. As one trader told me, “We’re always giving them things, it’s what you have to do. If you don’t keep giving them things, they quickly grow weary of you. 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.”

The current system of *habilitacion* is of course an evolution from the earlier system of debt-peonage, which in turn replaced the much earlier regional trade networks. The history of trade on the Chambira river has for centuries been inextricably bound up in the history of missionization and proselytization, and the ‘civilizing’ projects of the Spanish conquerors and their representatives. The Urarina claim that present-day traders are the descendents of the Cocama, who were probably the Urarina’s most important trading partners in pre-contact times. When Jesuit missionaries first entered the Western Amazon around 1638, regional exchange networks were already under the control of the Cocama and the Omagua, both powerful Tupian-speaking groups who had begun their own migration into the area at least a hundred years earlier. With their superior technology and warlike disposition, these groups quickly came to play a dominant role in the region, both trading with and raiding their neighbors. As elsewhere in the region, proselytization and mission formation followed indigenous alliance networks, each reinforcing the other (Reeve 1993).

First contact with Urarina was made by Jesuit missionaries around the end of the seventeenth century. Early reports suggest that it was the Cocama themselves who spearheaded the effort to conquer and convert the Urarina, repeatedly presenting the idea to the head of the Spanish mission at La Laguna, until they finally received permission to

proceed with a large company under Jesuit direction. An early missionary report described the Urarina as a “calm and peaceful people” who, in stark contrast to the violent and hostile reception granted by neighboring tribes, received their first missionaries with benevolence, to the point of appearing obsequious and servile. By the time the mission town of San Xavier de Urarinas was founded on the banks of the Chambira river in 1738, the Jesuits had assumed complete control over regional exchange, and local populations were soon dependent on them for European trade goods.

When King Charles III ordered their expulsion from Spanish America in 1767, the Jesuits were already administering to over 250,000 indians in 200 missions. By this time San Xavier de Urarinas had a population of 600, and was considered one of the most established and potentially successful missions to fall under Franciscan jurisdiction (Kramer 1979:12). Like others in the region, however, it soon collapsed under Franciscan direction, as most of the native peoples in the area, including the Urarina, had been decimated by disease almost to the point of extinction. The missions were quickly replaced by various other systems of labor recruitment, often forced, and run by extractive entrepreneurs. Prolonged labor scarcity due to depopulation and demographic collapse gave rise to the system of debt-peonage, in which indigenous labor was bonded through the sometimes coercive use of credit, enmeshing people in exclusive, hierarchical patron—client relationships.

Today, however, the commodities obtained through traders are a source of pride, a testimony to the ‘civilized’ nature of the Urarina. People actively seek out opportunities to indebt themselves. This is mirrored in a common discourse according to which ‘modern’ Urarina have left behind the ways of the ancient people, who are often described as ‘always fighting amongst themselves’, or as *ataebuinae*, meaning akin to jaguars, savages, or infidel. They lived moving around from place to place, in contrast to the way people live today: peaceful, ‘civilized’, and well organized, in legally certified ‘native communities’ (*Comunidades Nativas*). It seems likely that such statements themselves have a long and important historical precedent. One well-known myth tells the story of first contact with a priest who came to Urarina territory on a mission to ‘civilize’ them. It is presumably based on real events; although the details remain unclear, they may be summarized as follows. A priest and his novice attempt to visit the Urarina, who respond by threatening to kill them as they approach. The two flee, but the priest later sends his novice alone to talk to them, and convince them that he means well. When the two approach again, they are received in a friendly manner and given *urari* roots (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*) as a welcome. The priest is amused, and decides to call them ‘Urarina’, based on their name for the root. He then sends

the people off to fish, giving them sewing needles, which are supposed to be bent to form hooks. But the Urarina are not aware of this and so fail to catch any fish. The priest instructs them accordingly, and finally they are successful. Later, the novice sews clothes for the Urarina, which he gives to them as gifts because they were completely naked. But again, lacking any knowledge of how to manage them, the people urinated and defecated in their clothes, not realizing they were supposed to remove them first. Seeing this, the priest again sent his novice to instruct them. And so they learn how to wear clothes, and ‘all kinds of things’. After taming the people in this way, the priest finally resettles them in another area, calling it ‘Urarina’ place.

The term used in the story for the actions of the priest, *irilaa*, ‘to tame’ or ‘to raise’, is of course the same process that men deploy with their wives. It recalls widespread associations between processes of contact and colonialism, and a dialectic of ‘savage’ and ‘civilized’ spaces or epochs. As Gow has argued, the division between the wild forest indians and civilized, urban whites has always been central to the operation of *habilitación*: ‘For Amazonian people, the civilizing whites did not violently conquer the forest Indians but tamed them ... The forest Indians were *gente brava*, ‘wild people’, and the whites tamed them through the addictive power of their manufactured goods’ (Gow 1994:99). The sublimated sexuality at the heart of this addiction was clearly apparent to one elderly Huitoto man, who when asked why indigenous peoples so desire the goods of the whites replied, ‘the whites have come to show us the vagina of their woman, we’ve tried it and now we always want more’ (Gasché n.d.).

### **Consumption and Gender Ideology**

Not all goods a man acquires through trade are destined for his wife. Steel tools and hunting equipment, among other items, might be obtained for his private use. Yet most goods are ‘gendered’ one way or the other, and implicated in an increasing objectification of personal identity. An interesting feature of this process is that, even though women are ostensibly tamed through their steady consumption of commodities, ‘modern’ identities are available only to men. The cloth and beads most desired by women serve to mark them unmistakably as ‘Urarina’ and to differentiate them from mestizo women and from Peruvian society more generally. The prestige goods most desired by men—wristwatches and stereos—serve an almost opposite function, identifying them as modern Peruvian citizens: the mere possession of such goods by women is still unthinkable.

Such patterns resonate with Seymour-Smith's (1991) argument that capitalist development in Amazonia tends to exacerbate pre-existing gender asymmetries whereby men represent the local group vis-à-vis the outside, while women are more closely concerned with constructing the internal unity of the domestic group. Among the Urarina, as among the Jivaro, the introduction of externally manufactured trade goods, wage labor, and the use of money, have all been controlled by men. Urarina women are actively discouraged from learning or speaking Spanish, from dressing in Peruvian clothing, and often from attending school. Women travel to other communities much less frequently than men, and rarely, if ever, venture out to the towns and cities beyond the mouth of the Chambira river. This amounts to what Seymour-Smith accurately describes as the 'greater isolation of women from direct contact with mestizo society, noted by many authors in terms of their greater cultural and linguistic "conservatism"' (ibid.:643).

Such aspects of gender hierarchy are often associated with control over women's sexuality. While this appears to vary considerably between different groups, it is nevertheless the case that for the Urarina, as for the Jivaro, "marital fidelity as well as the sexual behaviour of unmarried persons are the focus of intense concern and often of disputes and even violent conflict" (ibid.:645). The escalating demand among Urarina for externally manufactured trade goods must be understood in this context. As Knauff (1997) has noted, the disembedding or decontextualizing of the social relations associated with modernity can open up new contexts of opportunity for female as well as male identities. Nevertheless, wage earning and the acquisition of commodities are most associated with men, with male agency, and with contemporary notions of masculine dominance. As male status is increasingly linked to a commodity or cash economy, women's extra-domestic activity is often correspondingly constrained and perceived as threatening. As women's potential for contact with outsiders increases, beliefs often intensify about the need for female propriety—the kind of propriety which, in the Urarina case, is one of the primary goals of the highly gendered 'taming' activities that structure all new Urarina marriages. These are concerned with eliciting new sexual and material desires, but also, and perhaps most importantly, with controlling and channeling them in appropriate directions, which ideally result in devotion, fidelity, and emotional and economic dependency between spouses.

If externally manufactured commodities are today particularly well suited to these domestic activities, it is likely due in part to their centrality in broader historical projects of taming and civilizing. It is against the backdrop of such historical experiences that we should interpret such concepts as familiarizing predation, claimed to be "the dominant schema of

appropriation in Amazonian symbolic economies” (Fausto 2000), and which echoes characterizations of Amerindian perspectivism as an ongoing “struggle between points of view” (Stolze Lima 2000:48). The Amazonian lived world is said to be one in which different groups all seek to capture “others” and turn them into kin. Hunting is intrinsically directed at the satisfaction of desires to eat meat, which in turn creates kinship ties; yet this is but one part of a wider relational structure through which the ‘outside’ is sought and captured in order to reproduce or regenerate the ‘inside’, a structure “which articulates predation and familiarization, affinity and consanguinity, exterior and interior” (Fausto 2000:939).<sup>9</sup> Industrial goods fit easily into this schema, and have arguably become one of its most important targets. Like pets, they develop a close and personalized relationship to their owner, becoming a part of their extended person and increasingly integral to the processes through which affective bonds assume a visible and material form.

It is difficult to say to what extent the ubiquitous relational form of familiarizing predation existed prior to experiences of contact and colonialism, but there is much to suggest that it is, and has always been, inherently gendered in nature.<sup>10</sup> The roles and dispositions adopted by Urarina in relation to a variety of more powerful and technologically superior outsiders—which may appear subordinate but need not be seen as circumscribing their agency—both reflect and in turn inform internal gender relations, and each may be seen as influencing the other. Like violence, taming seems to be rebounding by nature, susceptible to a kind of internal diffraction or amplification, such that the relational dynamic between wives and husbands increasingly resembles, in certain important ways, salient modes of interaction between Urarina and outsiders. In a situation of increasing uncertainty surrounding sexed identities, men understandably aim to produce new desires and dependencies in women, who in turn often seem quite willing to act in ways that incite their generous impulses. Industrial goods are more than tokens of a man’s willingness to satisfy the desires of his wife and family: they effectively produce social relationships. The desires for meat and sex that have always oriented the domestic economy and the production of kinship are themselves subject to a process of decoding, as it were, intensified and replicated across new spheres of exchange. For it is amidst the taming of wild things—in whatever form these take—that marriages are contracted and consolidated, and true love runs its course.



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See also Hugh-Jones (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Similar issues have been discussed by Siskind (1978) and Wolf (1982), among others. As Seymour-Smith (1991:646 n) emphasizes, the notion of a contrast or articulation between indigenous and non-indigenous systems implies neither a closed or static ‘traditional system’, nor a unitary ‘capitalism’.

<sup>3</sup> Widespread though this trend may be, counter-examples can be found, including in Amazonia: among the Shipibo, for example, men have been increasingly ‘marginalized’ by engagements with modernity (Roe 1979); interestingly, however, this reflects traditional gender norms and the high status of women in Shipibo society relative to other lowland groups.

<sup>4</sup> Urarina work intermittently for traders to repay debts (in the form of goods advanced on credit), the total value of which at any given moment rarely exceeds what they should be able to repay with a few days’ work. At the time of writing, edible palm hearts (*Euterpe precatoria*) were the best-earning forest product; around twenty (each worth 0.5 Nuevo Soles, or 11p) could be extracted per day by an adult male. Palm hearts were often supplemented by other forest products such as animal skins, tree resins, or wild honey. On the upper Chambira river, at the height of the wet season, a trader might appear in the community as often as once every couple of weeks; as the water level decreases, fluvial travel becomes more difficult and arrival of traders more sporadic and unpredictable. This very unpredictability may well contribute to the pervasive sense that trade goods, like animals, should be pursued vigorously whenever the opportunity presents itself.

<sup>5</sup> The Urarina relationship between men and women resembles in some ways the Xikrin relationship between chiefs and commoners. This echoes Lorrain’s (2000:303) observation that men’s role as women’s providers is politically crucial, given the widespread Amazonian conception of leadership as the paradigmatic providing role. The power of Urarina chiefs is relatively slight and there are few expectations they will provide for their followers, raising as a question for further research how the distribution of relations of provision constitutes a salient variable of social structure and a key entry point for a comparative study of engagements with markets.

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<sup>6</sup> Gow (1989:575) notes that among the Piro, ‘a major motivation for young men’s entry into wage labor in lumbering is their need to generate cash to supply their lovers with store-bought presents’. See also Hugh-Jones (1992).

<sup>7</sup> All cloth—red, black, or blue polyester—comes from the same stores in Iquitos and has been used by Urarina for decades for making women’s clothes.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor (1983) discusses a somewhat similar series of love chants (*anent*) used by the Achuar, in which images evoking pets and domesticated animals are said to connote affection, dependency, and helplessness. While some of these are used by women on their husbands, Taylor has elsewhere (2001) proposed that Achuar men must ‘tame’ women in marriage—a process in which the latter may similarly be complicit, given their self-identification as ‘pets’ in playful drinking songs.

<sup>9</sup> Fausto (2007: 502) outlines this process as follows: “In this universe in which nothing is created and everything is appropriated, different groups—human or nonhuman, living or dead—related as meta-affines seek to capture people in order to turn them into relatives. Shamans capture animal spirits and warriors capture enemy spirits, fertilizing women, giving names to children, producing songs for ritual, benefiting the hunt. But nonhumans also capture humans, seducing them and/or preying on them so as to transform them into members of their community. Predation is thus intimately connected to the cosmic desire to produce kinship.” It is significant that enemy captives and abducted children are typically referred to as ‘pets’, as are the shaman’s auxiliary spirits; indeed, the acquisition of shamanic power more generally is conceived as a process of taming or familiarizing nonhuman entities (see Gow 1994:95).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rival (2007), who points to the widespread symbolic feminization of victims or ‘prey’.