A Body of Knowledge, or, the Body Knows

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It was only a brief comment from a father to his young son but it launched me on one of the most illuminating and exciting lines of inquiry during my seven years of fieldwork with the Cashinahua of eastern Peru. The men were sitting on low wooden stools or turtle shells around an assortment of bowls that only a little earlier had been filled with the normal daily menu consisting of the meat of monkeys, wild pig, rodents and birds, accompanied by boiled manioc and plantains and gruels made of corn and ripe plantains. Their discussion of the day’s hunt was interspersed with the usual raunchy banter between brothers-in-law.

Awadetsati, the headman, cleared his voice, scratched his crotch and said, “In the days of the ancestors, there was a tapir.”

His audience chuckled in anticipation of the impending tale. The women, sitting on palm leaf mats around the remains of their meal in another circle a short distance from the men, giggled and hushed the children.
"He was a horned creature who announced his sexual interests to anything that moved. He even propositioned a leaf that blew across his path."

"Ee, e," said Masa, "just like Stu," referring to his young brother-in-law, who returned with a choice obscenity much to the amusement of the audience.

"One day as he blundered through the forest, tapir encountered a snake, a large land turtle. 'My,' he said to her, 'you are a gorgeous creature. Let's fuck.' That's just what he said to her. She looked him over from the end of his long nose to his rump. 'You're a big one. And what a luscious penis!' Sure, she said, 'let's do it.' I've never done it with a creature like you,' he said. 'Where do I stick my penis?'

Amidst considerable laughter and giggles, various members of the audience suggested possible alternatives.

"Here," she said, pointing to her mouth. Well, he shoved it in and started humping. 'Hun, hun, hun.' When he was at the height of his passion, GIUN! Her jaws clamped shut.

"Adai, adai," shouted the males as they clamped their hands over their genitals. The women cackled and giggled, their hands over their mouths. Turtle waltzed away, chewing. She had her supper. But tapir crawled into the bushes and died. That's the way it happened long ago in the days of the ancestors.

Amidst comments from the audience, Biita, the man sitting next to me on his turtle shell, leaned forward and said to his young son, cradled between his legs, "My son, that's what happens when all your knowledge is in your balls."

It was a funny line and I laughed, but Biita's comment haunted me for weeks, even months. Where else can knowledge reside? How is knowledge acquired? What, for the Cashinahua, constitutes knowledge?

Tapir, all my informants agreed, had little knowledge, none, and all of it was in his balls. In contrast, a wise man, hani unaya, has knowledge throughout his whole body. "Heni yada dashti unaya, his whole body knows," they say. When I asked them
This knowledge, say the Cashinahua, resides in his hands because they held the axe that cut the tree, causing it to fall and thus are the conduit by which the knowledge entered the body. Knowledge learned by and associated with the men's hands involves hunting, fishing, making gardens, tool, bows, and arrows, feather head-dresses and other objects. Women's hands know planting and harvesting gardens, cooking, weaving, making mats, baskets, pottery and other objects. The Cashinahua say that knowledge learned by and localized in the hands includes those physical skills in which the hands play a primary part, even if other parts of the body play an important role.

Let me give an example. Successful hunting requires considerable knowledge, not all of which involves use of the hands. It requires knowledge of the behavioral characteristics of the animals hunted based on observation. This knowledge, the Cashinahua say is "skin knowledge." Biichi amaga, as is all knowledge of the natural world. When I questioned why it was not "eye knowledge" since it was knowledge that came from observation, they told me that it was knowledge of the jungle's body spirit, yuda bake yushin.

A short detour is necessary at this point. The Cashinahua believe that every person consists of a body, yuda, and a series of at least five spirits, yushin. Although informants disagree on exactly how many spirits each person has, they all list at least the following: yuda bake yushin, body-child spirit; bedu yushin, eye spirit; namu yushin, dream spirit; pet yushin, feces spirit; and sinu yushin, urine spirit. For the purpose of this discussion we will consider only the first two types of spirits.

The yuda bake yushin, the body-child spirit (hereafter, simply body spirit), encases a person's body like an outer skin. As a spirit it is not really visible. It consists of a person's aura, an indicator of the state of a person's vitality and health, or lack thereof, and a person's sheer physical presence. Although it is ephemeral, intangible and invisible, the body takes on a different aura in its absence, as when a person dies. Yuda bake yushin also refers to a person's reflection in water or in a mirror, as well as a person's shadow. All living things, including people, animals, vegetation, and all other aspects of nature, are said to have "body spirits." Thus, when one sees a person or thing, one can be said to see its body spirit. Further, one learns about things like sun, wind, water, and rain through the sensations they produce on the surface of the body. It is in this sense that knowledge of the natural world is "skin knowledge," i.e., knowledge gained through and located in the skin.

To see the true nature of people and the things that make up the natural world, however, one also must understand the bedu yushin, the eye spirit, sometimes also called the real spirit, yushin rain. The eye spirit dwells in a person's eye, leaving the body during unconsciousness and hallucinogenic experiences to travel in the world of spirits. The knowledge gained in these travels is called bedu uma, eye knowledge. It is only with the eye spirit that one can truly and fully see persons or objects in both their physical and spiritual substance, i.e., their bodies and body spirits. Without the eye spirit, a person can only know the surface of things, i.e., their skin and thus skin knowledge.

We return now to our hunter. In addition to his knowledge of animal behavior, skin knowledge, which allows him to locate an animal, he needs to know how to approach it. Again skin knowledge. But once in position to shoot, he draws on hand knowledge for the hand-eye coordination needed to make the shot for judging how far to pull the arrow back and when to release it in order to make a kill. The skills required to make his bow and arrows are also hand knowledge.

Women's skills are also kinds of hand knowledge. Take for example spinning and weaving. Cashinahua women spin cotton to make thread for their hammocks, skirts, and other fabric objects. They say of a woman who can transform raw cotton into thread of standard thickness without lumps or weak spots that her hands know. To produce a piece of fabric of the right texture and denseness and with straight edges requires much hand knowledge. However, any designs that might be woven into the fabric draw on knowledge gained
The reasoning here is complex. First, children, the product of the genitals and genital activity, give one immortality by enduring beyond one's lifetime. The sexual act is brief and fleeting, but through it one reproduces one's self. Male informants often spoke of never feeling more alive than at the instant preceding ejaculation, followed, however, by death, that is, the loss of tumsence and muscle relaxation. The men often say of a satisfactory orgasm that they died or that the woman's vagina killed them. Cashinahua women never discussed the sex act in these terms, perhaps because they rarely experience orgasm. Genital knowledge of mortality also is rooted in biological realities associated with aging. Men speak with reluctance about their decreasing ability to achieve erection in old age; women speak about the cessation of menses and the loss of fertility.

The last kind of knowledge is taka una, liver knowledge, the knowledge of emotions. It is in one's liver that one feels joy and sorrow, fear, distrust, hope, pleasure. They say of a person who is generous, pleasant, and happy that he or she has a sweet liver, taka batapa, and that this or her liver knows a lot, hauem taka una baidha. A stingy person with a nasty disposition who always is gloomy and always foresees disaster is one with a bitter liver, taka numa. A person with a bitter liver also is said to be one whose liver only knows a through her eye spirit and/or her dream spirit.

Social knowledge is gained through and resides in the ears and therefore is called pabini una, ear knowledge. The connection with the ear comes from the centrality of language in social discourse. Although speech, hancha, comes from the mouth, knowledge comes from hearing. The Cashinahua use two expressions to distinguish between two kinds of hearing: ninka buna, soft hearing, and ninka kuski, hard hearing. Soft hearing involves listening and absorbing facts about social matters, i.e., social awareness. Hard hearing requires digging beneath the surface to consider motivations, consequences, etcetera. The statement, en mis ninka, "I hear you," can mean either I hear what you are saying or I understand what you are saying. Although both kinds of hearing involve knowledge, it is principally the second kind of hearing, hard hearing, that is involved when they say a person knows a lot, that they have much ear knowledge. Hard hearing results from both listening, ninka, and thinking, shina. Just a brief aside—I never was able to find out where thinking takes place. Several informants said that it...
litt,e, hauen taka una pichta. The amount of liver knowledge a person has and the state of the liver, i.e., sweet or bitter, expresses itself both in behavior and in demeanor, i.e., on the surface of the body. A person with a happy disposition is said to have a sweet face, besu butapa, while a grumpy person is said to have a bitter face, besu muku. One informant described his mother in the following terms. Hauen taka una haidu hayaki. Hauen besu butapa hauidu. Hauen pula dathb butapaki. Nakun dathb bemishaidu waumibuki. "Her liver has a lot of knowledge. Her face is very sweet. Her whole body is very sweet. It always makes us very happy."

Because of my own cultural bias, I continued to ask my Cashinahua informants about whether or not some part of the body, namely the brain, served as a sort of central processing center or data bank of knowledge. They patiently and persistently rejected any separation of mind and body. They insisted that different kinds of knowledge are gained through and reside in different parts of the body. The whole body thinks and knows.

What are the characteristics of a wise person in Cashinahua, a unapa? They are people who have a lot of knowledge, una haidu hayaki. Their hands know, i.e., they are skilled workers. Their skin knows, i.e., they have an extensive and intimate knowledge of their physical surroundings. Their eyes give them knowledge of the spiritual world. Knowledge of their mortality and immortality resides in their genitals. Their liver provides them with a full range of emotions. A truly knowledgeable person is one whose whole body knows.

But the Cashinahua insist that the wise person is not simply one who has a lot of knowledge. This knowledge must be expressed in behavior. Wise persons are generous both with their knowledge and the products their knowledge allows them to produce. They are helpful but reserved; they never force their knowledge on others. They are humble; they know that their knowledge is incomplete, that there is always more to learn. They are socially sensitive, knowing when to engage and when to disengage. They are even-tempered, patient, temperate in all things. And finally, they live in the present, knowing that it too shall pass.

For the Cashinahua, knowledge is derived from activity and in turn generates activity. It is in action, not in contemplation, that knowledge is both gained and given expression. Although most Americans think about knowledge in terms of the Cartesian separation of mind and body, we recognize and talk about certain activities and knowledge as if they are at least to some degree separate from the cognitive and semantic operations of mind. Take, for example, the political ad that told us, "In your hearts you know he's right," or when we speak of the manual dexterity of a skilled crafts-person or the physical skills of a gifted athlete, dancer, or musician as if their specialized knowledge is deeply embedded in the very fibers of their being. Despite these exceptions, we tend to alienate mind from body and see the body as a mere instrument of the mind. We celebrate knowledge for knowledge's sake, divorced from action.

For the Cashinahua, knowledge is gained through bodily experience and expresses itself in bodily activity. A wise person is not only one whose whole body knows based on past experience, but one whose knowledge continues to increase as knowledge is put into action. Knowledge is alive. It lives and grows in a body that acts, thinks, and feels.

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