

“Singing to Estranged Lovers:
Runa Relations to Plants in the Ecuadorian Amazon”

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(Forthcoming: Journal of Religion and Nature, April 2009. Not for further distribution.)

This article examines Runa relation to plants in the Ecuadorian Amazon. By examining ritual songs to plants as well as gardening behavior it argues that plants are treated like dangerous lovers or difficult children. To find out why this should be the case it then examines Quichua and Shuar language accounts of the origins of plant species. These accounts suggest that plant species evolve from a previously human state in which the plants were lovers or children who became estranged. The emotional estrangement then hardened into a physical transformation giving rise to a new species. Under certain circumstances plants continue to be treated as though they were moody estranged children or lovers. The paper concludes by suggesting that treating plants as high maintenance lovers leads to a kind of gardening that is more costly in terms of time and dedication than many women can afford under conditions of modernity.

“Singing to Estranged Lovers: Runa Relations to Plants in the Ecuadorian Amazon”¹

In his book *Tsewa's Gift*, Michael F. Brown studied relations to plants among the Aguaruna Shuar in Peru during 1977-78. He was puzzled by the perceived precariousness of manioc gardening. Why, he wondered, would Aguaruna women invest so much anxiety into gardening when the successful outcome seemed relatively secure (Brown 1986)?² Against this background he interpreted Aguaruna gardening songs as a kind of ‘technology of sentiment’ for increasing affinity between gardeners and their plants. In field work carried out during roughly the same period (1976-1979) Philippe Descola noted a similar anxiety among the related Achuar: “Unlike the very great majority of Amazonian societies, the Achuar consider that the growing of manioc must be surrounded by a tight web of ritual precautions” (Descola 1986: 191). Descola found that in carrying out these ritual precautions the Achuar maintained social relations with plants and animals patterned on human kinship. While women treated garden plants on the model of consanguineal kin men treated game animals as affinal relatives.³ Hence he entitled his book “In the Society of Nature: A Native Ecology in Amazonia.”

In this paper I examine women’s relation to plants in a society related to the Achuar, the Runa (*Quichua* speaking) communities of the Pastaza and Napo headwater valleys in the

¹ I would like to thank Michael Uzendoski, Bron Taylor, and Robin Wright for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article. Conversations with Janis Nuckolls also helped to shape the ideas developed here. Finally I would also like to thank my wife Josefina Andi for her assistance with the sometimes difficult Quichua translation of the texts included in the article.

² For them [the *Aguaruna*] the garden, like the forest, is a spiritually charged realm that poses dangers to the unwary or imprudent. ... To a scientific observer, the *Aguaruna* horticultural system is remarkably productive and resistant to the climactic fluctuations, plant diseases, and pests that make plant cultivation so risky in temperate zones. Not so for the *Aguaruna* gardener, who feel that without magical intervention the success of her crops is always in doubt’ (Brown 1986: 97).

³ For example Descola cites an Achuar hunting song that addresses the woolly monkeys as “little brother-in-law” (1986:261).

Ecuadorian Amazon.⁴ For these women plants can evoke deep and ambivalent emotion. Manioc plants are often treated as if they were delicate children. Medicinal trees can be addressed in song as if they were moody male lovers. Why should plants be experienced in ways that seem incongruous with their passive leafy appearance? In ritual contexts the name of a plant species is often followed by the *Quichua* term *runa* (man) or *warmi* (woman) suggesting that they are persons of some kind. But what kind of persons? What are the moral and religious qualities of human relations to these persons? Plant *runas* are classified in *Quichua* as a kind of *supai*, a term that native speakers frequently translate into Spanish as *diablos*. Yet, even though plant *supais* may be perceived as frightening, deceptive, or dangerous they are also attractive and regarded as sources of life.

Like Brown and Descola, I am interested in why such intense and ambivalent emotion is put into acquiring plant products. To better understand Runa relations to plants I will examine two sources of evidence. The first are ritual songs to plants. The second are stories that account for the origins of plant species. From these sources I will argue that plant species are understood to be children or adult lovers who have withdrawn from the human family because of a particular moral fault called *quilla*, a kind of lazy immaturity. The reason that harvesting

⁴ Quichua speaking people (Runa) on the Pastaza upper Napo Rivers are not primarily descended from Andean migrants but are rather Amazonians (mostly Zaparoan and Achuar/Shuar) who have undergone language shift. They share more rituals, origin stories, and customs with the Achuar/Shuar than with any other language group (including Quichua dialects of the sierra). In his early work Norman Whitten demonstrated close kinship ties between the Achuar and the Runa living in the Rio Pastaza valley (1976). Although his early work portrayed the Napo Runa as distinct, he later extended his portrait of Pastaza Runa kin networks to include the Napo headwater region (Whitten 2008). The work of Muratorio (1991) and Uzendoski (2005) tended to strengthen the view of the Napo Runa as culturally distinct from the Pastaza Runa. Although space does not permit me to argue the case here, from long residence in both the Pastaza Runa (1961-1965, 1971-73, 1996) and the Napo headwater Runa areas (summer and winter breaks from 1997-present) as well as a comparison of texts, material culture and dialects, I have become convinced that two are best treated as a single cultural continuum.

forest plants is believed to be so precarious is that it depends on overcoming this fault in a mature and disciplined relationship with these difficult lovers.

I begin by examining two songs by Clara Santi, a woman with roots in both the Pastaza and the Napo valleys.⁵ Her first song is addressed to Matiri Spirit Man. *Matiri* is the Quichua name of a plant in the *Clavija* genus of the *Theophrastaceae* family. *Clavija* is a deep forest plant that bears clusters of yellow fruits about the size of a grape. These fruits consist of a large pit surrounded by a thin, crispy skin with the thickness of a tangerine peeling. This peeling is considered to have a medicine (*jambi*) that hunters consume to dull hunger and attract game while out on long hunts in the forest. According to Clara Santi, ‘When you walk in the forest with hunger, when its fruits are smooth and ripe, you take them and you suck on them, breaking, breaking, breaking, their thin skin. You suck on these when you walk with hunger. The hunger goes away. It is a medicine.’ [insert photo 1; caption “Matiri Runa (*Clavija* sp.”)]

The *matiri* plant is said to have a personality or *runa* within it called Matiri Runa. To harvest the *matiri* fruit the medicine gatherer addresses a song to this persona hidden in the plant. As Clara put it, ‘This is one you sing to. You are to sing to it.’ Clara then sang her *matiri* song which goes as follows:

1. Matiri Man	1. <i>Matiri Runa</i>
2. When he goes to the forest	2. <i>Pai sachama.</i>
3. Carrying his <i>matiri</i> fruits	3. <i>Amtirita aparisha riushcai</i>

⁵ Clara Santi, the key Pastaza Runa resource for this article exemplifies the fluidity or relations between the Pastaza and Napo valleys. Although she speaks in the Pastaza dialect her mother was from Ahuano on the Napo. Clara spent some of her growing up years living in the home of her Napo Runa grandfather Asua Juanchu Grefa. There she was exposed to many influences (including one of her grandfather’s four wives who came from the Rio Ucayali in Peru).

4. To kill this bird	4. <i>Cai pishcuta wañuchingahua</i>
5. Matiri Man goes carrying it	5. <i>Matiri Runa aparisha rij mara</i>
6. Killing birds	6. <i>Pishcuta wanuchisha</i>
7. Filling the basket	7. <i>Matiri Tapata undachisha</i>
8. Giving (her) a bite [of the game bird]	8. <i>Canichisha</i>
9. Dressed in green he will bring it back	9. <i>Verdilla churasha apamuj mara</i>
10. Preparing that [game] bird	10. <i>Chi pishcuta pelasha</i>
11. He will have it (with him)	11. <i>Charisha</i>
12. That Matiri Tree Man	12. <i>Martiri Ruya Runaga</i>
13. Seducing a woman	13. <i>Warmita engañasha</i>
14. Drinking his little fruits	14. <i>Matiri Ruya pai muyuhuata upisha</i>
15. Sitting there giving the bird (he killed) to the woman he loves	15. <i>Payhua enamorado warmita pishcuta cusha tiasha</i>
16. So that what he wants will happen	16. <i>Pay munai tucusha</i>
17. He seduced her	17. <i>Engañara</i> ⁶
18. That is how Matiri Man is	18. <i>Chasna man Matiri Runaga</i>
19. That <i>matiri</i> fruit	19. <i>Matiri muyuga.</i>
20. I will go taking his power/spirit	20. <i>Payhua supaita apasha risha</i>
21. He is the man who stands there saying ‘Take me.’	21. <i>Apahuai nisha shayaj runa mara</i>
22. That Matiri Man.	22. <i>Matiri Ruyaga</i>

⁶ “Engañara” is a loan word from Spanish *engañar* (to deceive) which in this context means “to seduce”. The suffix “-ra” is a Pastaza Quichua third person singular past tense marker although it looks like a Spanish third person singular future tense marker.

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The purpose of the song is to persuade the plant man to allow the singer to take some of his medicine away with her: ‘I will go taking his spirit with me,’ she sings. ‘He is the man who stands there saying “Take me,” That Matiri Man.’ The reason that the song is necessary is that the medicine works well only if the plant cooperates and gives its medicine willingly to the healer. Simply taking the plant won’t produce an effective medicine. Getting the plant to give its medicine willingly is a delicate matter, however, because the plant is thought to be temperamental, guarded, and prone to withdraw from relationships. The song, which is sung to the *matiri* plant by a female singer, portrays the Matiri Man both as a seductive lover and as a skilled hunter.

By portraying Matiri in this way the song represents the guardedness or inaccessibility of the man behind the *matiri* medicine as a kind of male sexual coyness. Once portrayed in this light the female singer knows how to behave toward the plant in order to coax him to cooperate. She attracts him with love songs like she might any evasive but attractive man who is vulnerable to women. Since hunters chew his fruits when they go out hunting it is with Matiri Runa’s power and personality that hunters endure hardship to bring back game to give to the women they love. Hence Clara’s love song to Matiri portrays Matiri Runa himself as a hunter and seductive lover who brings back game to seduce his love.

The song builds on traditional patterns of courtship and love in which men hunt to give game to women in exchange for love, sex, and *asua* (manioc drink). Giving game to a woman is

a recognized act of courtship much like giving red roses.⁷ In this case the game that is given is a bird (*pishcu*). The word *pishcu* may have a double entendre because it is a common term for the male organ frequently used by women in joking. The double entendre is made more probable by the context. ‘Drinking his little fruits, sitting there to give the bird (he killed) to the woman he loves so that what he wants will happen. He seduced her. That is how Matiri Man is.’ Since in the larger context the song is about the relationship of the Matiri Man to the singer herself, it is likely that Clara is referring to herself as the woman that the Matiri Man is trying to seduce. What Clara hopes to receive from the Matiri Man is his medicine. Hence the bird given to the woman probably ultimately refers to the Matiri Man’s medicine, here compared to stereotypical male gifts of game and sex.

By singing teasingly to him in this way the female singer turns the tables on him. By flattering the male plant with her song she seduces him into giving her his medicine. In the beginning of the song Matiri Man is the one in control, seducing women. By the end, however, he is the ‘man who stands there saying take me’ and Clara concludes, ‘I will go taking his spirit away with me.’

The second song is addressed by Clara Santi to Huanduj Man (*Brugmansia suaveolens*). Like *matiri*, *Brugmansia suaveolens* is the source of a medicine (*jambi*) that the singer hopes to acquire. The soft stems of *Brugmansia* are split open and left outside overnight to expose them to the dew. The pulp is then scraped out and ingested to produce visions. The flowers and leaves are used as poultices for wounds and for acts of ritual cleansing called *pichana in* Quichua

⁷ I use the example of roses to suggest the idea that Amazonian men are romantic and not just exchanging products (meat for chicha) and much less meat for sex. Nevertheless comparing game to roses has its limits. While roses are given to a woman as an individual, game is given to a woman understood to be part of an *ayllu* or extended family. Unlike the gift of roses the gift of game is also evidence of a suitor’s masculinity developed in complex relation to the forest. For another exploration of the love, sex, and meat/manioc relationships see Peter Gow (1989).

or *limpias* in Spanish. *Brugmansia* is also planted around homes as a protective border against witchcraft. *Yachajs* (shamans) who drink *ayahuasca* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) claim to see the *Brugmansia* borders glowing in the dark.⁸

In introducing this song she said: ‘Ok. I am going to sing about the how the Huanduj Man went taking me to bathe me in the fragrance of his flowers. I stand inside the fragrance of the opening of [his flowers]. I am going to sing of the *huanduj* flower, the Napo River flower. That is what I am going to sing, the *huanduj* flower.’ Her song goes like this:

1. Little Huanduj Flower Woman	<i>1. Huanduj Sisa Warmiwa</i>
2. Little Huanduj Flower Woman	<i>2. Huanduj Sisa Warmiwa</i>
3. Huanduj Spirit Man	<i>3. Huanduj Supay Runa</i>
4. Taking (her) from right here	<i>4. Kaymandalla apasha</i>
5. Placing her on the point of the island	<i>5. Isla punday churasha</i>
6. Where he is flowering.	<i>6. Pay sisarishkay</i>
7. I am the woman who stands smelling.	<i>7. Asnarisha shayak warmi mani-ari</i>
8. Giving off perfume with just his flower	<i>8. Paibaj sisallawa asnarisha</i>
9. When she arrives where he is standing	<i>9. Pay shayaushkay paktarijpi</i>
10. The Huanduj Man bathes her with hi flower	<i>10. Sisawa Huanduj Runa armachisha</i>
11. I am the woman just standing here	<i>11. Shayaushkalla warmi mani-ari</i>
12. Wherever he wants to take her	<i>12. Mayta apasha nisha</i>

⁸ Ritual healers called *yachaj* (literally “one who knows”) regularly drink a bitter tea made from steeping the *ayahuasca* (*banisteriopsis caapi*) vine together with *chagrana* (*psychotria viridis*) to alter consciousness so that they can communicate with the *supai* (spirit) world..

13. In the house	13. <i>Wasi</i>
14. On an island in the Napo	14. <i>Napo Yaku islai</i>
15. The Huanduj Man, standing	15. <i>Huanduj Runa shayasha</i>
16. Called (me) from here	16. <i>Kaymanda kayawara</i>
17. Standing at the head of the island	17. <i>Isla punday shayasha</i>
18. The Huanduj Flower Man.	18. <i>Huanduj Sisa Runaga.</i>
20. He wanted to take [me]	20. <i>Apasha nisha</i>
21. But he was not able to overcome me	21. <i>Mana ushawarachu</i>
22. He will not be able to overcome me.	22. <i>Mana ushawarachu</i>
23. With only his flower.	23. <i>Paipak sisallawa</i>
24. Smelling, asking	24. <i>Asnasha, mañarisha</i>
25. I stand making him drunk	25. <i>Paita machachisha shayag mani-ari</i>
26. Huanduj Spirit Man	26. <i>Huanduj Supay Runata</i>
27. I stood making him give off his smell	27. <i>Payta asnachisha shayarani ari</i>
28. The Huanduj Flower Woman	28. <i>Huanduj Sisa Warmiga</i>
29. The Huanduj Flower Woman	29. <i>Huanduj Sisa Warmiga</i>
30. I stand turning back and forth (ambivalent)	30. <i>Kihuirisha shayani</i>
31. I stand turning back and forth (ambivalent)	31. <i>Kihuirisha shayani</i>
32. He himself	32. <i>Paillatamiga</i>
33. The Huanduj Flower Man	33. <i>Huanduj Sisa Runaga</i>
34. He thought he could just take me	34. <i>Apashalla nisha pas?</i>
35. He will not take me	35. <i>Mana apawangachu yari</i>
36. He himself secretly	36. <i>Paillata pakalla</i>

37. with his <i>huanduj</i> flower stem	37. <i>Huanduj sisa paibaj tulluwa</i>
38. I am the who stands making herself heard	38. <i>Uyachisha shayak warmi mani-ari</i>
39. Bathing with his <i>huanduj</i>	39. <i>Pai wandujta armasha</i>
40. I am the traveling woman who looks into his eyes when he stands there wearing his hat.	40. <i>Paibaj sombreroata churarisha shayaujpi paibaj ñawita rikushalla purik warmi mani-ari</i>
41. He stands wanting to take me	41. <i>Pay apawangaj shayarin</i>
42. The Napo River Huanduj	42. <i>Napo Yaku Huandujga</i>
43. Stands wanting to take me	43. <i>Apawangaj shayarin</i>
44. He stands wanting to take me to put me on the point of his island.	44. <i>Apasha paibaj isla punday churawangaj shayarin</i>
45. He wants to take me	45. <i>Apasha nisha</i>
46. The Huanduj Spirit Man	46. <i>Huanduj Supai Runaga</i>
47. Stands [there]intending to take me	47. <i>Apawangaj Shayarin</i>
48. Wearing his hat	48. <i>Pay sombreroata churarisha</i>
49. The <i>huanduj</i> flower opened	49. <i>Huanduj sisa paskaririshka</i>
50. With only his smell	50. <i>Paibaj asnayllawa</i>
51. I am the woman who stands smelling	51. <i>Muktirisha shayak warmi mani-ari</i>
52. The Huanduj Spirit man	52. <i>Huanduj Supay Runaga</i>
53. Laughs (flirts) wanting to take me	53. <i>Apashalla nisha asin</i>
54. He won't be able to overcome me	54. <i>Mana ushawangachu</i>
55. The strong Santi woman	55. <i>Santi warmi supaita</i>
56. Only his eyes/face	56. <i>Paibaj ñawillatata</i>

57. I am the woman who stands turning back and forth	57. <i>Kihuirisha shayak warmi mani</i>
58. I am the woman who stands taking his <i>huanduj</i> hat	58. <i>Paibaj huanduj sombreroata apasha shayak warmi ani</i>
59. Looking into my eyes	59. <i>Ñuka ñawita rikusha</i>
60. He sweeps with only his <i>huandu.j</i>	60. <i>Pai picharisha wandujllawa</i>
61. The standing man	61. <i>Shayak runata</i>
62. He laughs wanting to carry me away	62. <i>Apisha nisha asin</i>
63. I couldn't do it	63. <i>Mana usharanichu</i>

The purpose of Clara Santi's song to Huanduj Man is similar to that of her Matiri Man song. As with Matiri Man, the medicine produced by *Brugmansia* does not work mechanically but through a relationship. This song is the pathway of a romance between Clara and Huanduj Runa. In the first two lines of the song the singer takes on the identity of the *Brugmansia* identifying herself as the Huanduj Flower Woman engaging the plant as the Huanduj Spirit Man. Her identity as the Huanduj Flower woman is derivative from her relationship to the Huanduj Flower Man. The Huanduj Man is by nature hidden because he is a spirit not visible to the human eye. To describe the hiddenness of the Huanduj Man Clara draws on the physical appearance of the flower itself. The long tubular flowers hang downward so that the stamen and other internal parts of the flower are invisible unless one leans over and peers up inside the flower. As they hang downward the flowers look like a tall pointed hat with a wide brim at the bottom. Clara describes herself as the woman who stands peering under this hat. In line 58 she

takes his hat and looks inside. In line 59 her peering inside of him is turned around so that it becomes his peering into her eyes.

Another observable quality, the aroma of the *huanduj* flower, is used in the song as a symbol of the Huanduj Man's flirtatious attraction. In the daytime *huanduj* flowers have little or no aroma. But at night they mysteriously open and give off a pungent aroma that seems compelling and irresistible. Clara describes this opening as the Huanduj Man putting on his hat. In her song she compares the experience of this attractive aroma to the experience of being teased, laughed at, and flirted with by an elusive man wearing a hat. 'The Huanduj Spirit man laughs wanting to take me.' She says of herself 'I am the woman who stands smelling.' She becomes the Huanduj Flower Woman by bathing herself in his attractive aroma.

Although the *huanduj* is beautiful being carried away by its aroma is not an unambiguously good thing. The Huanduj Man, like the spirit world in general, can also bewitch and kill. The singer's relation to the *huanduj* is portrayed as a journey. The journey is an erotic contest of power in which either she will take him or he will take her. The goal is to know him and receive his gifts without being carried away, losing control and possibly being killed by him. Near the beginning of the song, she articulates what she sees as the real danger of engaging him: He might take her away to place her on the head of the island.

The relationship is portrayed as a contest between intense attraction and the will to resist. In lines 30 and 31 she describes herself as the woman who stands turning back and forth. The Quichua word *kihuirisha* here refers to restlessness in which she is continually pulled toward the Huanduj Man but then turns back. 'He won't be able to overcome me, the strong Santi woman,' she concludes.

The songs we have just examined display a more complex emotion than one might have expected to be generated by plants. Certainly plants are beautiful but how do they generate the passion of a great human love? Certainly plants can be poisonous but how can they generate the ambivalent feelings of attraction, seduction, resistance, fear and giving that characterize erotic relations between a man and a woman? These are emotions that we generally associate with family relations within our own species, not with human relations to other species and especially not with plants. That we find such ambivalent and passionate emotions (usually reserved for human domestic disputes) associated with relations to plants suggests that Amazonian Runa understand plants differently. But how are plant species understood? One of the best places to look for the answer to this question is in stories about the origins of plant species which explain how the present qualities of a particular plant have come into being.

Unfortunately, of the many thousands of species that inhabit the region only a handful have origin stories. Of these, most are related to the origin stories of animals. There are, for example, no known origin stories of the Matiri Man or the Huanduj Man. Nevertheless, the evidence from the accounts that do exist is telling. I will present parts of the origin stories of five plants: *Bixis orellana* (Quichua: *manduru*); *Genipa americana* (Quichua: *huituc*); *Fabaceae Lonchocarpus* species (Achuar: *Timiu*); *Clibadium surinamense* (Achuar: *Masu*). and *Manihot esculenta* (manioc or Quichua: *lumu*).⁹ I will then trace a pattern of similarity between these origin stories. Although space does not allow me to make the case the same pattern is present in the origin stories of animals. Since this pattern is consistently present in Amazonian Runa origin stories I propose that it can be used as a hypothesis for understanding Runa thinking about

⁹ Photographs of all the plants treated in this article can be viewed in the Ethnobotany Database at <http://andes.asu.edu>.

plant species in general. Runa understandings of the personalities of the plants will then help to explain how people behave toward them.¹⁰

We begin with the story of *manduru* (*Bixis orellana*) and *huituc* (*Genipa Americana*) two plants of great cultural significance to Amazonian communities. *Bixis orellana* is the source of a red paste or dye that is used as body paint. It is symbolic of blood and used in many ceremonies. *Genipa americana* is the source of a black dye that is also used as body paint and has many ceremonial uses. The narrative cycle of the sisters Manduru and Huituc is central to the creation story of Quichua, Achuar, and Shuar speaking people south of the Rio Napo. In a series of loosely related stories it narrates the sexual experiences of two human sisters who move from one man to another until they eventually become the plants *Bixis orellana* and *Genipa americana*. As we have seen, Clara Santi's songs have presented two plant species as male lovers. By examining the stories of the sisters, Manduru and Huituc, it may be possible to gain a deeper insight into how Runa understand the past love life of plants. This in turn may provide insight into the present status of plants as potential objects of human love songs.

I will present a Quichua language segment of this story narrated by Luisa Cadena.¹¹

According to Cadena, before becoming plants, *Manduru* and *Huituc* were human sisters about to

¹⁰ By using the word "personalities" I mean to suggest that a plant or animal species has something like a psychological history or memory of estrangement formed by the distinctive events of its origin. Although the events occurred while the species was still human their effects on the subjectivity of the species lingers on as a formative factor in its contemporary behavior. It is this lingering effect of the past history of domestic relations that allows the species to become a partner with a human being in a complex and ambivalent relationship of attraction, coyness, seduction and resistance. By using the word "personalities" I do not mean to suggest, however, that individual plants have their own psychological histories.

¹¹ Luisa Cadena has served as a primary resource for Janis Nuckolls' work (1996). Cadena is a Quichua speaking woman from Montalvo whose parents were Zaparoan speakers from the Andoas area on the Pastaza. I am indebted to Janis Nuckolls for making it possible for me to record Luisa Cadena in the context of Arizona State University's Andes and Amazon Field School during July of 2008.

marry brothers. *Manduru*, the older sister, (and in some versions both sisters) had a series of affairs. While married to a man who later became the squirrel, she had a secret affair with a man who became the dolphin accepting fish from him and giving him manioc. After a series of other affairs the two sisters entered into a relationship with two brothers who later became swallow-tailed kites. The two brothers offered fish to the girls and sent them to bathe their future mother-in-law. They warned the girls not to bathe her in hot water but the girls playfully did bathe their future mother-in-law in very hot water, melting the old lady. As a result the girls were abandoned by their potential husbands. The story then continued as follows:

<p>On the Origin of Manduru and Huituc</p> <p>1. In the afternoon when they were left behind they said, when they were left [one sister] said ‘Now what is going to happen to us? Let us stay right here. Now what will we turn into?’ Now what will we become?</p> <p>2. I am (have a) hairy vagina. I am going to turn into <i>manduru</i>,’ [one sister] said.</p> <p>3. The other sister said, ‘I am hairless. I don’t have hairs. I am a naked vagina. I will turn into <i>huituc</i>,” she said..</p> <p>4. I am going to be in the mud and you will stand in good soil,’ she said.</p>	<p>1. <i>Chishi painata saquirisha ninaura saquirishashi nira “Cunangalla, imata tucushun? Caillei shaquirishun! Cunanga imata tucungaraunchi nisha, Imata tucushun? Nira.</i></p> <p>2. <i>Ñucaga punzhuracamani. Ñuca manduru tucusha nishca.</i></p> <p>3. <i>Shuj ñana nishcashi, ñucaga mas vilmaguas illaj. Mana vilmayujchani Lluchu racamani nira. Ñucaga huituj tucusha nira.</i></p> <p>4. <i>Ñuca turui shayaringarauni. canga ali allpai shayaringui nishca,</i></p>
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<p>5. Then the sister who was transformed first stood up as a <i>huituc</i> tree. Standing she said “Now I am transformed. I am going to become <i>huituc</i>. You be <i>manduru</i>.” She said.</p> <p>6. ‘<i>Tuluj!</i>’ It sounded. ‘<i>Aiii!</i>’ She cried Again ‘<i>Tuluj aiii!</i>’ Again ‘<i>Tuluj aiii!</i>’ New leaves sprouted “Lican!” Becoming a <i>huituc</i> tree she stood up.</p> <p>7. The other sister who stood watching. ‘No, I will go up on the hill (even though she had stood up in their gardens.”)</p> <p>8. Standing up she said “I will just become Manduru. to paint their manioc cuttings, to put in their food, to paint their pale things.</p> <p>9. We will be turned into things that make people happy.....</p> <p>10. My sister will become something for dyeing the heads of those with red hair charcoal black.</p> <p>11. With that, ‘<i>Tuluj, Aiii!</i>’ Again ‘<i>Tuluj, Aiii!</i>’ becoming <i>Manduru</i> she stood up. Now becoming those things, they stayed that way.</p>	<p>5. Chiga naña chi ñaupá tucura huituj shayariirgrishca. Shayarigrisha cunan tucuni. Huitujmi tucungarauni, Cambas manduru tucungui nishca.</p> <p>6. “Tuluc!” uyarishca “Aiiii! shi caparira,” “Cuti tuluc aii, cuti tuluc aii,” Llulupanga. lican! Huituj tucushashi shayarira.</p> <p>7. <i>Shuj randi ricusha shayauj. Mana, ñuca urcui rishalla nisha (paiguna chagrai shi shayarijleira).</i></p> <p>8. <i>Shayaririsha ñuca manduru tucushalla. Paina lumu caspi shayachina, paiguna micunai churana,</i></p> <p>9. <i>Ñuchanchi cariyachina tucungaraunchi,</i></p> <p>10. <i>Pai irisda humata charic pucumagunata yana zhinqui tucuna ñuca ñana tucán.</i></p> <p>11. <i>Shinashi, chigua Turuc! Aii!, Cuti “Turuc! Ai!” manduru tucushashi shayarin. Ña chasna tucusha ña chai saquirinaura</i></p>
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For the purposes of my argument, the important elements of the story are these. *Bixis orellana* and *Genipa americana* were once very attractive human girls. These girls got themselves into so many problems with men that, eventually, they became homeless. When there was no place left for them in the human family they became plants. It is particularly the sexuality of each girl that is important in determining the kind of plant that she will become. [insert photo 2; caption: “Huituc Warmi (*Genipa americana*)”] In order to understand the nature of these plants it necessary to explore in some detail the problems that they had with men. To anticipate, the problem that they had with men can be attributed to a particular moral fault called *quilla*. It is because of this same moral fault called *quilla* that a new species typically splits off from the human family. Hence, understanding the meaning of a *quilla* is key to understanding the relationship between humans and other species, whether plant or animal. Before examining the girls’ encounters with their various male lovers it will therefore be helpful to have a better idea of what Runa mean by *quilla*

The word *quilla* denotes what for *Quichua* speaking people is perhaps the greatest moral fault. Although it has no direct translation its meanings approximate English ‘lazy,’ ‘sexually loose,’ and ‘immature.’ Laziness and sexual looseness are connected in Quichua for several reasons. First, work is highly gendered. Hence the products of female work such as productive gardens or elegant ceramic vessels are considered proof of a powerful and skillfully use femininity. Successful hunting is similarly proof of a skillful and disciplined use of male sexuality. Laziness, by contrast, is the result of immature sexuality. Often it is the result of being distracted from the task at hand by unsuitable partners. In Quichua, when the infix “*chi*” is inserted into any verb it changes the meaning so that the subject of the verb causes the object

to do the activity signified by the verb. Hence the verb “*quillana*” means “to be lazy” while “*quilla-chi-na*” literally means to make someone else be lazy. In contemporary Quichua however “*quilla-chi-na*” is also the verb which means “to flirt”, “to bother” or to “seduce.” Hence, in Quichua, to flirt or to seduce necessarily also means “to make lazy” because seduction distracts a man or woman from attention to the task at hand.

Because the behavior described as *quilla* leads to the breakdown of marriage the word must be understood by contrast to the *Quichua* ideal of marriage. In Quichua thinking marriage (and by extension human society as a whole) is based on a sensuous exchange of disciplined female work for male work. Most typically women give men *asua* (*manioc* drink) in exchange for fish and game. In order to understand the contrast to *quilla*, it is important to see that this exchange is both sensuous and the result of highly disciplined work on each side.

Asua embodies self-disciplined female sensuality. Each woman has her own manioc garden which she cares for as if it were her own baby. From the manioc roots that grow there, she makes her own brew of *asua*. Because the *manioc* is chewed to increase fermentation her saliva gives the *asua* an intimate quality.¹²

For the man’s part, hunting is like a martial art that is successful only with great balance and endurance. To stay up all night hunting, to be successful, and then to bring home game to a beloved woman is an admired expression of mature masculinity. In response, the woman mixes *asua* in a *mucahua* (ceramic bowl) painstakingly adorned with patterns from her dreams painted with a brush made from her own hair. The woman holds her bowl to the mouth of the returning

¹² In recent year the practice of chewing manioc to start the fermentation process has declined, particularly in the Napo region. Most young women now use a little fermented mash left over from a previous brew as starter to ferment a new batch.

hunter moving it sensuously while he drinks sometimes with movements reminiscent of a kiss. While he drinks the woman who has waited for him, caring for his children, looks into his eyes and sings a love song composed just for him. The result is a sensuous and intimate exchange between a man and a woman. In this ideal exchange the female partner is called a *chagra mama* (garden mother) and the man an *aicha yaya* (meat father).

An *aicha yaya* or *chagra mama* of this kind are characterized as *shinzhi* (strong) because they have the strength to endure in their work without being overcome by distractions whether from hunger, tiredness, curiosity or sexual desire. They are also described as *iyaiyuj* (intelligent) and *sabiru* (clever) because they do not allow impulsive distractions to cloud their judgment. For example, Clara Santi could be described as a *shinzhi warmi* (strong woman) because she did not allow the seductiveness of Matiri Man or Huanduj Man to cloud her judgment or to distract her from her task of harvesting medicine. In their narrowest meaning *shinzhi chagra mama* and *shinzhi aicha yaya* refer, respectively, to a skilled manioc gardener and a skilled hunter. But in their broader meanings they refer to the whole range of female and male work performed and exchanged with alertness, skill, and endurance.

A *quilla* is the opposite of these self-disciplined lovers. A *quilla* is a woman or a man who is too lazy or distracted to stick to the labor needed to exchange with a partner. A *quilla* is gullible and prone to being seduced because she allows intellectual laziness or the distractions of desire to cloud her judgment. A *quilla warmi* is a woman who flirts with other men instead of working hard to give *asua* to the husband who provides her and her children with meat. A *quilla* also gives *asua* in the wrong way to the wrong man: to one who is not the husband who works hard to provide meat for his family.

A *quilla runa* is a man who fools around instead of hunting and fishing in a disciplined way. A *quilla runa* gives fish or game to the wrong woman, one who is other than the wife who works hard to take care of his children and who gives him *asua*. A *quilla* is also a person who wanders from place to place because they want to be someone or something else in order to escape the hard work of being a *chagra mama* or an *aicha yaya* in the place that they are from.

We can now return to the story of Manduru and Huituc to show how their relationships to men exemplify the character trait called *quilla*. Although there are many oral versions of the girls' encounters with these different men the most complete text published to date is a Shuar language version recorded by Siro Pellizzaro (1988)¹³ In Shuar culture the preferred form of marriage was one man married to two sisters.¹⁴ Hence in Shuar versions the two sisters Manduru and Huituc move together from man to man. According to Pellizzaro's text (as well as Luisa Cadena's unpublished version) Manduru and Huituc lived with a man named Kunamp/Ardilla (*Sciureus* sp.) who had very prominent front teeth. Although the girls appeared to be working hard carrying the corn from their gardens, they were unable to control their tongues and loudly made fun of their husband's teeth. The annoyed husband promptly imprisoned the girls in bamboo ending the relationship (Pellizzaro 1988:181-86) Another man, Paushi (curassow)

¹³ Quichua language texts of two shorter episodes appear in Foletti-Castegnaro (1985). Norman Whitten and Dorothea Scott Whitten have also provided insightful interpretations (2008). Their extensive work with Pastaza ceramic art has brought many visual images from the Manduru and Huituc myth cycle into print (Whitten 1976; Whitten and Whitten 1988, 2008). The Whittens portray the Manduru and Huituc saga as a story of Runa resistance to foreign oppression (2008:2-4). According to this interpretation Machin is a foreign man who locks up the native women Manduru and Huituc. The women are later liberated by Sicuanga (toucan) who represents the Runa warrior. In this interpretation fault lies primarily with Machin as foreign oppressor rather than with the *quilla* qualities of the various parties. Although Pellizzaro's version uses the Shuar names Sua (Huituc) and Ipiák (Manduru) I retain the Quichua names for consistency.

¹⁴ Because Quichua speaking people have lived in closer proximity to Catholic missions they became monogamous at an earlier date.

according to Cadena, or Sicuanga (*Ramphastos cuvieri* the toucan) according to Whitten (2008), cut them free but instead of pursuing stable alliances with these men, the girls move on to more unsuitable encounters.

The two sisters then arrived at a home of an older woman who invited them in to wait for her son. Her son, she told them, was a great warrior. Instead of asking questions the girls allowed desire for marriage to cloud their judgment. At first the sisters prepare steamed fish for this man in the hopes of getting married. Then, unable to stick to their intentions, the girls eat the food themselves and fall asleep. Upon waking they sensed that someone had molested them. As they lay watching they saw the woman feeding her son by the fire. To their surprise he was not a warrior at all but the moth boy Katarkap sitting by his mother in the night, a long penis wrapped around his neck.¹⁵ After feeding him the mother placed her son on a stool beside the girls' bed. Without giving game to the girls' family or receiving manioc drink, the boy sought to penetrate first one sister and then the other. This time however the girls were sleeping with their skirts tucked tightly between their legs and he was unable to penetrate them through the cloth (Pellizzaro, 1988, 87-94).

Leaving the home of Katarkap, Manduru and Huituc finally meet a good man, Nayapi (*Elanoides Forficatus*; Quichua: *Tijeras Anga*), who offered the girls fish and game and was willing to marry them. Because Nayapi was on his way to a long hunting trip he sent the girls to wait for him in his home where he asks them to take care of his mother. The girls lose their way however because they are tricked by a man who later became Tsuna, a large deep forest tree with a very foul smelling sap. Instead of arriving at the home of Nayapi they mistakenly arrive at the home of Tsuna. Tsuna's mother invites them to help her make *asua* while they wait her son

¹⁵ In Runa tradition moths are viewed with a certain aversion and as something which should not be touched because they are believed to cause *shicshi* an itchy skin condition.

who, she says, is a great hunter (and whom they think is Nayapi). After the girls are in bed, the son comes home. The woman and her son noisily chew on a little crab commenting loudly that they are chewing the bones of a large animal killed by the son. The girls thought that he was indeed the great hunter. Tsuna climbed into bed between them and spent the night caressing first one and then the other. In the morning the girls found themselves covered with a disgusting secretion that reminded them of sap of the Tsuna tree. Instead of making love with the hunter they had been seduced by the tree man Tsuna. The foul smell of his sap was in their eyes, in their armpits in their nostrils and in all of the places where he had kissed them. Although they bathed they could not completely get rid of the smell (Pelizzaro 1988: 103-110, 151-163).

Finally, still smelling of their night with Tsuna, the girls arrive at the home of Nayapi and are invited in to wait by his mother. In return for his gift of fish Nayapi had asked the girls to perform the female task of bathing his aging mother with lukewarm water. In Runa thinking a *cari mama* or husband's mother is a respected figure for a *cachun* or daughter-in-law. Loving care of a *cari mama* is a central part of female labor. Yet instead of bathing their *cari-mama* carefully in lukewarm water, the girls playfully and deliberately scald the old woman with hot water as a kind of joke, melting her and causing her son to withdraw from the marriage. (Pelizzaro 1988:110-120). In a Quichua version collected by Foletti-Castegnaro the girls do bathe their future mother-in-law carefully at first but are then overcome by curiosity to see what would happen if they bathed her in very hot water (1985:99-103).

The girls then fled from Nayapi to the home of a young man named Machin/Tsere who later became capuchin monkey (*Cebus capucinus*). In a narrative style reminiscent of erotic comedy the narrator tells how Machin invented an array of schemes designed to satisfy his sexual curiosity. First he invented lice hoping that the girls would ask him to delouse them so he

could play with their hair. Instead the girls learned to delouse each other. Machin then invented fleas hoping they would let him search their bodies for the pesky creatures. Finally, Machin invented scabies and other skin diseases in the hopes that the girls would ask him to cure ailments in their private parts. The girls, however, learned to heal each other. (Pellizzaro 1988:167-74).

Eventually though, the girls succumbed to Machin's seduction when they were unable to resist curiosity. Machin had busied himself rolling fiber into string. Curious, the girls asked him why he was making string. Machin offered to tell them on the condition that they let him kiss their breasts. Dying of curiosity, the younger sister Huituc exposed her breasts first. Machin kissed one breast and then another. Still he still would not tell what the string was for so Manduru exposed her breasts too. After kissing Manduru's breasts Machin finally told the girls his secret. To avenge the death of his mother, Nayapi had commissioned Machin to make the string so that Nayapi could make smoked meat out of Huituc's body (Pellizzaro 1988:122-123).

Hearing this, the girls continued their flight. They soon realized however, that they had no where else to go. They had become estranged from men and men had become estranged from them. Through their acts of *quilla* they had alienated the *aicha yaya* Nayapi who wanted to marry them and who might have sustained them with fish. In addition they had become disenchanted by *quillas* like Katarkap, Tsuna and Machin. These men only sought to seduce them offering nothing in return. In short Manduru and Huituc had had a series of misadventures in which different men had had sex with them, not so much because the girls wanted sex, as because they were tricked into things, could not resist curiosity, fooled around or were too lazy to pay attention. Now distanced from human men, they were no longer capable of entering into a productive marital union.

Manduru and *Huituc* therefore withdrew from the human race to become plant species. As with all of the transformation stories there is continuity between who the women were before and what they become. The older sister who had a hairy vulva becomes *Bixis orellana* a plant with a hairy red pod containing seeds that yield a red paint symbolic of blood. The younger sister becomes *Genipa americana*, a plant with a smooth hairless pod that yields a black paint. As a result of the transformation *Manduru* and *Huituc* ceased to be *quillas*. Instead of wandering, they became stationary. *Manduru*, the girl who wandered most, became stationary in the *chagra*, or garden, the place of female work. The word *quilla*, it will be remembered, means both 'lazy' and 'sexually loose.' Instead of being promiscuous and avoiding work the transformed vulvas of *Manduru* and *Huituc* now produce valued gifts. *Manduru* produces a red paint while *Huituc* produces a black paint.

Once they become plants *Manduru* and *Huituc* become agents for transforming their human ex-lovers into elegant and productive animal species. Squirrel man painted himself red with *manduru* to become the Amazonian red squirrel. *Nayapi* painted his chest black with *genipa* to become the swallow tailed kite. *Sicuanga*, the toucan painted his feathers black with *huituc* and red with *manduru*. The curassow painted his feathers black with *huituc*. Through the women's transformation into plants their men too were transformed into the various species animals and plants that now interact in an orderly and productive ecological exchange (Pelilizzaro 1988: 206-210; Whitten and Whitten 2008:4).

In Amazonian society, these two paints are central to the exchange between men and women who are not *quillas*. Women paint their own faces as well as the eyes of their *manioc* stems when they plant *manioc* to make *asua*. Men painted their faces with *manduru* and *huituc* to attract game while hunting. In social situations, these body paints symbolized the

attractiveness and sensuous beauty of men and women who came together in socially appropriate exchange. *Huituc* and *manduru* dyes are now gained by humans through exchange with these plant species. Although the exchange is with plants, the origin story leaves little doubt that the reception of these dyes and medicines is to be understood on the pattern of exchange of female for male products. *Bixis* and *Genipa* may be transformed women but they are women all the same. The red and black dyes are inescapably the products of female work because they are produced in the transformed female organs of *Bixis* and *Genipa*.

Although *Manduru* and *Huituc* are clearly *quilla* women, they are not flat characters that represent only sexual looseness and laziness. As they proceeded through their adventures they also resisted and matured so that in the end they also became exemplars of the *shinzhi warmi*'s (strong woman's) modesty and ability to resist *quillachina* (seduction). By learning to resist seduction they invented many of the practices that become recognized markers of female modesty. They were the first to learn to groom each other's hair rather than ask men to do it. They were the first to learn to sleep with their dresses tightly tucked between their legs. By learning to cure each other's itches and skin ailments rather than allowing themselves to be treated by men *Manduru* acquired the medicinal properties that inhere in the plant today. As will be recalled from Clara Santi's songs to *Theophrastaceae* and *Brugmansia*, the ability to resist seduction is a crucial part of being a *shinzhi warmi* (strong woman).

Parallel to the saga of the two sisters *Manduru* and *Huituc* is the story of brothers *Timiu* and *Masu* who became transformed into plants used by men as fish poisons (*Fabaceae* *Lonchocarpus* species and *Asteraceae* *Clibadium surinamense*). A brief examination of this story will show that a plant can also originate from the transformation of a male human lover's act of *quilla*. In a Quichua version of the story a hunter was walking alone through the forest

consequences which spiraled into the sexual encounter and finally into transformation. The two brothers became the plants Masu, a weak fish poison that can only kill minnows in relatively still shallow water; and Timiu, a potent poison that can kill larger fish. Just as Clara Santi sees Matiri as a strong hunter one could also interpret the plants Masu and Timiu as fishermen because they are used as fish poisons. While both could now be seen as *aicha yaya* plants useful in the male task of fishing, Masu is a weaker fisherman because as a human lover he was more of a *quilla*, while Timiu is a stronger fisherman because as a human man he was more able to control his sexuality.¹⁷

Although the origin story of the fourth plant, *Mahihot esculenta*, appears to be quite different from the story of *Manduru* and *Huituc*, it has underlying similarities. In a version of the story I recorded from Ana Shiguango on the Napo River, *Quillor* and *Ducero* (the miraculous warrior twins) decided to help a woman who had no *asua* to give to her husband. They told her to go out to the garden with her own baby girl and to put the child in a hammock. The twins then stationed themselves at either end of the field. With magic words they created an immense garden of tall manioc plants. The woman left the baby in the hammock and began to work in the *chagra*, returning every so often to nurse the baby. After awhile the woman forgot her baby. When at last she did remember her, the garden had become so large that the woman got lost in it

¹⁷ It is only in the Achuar version that the hunters turn into the plants Masu and Timiu. Although the material culture of fishing with the two plants is the same in Shuar and Runa communities no Shuar or Quichua language origin stories for these plants have been collected to date. In all three language version the cut penis accounts for the origin of anacondas. Since the Achuar are the least acculturated it is possible that the plant transformation ending may have been present in the other languages and was subsequently lost.

and could not find her baby. The woman searched for the girl until dusk but to no avail. When she returned home without the child her husband became furious.

The next day she returned to the spot with her husband. This time they easily found the baby just where the mother had left her. The daughter, however, was distant, changed irreversibly by being abandoned. The mother and father found their daughter sitting calmly on the ground with a crown of woven manioc flowers on her head. Fanning out from her were manioc tubers as if she were their stem. She told her parents that she had changed to become the manioc flower woman.

Although the parents found their daughter she remained lost to them because of the transformation into manioc. In losing her daughter the woman did however, gain something else. At the beginning of the story the mother was a *quilla warmi* in that she was unable to give her husband *asua*. She was also a *quilla* in the sense that she was so careless at the female task of mothering that she forgot and lost her daughter. By the end of the story she was no longer a *quilla*. She had learned how to treat the garden so that it would grow for her. In fact, she had become the first *lumu chagra mama* (manioc garden mother). When she treated the *manioc* plants as though they were her lost daughter, devoting time to them lest they too disappear, the garden produced. She was able to harvest manioc and to give her husband *asua* when he came home from hunting.¹⁸

¹⁸ The story of the manioc baby is widely defused in the Pastaza Runa and Achuar/Shuar communities where she is called Nunguli or Nunkui (Brown 97-132; Descola 1994:191-215; Foletti-Castegnaro 1985:35-41; Pellizzaro 1978; Whitten 1976). The Nunkui tradition is complex displaying likely influence from a significantly different Andean tradition of plant origins which would require separate treatment. As the manioc baby retreats she creates the wild or useless doubles by cursing the key crops of the *chagra*. Out of the edible manioc *Manihot esculenta* she creates the inedible *Manihot brachyloba*, out of plantains she creates heliconias and out of yams *Ipomoea batatas* a wild and inedible variant. Bamboo is blessed or called into existence to help her in her flight. As she escapes downward through its trunk she repeatedly ceils the space off

Despite differences, the manioc origin story has clear similarities with the story of Manduru and Huituc, Masu, Timiu, and the Tsuna. In each case 1) the new plant species arises out of a transformation of previously human beings; 2) The transformation is the result of an estrangement within a family or in male-female relations; 3) The estrangement results from an act of *quilla*, understood as a breakdown in the exchange of male and female work. 4). With the act of transformation the character flaw of *quilla* is overcome and the protagonist becomes a *chagra mama* or an *aicha yaya*. Although space does not permit me to elaborate here the same pattern can be found in most Runa accounts of the origins of animal species.

Since this pattern is consistently present in Amazonian Runa origin stories I propose it can be used as a hypothesis for understanding Runa thinking about other plant and animal species in general. Hence the relation to plant persons will be characterized by *quillachina* seduction, making lazy, and the resistance of a *shinzhi warmi* who is not *quilla*.

Conclusion:

We can now return to the songs of Clara Santi. Why does she sing to *Matiri* Man as a hunter who brings a bird to the woman he loves? To be sure, we still do not know for sure. But from studying the extant origin stories we can risk a more educated guess as to who these plant people might be. Like all species *Matiri* and *Huanduj* must have acquired the personalities they have through a history of transformation. Although there are no known origin stories of *Matiri*

behind her creating the compartments that characterize bamboo. (Brown 97-132; Pellizzaro 1978) Eventually she enters the earth through the roots of the bamboo to become the *allpa mama* or earth mother. A beginning time *runa*'s creation of new species by cursing and blessing beings that aid or hinder their flight as they withdraw from the world is reminiscent of the Andean tradition of flight of Viracocha in the Huarochiri Manuscript (Salomon and Urioste 1991). It also has parallels to the Andean *yumbada* as well as Andean narratives of the flight of Nuestro Señor that I have recorded in the Ecuadorian sierra.

Man or *Huanduj* Man, it is reasonable to suppose as a working hypothesis that they were men who became plants through the same pattern of speciation that occurs in nearly every Runa origin story. Santi probably treats *Matiri* and *Huanduj* as male lovers because they were once human men involved in relationships with human women. They became plants through a process of estrangement caused by a particular cultural construction of fault called *quilla*. We can surmise this by examining the known origin stories in which *quilla* is the standard Runa religious explanation for all transformation, just as *karma* is the Hindu cultural explanation for all instances of reincarnation.

As we have learned, *quilla* is a quality of relationship between men and women in which the disciplined exchange of male for female work breaks down. *Quilla* can be understood as a kind of laziness or immature sexuality which contrasts to the mature femininity of the *chagra mama* or the mature masculinity the *aicha yaya*. We have learned that once speciation occurs, the fault of *quilla* is resolved. Speciation can thus be understood as a process of maturation. As a distinct species, the plants and animals cease wanting or pretending to be someone else. They are no longer useless for they now produce products that benefit humans as well as other species.

This article has sought to explore the nature of Amazonian Runa relationships to plants. How are plant persons experienced in the context of Runa religious life? Why are they experienced in these ways? Is there an ethical dimension to the relationship with plants? If so what is it? What are the appropriate and inappropriate ways of engaging plant persons? The answer is this: The relationship to another species, in this case to a plant species, should be understood on the model of an exchange of gifts between a man and a woman. It is a personal exchange based on attraction. If the breakdown between human beings and the other species was caused by immature sexuality then the relationship is restored by the mature exchange between

chagra mama and *aicha yaya*. A human woman generally approaches another species as though they were men. A man as though they were women.

Harvesting the *ambi* (medicine) of an *ambi yura* (medicine tree) is not just a technical process that can be done by anyone. Medicine is given by a tree in the context of a relationship. Trees like *Matiri Runa* have become mature through the process of speciation and will no longer waste their gifts on a *quilla*. They have experienced the estrangement and ‘divorce’ of speciation. They are like experienced ex lovers who, although distant and withdrawn, are still vulnerable to loving and being loved. Although they will not respond to fools they will respond to the disciplined sensuality of a *chagra mama*, to someone like Clara Santi. Hence Santi looks at the green leaves and yellow fruits of the *Matiri* and sings a love song to the *aicha yaya* hidden there. In her song *Matiri* Man is a hunter dressed in green who goes to the forest to kill a bird to give to the woman he loves. In this case the bird is the medicine and the woman the hunter loves is the singer Clara Santi herself. ‘Taking his spirit (*supai*) with me,’ she sings at the end of the song, ‘He is the man who stands there saying “Take me, that *Matiri* Man.”’

As we have seen, a mature sexual relation is not the only model for engaging plants. *Manioc* and other garden plants are treated as children who have withdrawn from a *quilla* or immature mother. Nevertheless, the idea is similar. These plants too have been transformed through a process of estrangement. They are children who have been burned by parental abandonment, and so, they also will not give their gifts to a fool. They respond only to another expression of mature femininity, the sensuous and disciplined mothering of a *Chagra Mama*.

Treating the garden like a sacred child prone to estrangement is much more time consuming and labor intensive than strictly necessary for agriculture. One of the ideas guiding the ritual behavior of *chagra mamas* is to treat the time it takes plants to grow as a kind of

pregnancy. Young plants are like children growing in the womb of the gardener. This idea involves transferring a range of pregnancy related *sasi* or taboos to the act of gardening. For example, the *chagra mama* observes certain dietary restrictions either during critical times early in the plant growth cycle or during the entire time that the plant is growing. In the growing of peanuts the woman avoids eating fish heads at the time that the peanuts are first forming because, at that time, the young peanuts have the shape of fish heads and might be harmed by the eating of fish heads. Gardeners also fast from eating any kind of sweet while they are growing beans in their gardens.¹⁹

Chagra mamas avoided going into their gardens while they were menstruating because just as menstruation would signify the end of a pregnancy going into a garden during menstruation would cause the manioc tubers to cease growing and rot. *Chagra mamas* also avoided going into their gardens in a state of advanced pregnancy because it could cause the manioc tubers to burst or split. When manioc is finally harvested the area around the plant is first cleaned with much greater care than necessary. After being taken out of the ground the tubers are cut from the stem with great care and placed head down in a basket just as a child should be placed in the womb. So close is the identification between the manioc tuber and the fetus of the gardener that should the gardener be so careless as to place the tuber in the basket crosswise or feet first, it is believed that gardener's own child would be born feet first or crosswise. No tubers, even those too small to be worth eating, should be left abandoned in the field because if they are left behind they might cry like babies causing the manioc to withdraw. All of this makes the life of the *chagra mama* meaningful but it is also time consuming and emotionally demanding.

¹⁹ For Achuar dietary restrictions during planting see Descola (1994: 208-210).

Besides being hard work, the relation to plants is perceived as potentially dangerous to the gardener. We saw that in Clara Santi's songs to *Matiri* Man and *Huanduj* Man there is not only attraction and flirtation but also resistance. In her song to *Matiri* Man Santi suggests that the *Matiri* wishes to seduce her. In her song to *Huanduj* Man she sings that *Huanduj* wants to take her away but that he will not be able to do so. What is this threatening quality of the plant that must be resisted? In the process of speciation the person who withdrew became, not only the external leafy green plant, but also what is called a *supai*, the spirit person behind the plant. Although I and other scholars might translate the words *supai runa* as "spirit people" native speakers of *Quichua* most frequently translate these words into Spanish as '*diablos*' suggesting something more sinister.

In Runa thinking *supai runa* are similar to the dead in that they once lived openly in this world as humans and then retreated behind the surface appearance of this world. They now inhabit the invisible world behind plants and animals as well as inside the mountains, earth, rocks and oxbow lakes. Like all *supai*, the plant *runas* have a superhuman quality. To see them is unnerving. They are overwhelmingly attractive, mysterious, and terrifying (words the Mircea Eliade, following Rudolph Otto, used to describe an experience of the sacred (1957: 8-9). To engage them means opening the heart to a current of attraction, a 'crush,' that could prove fatal. If the gardener should be overwhelmed by this beauty she could be pulled inside to that place where the *supai* reside, withdrawn, and hidden from this world.

The *supais* behind the plants are similar to the dead in that through the process of transformation they have died and become something else. To enter into an emotional relationship with the plant and animal *supais* is to risk undergoing the transformation that they

have undergone. To be pulled there means death. Thus traditional gardening means maintaining a relationship to plants that is not only sensuous and disciplined, but also, dangerous.

The portrait of women's relations to plants developed here both collaborates and amplifies previous work on Runa and Achuar/Shuar relations to other species. Michael Brown interpreted Aguaruna Shuar gardening songs as a 'technology of sentiment' for increasing affinity between gardeners and their plants (Brown 1986). By examining how plants are understood as formerly human lovers who became distanced from the human family I have sought to shed light on the estrangement that exists between humans and plants. It is this estrangement which Runa singers like Clara Santi seek to overcome to increase affinity with plants through their songs.

In his work on the Achuar Phillippe Descola found that Achuar men treat the forest world of game animals as affinal kin while women treat domesticated garden plants as consaguineal relations (1994;1996). This fits a structuralist pattern in which the binary opposition between male and female is mirrored in parallel contrasts between forest and garden, affinal and consaguineal. My findings do confirm that Quichua women engage their manioc gardens as mother to her children (a consaguineal relationship). However Clara Santi's songs to Matiri and Huanduj show that women can also engage plants as male lovers (an affinal relationship). Because Matiri is a deep forest plant while Huanduj is domestic Santi's songs show that women can engage both forest and domestic species through an affinal relationship. In Santi's songs both the domestic and the wild plant are treated as dangerous and seductive lovers. Since many Pastaza Quichua women like Clara Santi have married into the Achuar communities for generations it is likely that Achuar women also had songs like those sung by Clara.

Perhaps it is best to say simply that a range of human to human relations can be used as models by both men and women to engage the *supai* world behind the other species. Because any species has both male and female members, it is in theory at least, possible to engage any plant species as either male or female. All things being equal men engage the *supai* as female lovers while women engage the *supai* as male lovers. The strongest evidence for this comes from male *yachajs* and hunters. I have worked with a considerable number of Amazonian Runa male *yachajs* in both Pastaza and Napo and have gathered information on still others. Every one of these men developed relationships to the forest and water *supai* behind the game as female lovers or wives (*yacu warmi* and *sacha warmi*). I have also worked closely with two female *yachajs* (one in the Andes and one in the Napo). Both women treated the water and forest or mountain *supais* as husbands.

Although this is the default pattern a few plants that have origin stories are more strongly portrayed as specifically male or female. Manduru and Huituc are perceived as female by both men and women. Masu (*Asteraceae Clibadium surinamense*) and Timiu (*Fabaceae Lonchocarpus* species) are thought of as male by both men and women because they originate in the transformation of two men. Since only men work with these fish poisons I assume that the relation to the plants is male to male with little or no erotic context. Manioc fits into this pattern of plants with origin stories well. Since the origin story portrays manioc as the transformation of a female child gardeners treat manioc as a baby. To a certain extent men also treat manioc as a baby. For example a man may help his wife pick up small left over tubers that are not to be left abandoned lest they cry. Such a relationship could be treated as a father child relationship. I know of one man, Anselmo Aguinda, who had a spiritual gift (*lumu paju*) for relating to manioc. He was a widower who had his own flourishing manioc garden. Before he died he passed his

gift to his granddaughter, Carmen Andi, now a chagra mama in her fifties who treats her own manioc as her babies. Although I do not have evidence I think it is likely that Anselmo engaged his manioc through a father child relationship. In all of these cases however the relations to plants are tenuous, delicate and dangerous because the plants were persons who withdrew from their humanness through a process of estrangement resulting in speciation.

By portraying the Runa practice of treating plants as persons this paper also implicitly raises the question of whether Runa communities might have a more cosmocentric or nature centric (as opposed to anthropocentric) ethic. For example, one might wonder whether Runa communities might extend something like “human rights” or the respect due to all human beings to plants and animals as well. This is a difficult question which would take a different essay to examine. In this essay I have used the word “person” to translate the Quichua word “*runa*”. Although there is no better English word to use the semantic fields of “person” and “*runa*” only partially overlap. In English the word “person” carries with it a whole Christian and European philosophical history suggesting an individual of a unique class of beings who descend from a single pair, are equal, and of infinite worth because they and only they are made in the image of God. The word “*runa*” like the words “*dine*” (Navajo) or similar words in other languages indigenous to the Americas refers first and foremost to the ethnic group that speaks “*runa*” “*dine*” or and who are related through kinship. The word “*runa*” can be extended outwards by degrees to groups who are more similar until at its outer edges it can mean human or the human like beings behind the plants and animals. The word “*runa*” contrasts to terms referring to other ethnic groups and above all to ‘*aucas*’ (enemies or outlaws). In short, the words “*runa*” and “person” carry with them the very different religious and moral histories. Thus attributing

runahood to plants would not carry the same moral and philosophical implications as attributing “personhood” would. The similarities and differences would have to be carefully worked out.

It should also be noted that the ritual language for treating plants as *runas* occurs almost exclusively in the context of gardening and gathering plant medicines. In other words, plants seemed to be treated as persons in order to enter into an exchange which results in the reception of food and medicines for human use. Apart from ritual aspects of hunting and gardening plants and animals are generally not thought of as human beings. Nevertheless the idea that there are *supai runas* behind the plants and animals that could appear unexpectedly gives people what might be called a “healthy respect” for the plants and animals.

One might suggest that for Amazonian people, plants and animals are not so much persons as they are *ex-persons*. The transformation of various previously human beings into plant and animal species was a crucial part of the emergence of a good and habitable world. In the act of transformation plants and animals ceased to be human in ways that are ethically important. As we have seen, the transformations occurred in part because the previously human plants and animals could not get along with their families. If plants and animals were still human they would compete for the same foods, spaces, and sexual partners making life untenable. If they were still human, plants and animals could not be killed and eaten for to do so would be a kind of cannibalism. It is by becoming another species that they are now able to coexist with human beings in a productive exchange. The barriers between species created in the acts of transformation are thus believed to be good. They are what make the world habitable. It is considered dangerous and perhaps morally wrong to break these barriers down unnecessarily. Plants and animals are thus respected but generally kept at a distance unless the tasks of gardening or hunting require otherwise.

I have written this paper as though the relationship to plants and animals represented by the *chagra mama* or *aicha yaya* ideal were typical of all, or at least most, adult Runa. That, however, is no longer the case. The change comes, I believe, not because secular agriculture is more credible but because it is easier. The relationship to plants described in this article is a way of life that demands a gardener's fulltime attention. As such it is increasingly in tension with going to high school, employment in towns, eating in restaurants, and much of modern life in general.

Years ago I attempted to plant *runa purutu* (native beans) with a young Runa woman who later became my wife. She was shaped by the *chagra mama* tradition but not romantically attached to it. She had brought some beans back from her mother's *chagra* on the Napo and I was anxious to plant them. 'Let's go plant those beans,' I said. She told me that, although you can plant store bought beans at any time, *runa purutu* can only be planted when the *chucu* (*Erythrina peopigiana*) trees are in bloom. We waited a couple of months until I saw the bright orange blossoms appeared on the *chucu* trees along the banks of the Pastaza. 'Let's go plant those beans,' I said. She told me that *runa purutu* could only be planted during the full moon when the *chucu* trees were blooming. I waited until the moon was full and said 'Let's go plant those beans.' She told me that the person who planted *runa purutu* has to abstain from sugar and deserts from the time the beans are put into the ground until the time they are harvested (her mother had always done that). I said, 'Well just plant the beans in the ground and fast like your mother.' She thought about it for awhile. Probably she thought about Sprite, Coca-Cola, ice cream, lemonade, and apple pie. Finally she turned to me and said, 'You plant them.' Evidently, neither one of us thought that it was worth giving up sugar and deserts just so we could grow our

own beans. Ritual gardening had become too complicated. To this day my wife continues to maintain a *chagra* (traditional garden) but does so in a much simpler fashion.

Although the self-disciplined ritual life of the *chagra mama* and the *aicha yaya* are increasingly in tension with the jobs and lifestyles of younger people, younger gardeners are finding new ways to carry on the gardening piety of their grandmothers. Although very few young women observe the menstrual and dietary restrictions or paint their faces and manioc cuttings with *manduru*, nearly all younger Runa women who have land do continue to garden with respectful attitudes shaped by the *chagra mama* tradition. They still prepare their manioc cuttings for planting with an attitude of love, remembering (*iyarisha llaquishalla pitina*) their mothers and grandmothers. They are still careful to clear the area around a manioc plant neatly before harvesting. The tubers are still carefully placed head down in the basket. Most importantly, a neatly kept manioc garden is still the most prominent symbol of a an *ali runa warmi* (a good Runa woman) who is neither *quilla* nor *orgullosa* (ashamed of her heritage). Although the tradition of the *chagra mama* and *aicha yaya* is undergoing rapid change they will continue to influence modern Runa attitudes towards plants and animals for many years to come. I conclude by translating the words of a Quichua song that men sing to those elegant women they call *chagra mamas*:

1. Manioc Flower Mama	1. <i>Lumu Sisa Mamalla</i>
2. Rising while it is still dark	2. <i>Llandu, llandu atarisha</i>
3. Carrying your basket	3. <i>Ashangara aparisha</i>
4. You stand dancing	4. <i>Bailahami shayaungui</i>

5. On sunny days and cloudy days	5. <i>Indi llandu punzhapi</i>
6. You stand firm like the Callamballa	6. <i>Callamballa shayaungui</i>
7. My beloved woman	7. <i>Ñuka warmishitalla</i>
8. With what joy you work	8. <i>Ima kushi tarbangui!</i>

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