

Helpless – the affective preconditions of Piro social life

Peter Gow

This chapter explores the dynamics of a particular experiential state, which I here term 'helplessness', among the Piro people of Peruvian Amazonia, to shed light on the specific Piro conception of the human condition, and of the place of humanity in the cosmos. It draws on and extends a larger body of work concerned to develop a phenomenological account of the lived world of these people (Gow 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1997, in press). My analysis in this chapter directly addresses the issues raised by Overing in her work on the aesthetics of community (Overing 1989, 1999), and by Taylor's critique (Taylor 1996) of the very distinctive analytical style that Overing has created: now that we are able to talk of love and of hate in the context of ethnographies of indigenous Amazonian peoples, what other emotional states can we talk about?

Here I want to discuss an aspect of indigenous Amazonian lived worlds which has received surprisingly little attention to date: experiences of grief, suffering, compassion and consolation. Our naive everyday phenomenology would be shocked to discover that indigenous Amazonian people had no experience of these phenomena, and the fieldwork experiences of those who have worked in the region doubtless present much material on which to elaborate accounts of them, but there is very little literature on these states.¹ So, here I want to look at experiences of grief, suffering, compassion and consolation in the Piro lived world, and at the purchase a consideration of these experiences gives in ethnographic description and analysis.

The Piro people are an indigenous Amazonian people with existing communities in four areas of Western Amazonia: on the Bajo Urubamba, Cushabatay and Manú rivers in Peru and on the Iaco river in Brazil.² I know best the people living along the Bajo Urubamba river, which has the largest Piro population, and my account here refers exclusively to them. They live in villages ranging in size from about fifty to three hundred people, and to over a thousand people in the special case of the mission of El Rosario de Sepahua, and depend for their living on shifting agriculture, fishing, hunting and commercial work in lumbering and other activities. They speak a Maipuran (Arawakan) language. All Piro people are involved in dense

relations with non-Piro people such as, on the Bajo Urubamba river, the Campa-Asháninca, Matsiguenga and *mestizos*. A far fuller account may be found in the book, *Of Mixed Blood* (Gow 1991).

To be helpless and to be seen to be helpless

The Piro terms I address here are *wamonuwata*, 'to do/to be *wamonu*-' and *getwamonuta*, 'to see *wamonu*-. The term *wamonuwata*, can be translated as 'to grieve, to be sad, to suffer, to be cute, to be cuddly'. This experiential state elicits, in others, *getwamonuta*, 'to see the grief, sadness, suffering, cuteness, cuddliness of another'. The diverse range of states designated by *wamonuwata* have, at least to this English-speaker, little in common. I argue here that what these people, cute babies and grieving adults and older children, have in common, for Piro people, is their aloneness, their singularity as humans, and that the best translation of the term *wamonuwata* is 'to be helpless', in the idiomatic sense that this term shares with the Spanish *desamparado*. Similarly, I translate *getwamonuta* as 'to compassionate', in the idiomatic sense that this term shares with *compasionar*. I hasten to add that these are my translations: Piro people, when speaking the local Ucayali dialect of Spanish, habitually use *estar triste*, 'to be sad', for *wamonuwata*, and *dar pena*, 'to feel sorry for', for *getwamonuta*.

Clearly, these English and Spanish translations of mine carry a theological loading likely to be absent or different in the Piro case. Indeed I argue that the interplay between the states of 'being helpless' and 'compassionating' are the affective preconditions of Piro humanity and its intrinsic sociability, and not, as in Judaeo-Christian cosmology, preconditions of humanity in the regard of an extra-human divinity.

Little babies *wamonuwata*, 'are helpless', and elicit in others *getwamonuta*, 'compassion'. Why? Because they are alone. They are humans who lack kinspeople. When a Piro baby is born, the first question asked about it is, 'Is it human (*yineru*)?' This question addresses the bodily form of the baby: is it a human, or a fish, or a tortoise or 'an animal nobody had ever seen'. The bodily form of the baby is an intrinsic identity form, which is uninfluenced by parental behaviour. Only those babies born with human form have potential to be 'kinspeople': others are expelled out of social space into the realm of otherness, the river or forest. A human baby is divided from its placenta, and only the placenta is expelled from social space. Such a baby has the potential to be a 'kinsperson', but it is not a kinsperson to anyone yet. To become a 'kinsperson', it must be fed 'real food', and respond with kin terms (cf. Belaunde, Kidd, Lagrou, Londoño-Sulkin, Overing, this volume).

Mourning adults *wamonuwata*, 'are helpless', and elicit in others *getwamonuta*, 'compassion'. Why? Because they are alone. They are humans who lack kinspeople. Here the missing kinsperson is a specific known dead

person. A once-living kinsperson has died, and left the surviving kinsperson as one who is 'alone'. Piro people do not mourn collectively, or in small defined groups of mourners. They mourn alone, because each person has lost part of themselves. This is because kin relationships are, as has been pointed out on numerous occasions by Rivière, Overing and Viveiros de Castro among others, radically 'ego-centric' in Amazonian systems such as the Piro one: each link in the chain that establishes a person as a kinsperson is focused on the 'ego', rather than on broad classes or groups. Just as Piro people do not identify themselves with other kinspeople in defining their own specific kin relations, they do not identify themselves with other kinspeople when those kin relations are unmade in the ontogenetic processes of death (cf. Alès, Belaunde, Jamieson, Lagrou, this volume).

On hearing one of my earlier accounts of Piro experiences of mourning, a Melanesianist ethnographer of psychoanalytic bent described them as 'extreme narcissists', and questioned the veracity and plausibility of my account. While I strenuously defended my material and analysis, the Melanesianist was making an important point. For Melanesianists, and presumably for Melanesian people themselves, social life is predicated on the anti-narcissus of exchange, and ethnography after ethnography demonstrates how, in that region, it is exchange that overcomes the self-regard of other people (cf. Wagner 1967; Munn 1986; Strathern 1988). There, gift exchange transforms egocentric emotions into sociocentric actions. Among Piro people, and more widely in Amazonia, where elaborated gift-form exchanges are absent, the person stands revealed fully as a person, and hence does indeed resemble one of the manifold psychic disorders treated by psychoanalysts.

The Melanesianist was right: it is indeed true that the grief of mourning plunges Piro people into a condition we might recognise as 'melancholy', at least in terms of the devastating honesty with which they habitually talk of it. But if we think about the notion of narcissism, and the myth of Narcissus, we gain a new insight into the Piro lived world. Unlike Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection, Piro people are in love with their multiple other selves. That is, Piro people are not 'extreme narcissists' because it is not their solitary reflections they love, but their multiplicity. Let me explain why.

I borrow the term 'multiple other selves' from Joanna Overing's elucidation of the Piaroa lived world.³ It provides an excellent fit with two aspects of the Piro lived world. First, there is the predication of 'humanity' and 'kinspeople' as intrinsically multiple. Second, there is the predication of one's own selfhood, one's own definition of one's humanity, as lying with other people, in 'the eye of the beholder': this is the Piro formulation of self in *nshinikanchi*, 'mind, love, memory, thought'. I take each in turn.

For Piro people, 'humanity' is intrinsically multiple. In Piro, the words *yine*, 'humans, people, Piro people', and *yineru/yinero*, 'male/female human', have an unusual characteristic. *Yine* is technically a plural of the noun root

yi- + *-ne*, 'pluraliser', but this noun root cannot take a singular form, for no word **yi* exists in Piro.⁴ Thus the singular forms of humans (by gender, *yineru* and *yinero*) are the singularisations of what is intrinsically plural. This formulation is very unusual in Piro, and is only shared with the names of the *neru*, 'endogamous groups', the units Piro people say their ancestors were divided into, and which exist today as surnames (cf. Gow 1991). All other 'ethnic' labels in Piro, such as *kajitu*, 'white man', *gashanigka*, 'Campa person', *chayiko*, 'Conibo person', etc., exist as singular forms that must be pluralised to attain multiplicity.⁵ The same is true of all other entities. Therefore, 'humanity' is multiple, and uniquely so.

Further, unlike the modern Western core idioms of kinship, which stress profound and originary ties between formally separate entities (such that, for example, two individuals can be consanguines); the Piro core idiom of kinship stresses the multiplication of identical entities. The Piro term *nomolene*, 'my kinspeople', has the root *mole-*, which means 'to be related to as a kinsperson', 'to heap up a bunch of like things' and 'ten'. It therefore refers to the grouping together of elements which are separately alike into a multiplicity of identical elements: 'kinspeople', 'things', 'numbers' (i.e. the digits of two hands). A kinsperson, *nomole*, 'my kinsperson', does not therefore refer to a special relationship between ego and alter; but to ego and alter's common membership in a set with multiple members. Within this set, any given person is related in specific mode to any given other (as 'son', 'father', 'brother' and so on), just as each element of a 'heap of like things' or the constituent integers of 'ten' stand in specific relations to each other. I stress that the metaphors I am using here are drawn from mathematics, not anthropological kinship theory.⁶

Nomolene and *yine* are two manners by which Piro people designate, in normal circumstances, the collectivity I here term 'Piro people'. In most circumstances, the two terms are interchangeable and coterminous: 'my kinspeople' are 'humans' and vice versa. There are, however, key moments when they become separated, such as in birth ritual, the making of affinity, in shamanry, etc. For example, in birth ritual, the umbilical cord must be cut by someone who is not a kinsperson to the parents. But since all Piro people are kinspeople to each other, the father must often redefine a 'distant kinsperson' as not *nomole*, 'my relative': the cord-cutter becomes thus a 'human' who is not a 'kinsperson'.⁷ Similarly, when people say of a normally non-human entity, such as a kind of deer or palm tree, that '*Yinerni*', 'It is human', there is no implication of kinship here, for this statement signals the speaker's entry into a specifically shamanic discourse where, as I discuss further below, different rules apply.

Getwanonuta, 'to compassionate', is grounded in this sense of the intrinsic multiplicity of 'humans' and 'kinspeople' when these coincide. When Piro people see the 'helplessness/aloneness' of another, their own sense of their humanity as intrinsically multiple leads them to intensify their regard for

that other person (cf. Alès, Jamieson, Kidd, Lagrou, Londoño-Sulkin, Rivière, this volume). The person who is 'helpless' is one of other Piro people's multiple selves and so must elicit their compassion. They solicit the regard of the one who *wamonuwata*, 'is helpless', and so insist on their own mutual co-presence.

From the start, from the moment that the people assembled at the birth have decided that it is human, the neonate is the object of other people's compassion. Usually, this compassion is expressed by the baby's parents, but it is not uncommon for another adult to do so. One woman told me, of her ninth child,

When she was born, she was so small! Just tiny! I looked at her and said, 'This one will not be able to live.' My father said, 'Oh, my daughter, how can this one survive? She's far too small!' But my oldest daughter said, 'I feel sorry for her, she is beautiful. Let's see if we can make her live.' So my daughter breastfed her, I had no milk then. My daughter fed her until my milk came. It is because of her older sister that my little daughter is alive now.

In another case, a married couple insisted that a newborn baby be given to them, on the basis that they had only one child, the mother had already had fourteen, and she had no husband. Their argument received general support in the village, but the mother refused, saying, 'No, I want to keep him. He is a beautiful little boy, I feel sorry for him.' Little Samuel stayed with his mother, and village opinion shifted to an amused tolerance of his mother's eccentricity.

Older babies are subjected to a ceaseless stream of attention, as they are called to across the village, joked with, and picked up and played with. A visiting baby, sitting on its mother's hip, will often be greeted before its mother, and when in the care of perhaps bored older siblings, will be easily relinquished into the solicitous arms of others. At the very least, a baby will be turned towards anyone soliciting its attention, and any fear on its part will call forth a warm but mildly disapproving cry of 'Waaaaa!', followed by laughter. This attitude towards babies is the elicitation of the baby's 'mind', in the sense of its regard for others. The stereotypic response to a friendly reaction from the baby is 'Ralukno!' or 'Talukno!', 'He/she loves me!'

Getwamonuta, 'to compassionate', leads the person to *giglenshinikanuta* the one who *wamonuwata*, 'is helpless'. *Giglenshinikanuta* means 'to mind well, to remember well, to love well, to console': it is a combination of *gigle-*, 'beautiful, good', and *nshinikanu-*, 'memory, love, thought, thinking about'. Therefore, the 'helplessness' of a singularised human leads the other 'to see suffering, to compassionate' and then 'to mind/think/love well, to console' the other. This consolation is not a special act, as it might be in Western cultures, but an intensification of the general sociability that characterises

Piro village life. Insofar as relations between villagers are by definition kin relations, and insofar as all kin relations originate in an adult's compassion for and consolation of a helpless baby, Piro village life is a sustained and generalised form of compassion and consolation. Its everyday form is the mutual recognition of fellow villagers' hunger and the consequent distribution of game. Here, hunger is the everyday equivalent of the more extreme state of 'helplessness': it is that little bit of suffering that all Piro people may experience any day (cf. Gow 1989, 1991).

The term *nshinikanchi* can be translated as 'memory, love, thought, thinking'. But it cannot be simply so translated, for it is not construed as a bodily interior state after the manner of these English words. *Nshinikanchi* is immediately perceptible in another person, such that Piro people do not need to speculate whether an alter 'remembers, loves, thinks about' them. This is because, as noted above, the supreme manifestation of *nshinikanchi* is co-residence. That is, two people manifest their *nshinikanchi* to each other by living together in the same village, and by sharing game with each other. Likewise, two people manifest their lack of *nshinikanchi* to each other by living apart in different villages, and by never sharing game with each other. Piro people who live apart are still kinspeople to each other, but they are very bad kinspeople to each other, as Piro people are always quick to point out (cf. Gow 1991 for how such relations are negotiated).

As might be imagined, this faculty of *nshinikanchi* is entirely relational, and indeed ego-centred. Those with whom one lives and to whom one is closely related have more *nshinikanchi* than others. This has the interesting effect that Piro people experience themselves as their own paragons of virtue in this regard. Indeed, Piro people consider themselves, as a whole, to be *kshinikanpotu*, 'with lots of *nshinikanchi*', and they array all other beings below them. Thus, they consider the neighbouring Campa people to have less *nshinikanchi*, while white people and animals are *mshinikatu*, 'thoughtless, forgetful, without *nshinikanchi*' (although pets, missionaries and anthropologists can, with time and careful handling, develop a certain degree of *nshinikanchi*).

However, although *nshinikanchi* is radically ego-centred, it is also radically alter-centred too. This is because it is only really possible to be *kshinikanu* with other people who are also *kshinikanu*. As I have discussed at length elsewhere, *nshinikanchi* develops in a child through the care it receives from others, and is manifest in its spontaneous use of kin terms to address those others. Similarly, *nshinikanchi* is maintained and manifest in the willingness to co-reside with other kinspeople, such that it is necessarily a feature of human multiplicity.

Because kinship ties, in the sense I use this term here, are modes of intersubjectivity, the *nshinikanchi* is fully intersubjective. Indeed, the *nshinikanchi* can be thought of as the intersubjective 'organ' of kinship. The *nshinikanchi* is both the organ of sociality/kinship and the surface of a person, or rather, that surface as it is constituted in the mutual visual experience of related persons.

I must stress that *nshinikanchi* is the bodily exterior of the person, but not the skin, *mtachri*. It is, rather, the availability of the other person to ego's everyday perceptual experience. A salient contrast here is with the bodily interior, which is the locus of the key transformational processes that generate *nshinikanchi*. The bodily interior is not available to casual inspection by others, and it can only enter the realm of the intersubjective when it is reported on by ego, when it is viewed in hallucinatory state by shamans, or when it is finally revealed long after death as the *gipnachri*, 'bone demon' (cf. below). *Nshinikanchi*, by contrast, is what you see, because in everyday village life, what you see is what you get.⁸ As my *comadre* Sara perceptively put it, referring to two foreign women, 'Fulana is a nice woman, every time you see her she is smiling. Mengaña is maybe not so nice. She only smiles when she sees you looking at her. Perhaps she is angry.' For good reason, and precisely to avoid such judgements, Piro people strive for and admire a placid easy-goingness in daily life.

There is another possible translation of *nshinikanchi*, 'respect'. Piro people are, and seek to be, 'respectful' of each other (cf. Kidd, Rivière, this volume). This is a generalised social value, but it is manifested in its particularities. That is, the nature of 'respect' depends entirely on the nature of the relationship between the two people involved, whether they stand to each other as father and son, brother and sister, mother-in-law and son-in-law, and so on. When Piro people say they are *kshinikanpotu*, 'very respectful', they refer to their careful mutual attention to the multiplicity of their kin relations. When they say that white people are *mshinikatu*, 'disrespectful', they refer to the shockingly disrespectful manner in which white people treat each other and everyone else. As they say, 'Go to the white man's house and see if he will feed you! That's where you will learn how to suffer!' White people either do not notice other people's hunger, or they do notice it and do not care.

Piro social life is the ongoing realisation of their multiplicity in a ceaseless round of attention towards others as kinspeople. This multiplicity leads to the supreme Piro value of *gwashata*, 'to live well'. Literally the term means 'to reside and do nothing else': it refers to the day-to-day tranquillity of village life, where no grievances, sadness or dissatisfaction leads a person to seek to move elsewhere. It is based on the orchestration of life-courses of different people of different ages and sexes, in the production of villages where life is good, and tranquil. 'Living well' is what we would have to define as kinship for Piro people.

Alone

My account here of *nshinikanchi* helps to explain the dynamics of 'helplessness', 'compassion' and 'consolation'. To 'be helpless' means to lie outside of the generalised mutual attention of 'living well'; to 'compassionate' means to see another who is in such a condition; and to 'console' is to intensify attention

toward the one who is helpless to bring them back into 'living well'. But if these are the dynamics of 'helplessness', 'compassion' and 'consolation' in Piro social life, what are the interior dynamics of 'helplessness'? What does it mean, for Piro people, to be alone?

If Piro people experience their condition as social humans as a manifestation of *nshinikanchi*, 'mind, memory, love, thought', then their experience of a non-social condition lies with the *samenchi*.⁹ I have translated this term previously as 'soul', following Piro people's own translation of the term into Ucayali Spanish as *alma*, but without wishing to imply any specific religious content to the term. Now I would prefer to translate it as 'self', in the sense of the radical experience of personal uniqueness. As I have been discussing, for Piro people, the self, this radical experience of personal uniqueness, is not the basis of social life, for that is based on *nshinikanchi*, 'mind, memory, love, thought', a faculty generated by others. It is, however, at the basis of much cosmological action in the Piro lived world, and in particular, of the experience of 'helplessness'.

The most common everyday experience of *samenchi* for Piro people is in dreaming (*gipnawata*). The self who experiences and acts in dreams is the *samenchi*. During sleep, a person's *samenchi* wanders around, experiencing things. What it sees is the future, but in a metaphorical sense. Piro people know a set of standard metaphors for translating dream experiences into predictions of the future, although not all dreams are easy to analyse. Dream-analysis is a collective act: people tell their dreams to others, and ask for interpretations. However, during dreaming, and in the later remembering of the dream for collective analysis, Piro people experience themselves as intimately unique. As one man put it, 'At night, it seems as if we wander around, doing all sorts of ridiculous things. It's not true! We're just there, lying in bed!' This raises an important point, for all perceptual experience of the *samenchi* is, from the point of view of the everyday waking state, delusional.¹⁰ The self sees the future in dreams, it is true, but it experiences the real future as a set of bizarre and improbable events, i.e. in delusional form, rather than as it will be. For example, a young man anxiously recounts that he has dreamt that his entire body was covered in caterpillars with poisonous spines, saying, 'It was revolting, and I was very frightened!' Making no comment on his expressed emotions, which were delusional and hence do not matter, his kinspeople speculate as to whether this means he will live a long time (the caterpillar's spines are grey like the hair of very old people) or whether all his children will be daughters (girls have long hair like the caterpillar). Opinions are expressed, but no consensus is sought. The young man calms down.

The *samenchi*, experienced in a dream state, has an origin and a future. Consideration of this trajectory of the *samenchi* will help to explain the nature of 'helplessness' as an experiential state. Piro people are born with *samenchi*, that is, with intimate personal uniqueness. Indeed, until the child develops

nshinikanchi ('mind, memory, love, thought'), all experience is of the *samenchi* (the 'self'). This accounts for the strange actions of infants: the infant's *samenchi* wanders after its parents when they go to the river or the forest, and hence falls easy prey to demons disguised as its parents, who lure it away. This is the illness known as 'soul loss' (cf. Lagrou, this volume). Similarly, infants make augury: for example, if an infant arches its back and raises its tongue onto the roof of its mouth, it is an augury of death, for this behaviour means, 'it sees its own coffin'. Like the dreaming adult, the infant sees the future, and communicates this future involuntarily as augury.¹¹ As the infant grows and develops *nshinikanchi*, the *samenchi* does not cease to perceive, but shifts locus. In a formulation that would surely please Lacanians, it is the development of language which shifts the *samenchi* out of its central place and into the world of dreams.

It is this full existence in the delusional world of *samenchi* experience which renders the infant *wamonuwata*, 'helpless' in the eyes of others. By eliciting its attention towards themselves, older Piro people lead the infant to generate *nshinikanchi*, and hence to attend to its kinspeople in the here and now, rather than to the future. Here, the dynamics of compassion render the infant as 'human' in the full sense described above, the combined 'human' and 'kinsperson'.

The relationship between *nshinikanchi* and *samenchi* is manifested most powerfully at death. At a person's death, the *samenchi* separates from the body. The latter rots down in the grave to the skeleton, which eventually reanimates and leaves the earth to prowl about as the very dangerous 'bone demon', in a process that necessarily takes quite a long time. By contrast, *samenchi* retains its agency immediately after the death. This is because it retains *nshinikanchi*. It continues to haunt the living, crying in loneliness for them, and evoking in them a lethal nostalgia. However, the *samenchi*, separated from the body, cannot generate the *nshinikanchi* of others, so must depend on its agency in the *nshinikanchi* of those who are already linked to it. It is only those who are already bound to the dead soul through *nshinikanchi* who can be objects of its actions. That is, only those who have known a dead person as a once-living person need fear the attentions of his or her *samenchi*. As each of those who have known a person during life die in turn, his or her soul ceases to act and is totally forgotten. As the SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) missionary Matteson put it, the *samenchi* 'lingers by the grave, living on papaya, suffering and crying when soaked by the rain, until it eventually passes out of existence' (1965: 337). This fate of the dead *samenchi* helps to underscore the meaning of *nshinikanchi* as embodied intersubjectivity. It is *nshinikanchi* which holds people together, and leads them to feed each other and to live together. The dead *samenchi* lives in the forest, eating non-human food, and suffers in the rain.

This account of the *samenchi* helps us to understand the peculiar nature of *wamonuwata*, 'being helpless', in the case of the mourning adult. From the

point of view of other people, the mourning adult is alone, abandoned by the dead person. But from the point of view of the mourning adult, he or she is not alone, for he or she is subjected to the constant sight of the dead person's *samenchi*, who calls to them, begging them to keep it company. Here it is the *samenchi* who 'is helpless', *wamonuwata*, and the mourning adults who 'are compassionate', *getwamonuta*, towards it. However, as I have discussed elsewhere (Gow 1991), such 'compassion' is delusional and lethal, for it leads to death.

Here, the 'compassion' of other living kinspeople, and their 'good thinking', leads them to intensify their solicitude for the mourning adults, searching them out, keeping them company, and insistently and steadily replacing the presence of the dead *samenchi* in the experience of the mourning adults with the presence of themselves. Eventually, the mourning adult 'forgets' the *samenchi*, which thereby ceases to act. Through other people's *giglenshinikanuta*, 'thinking well, consolation', the *nshinikanchi* of one who *wamonuwata*, 'is helpless', is brought back to the only place where it has meaningful social efficacy, the immediate world of living kinspeople.

Dead or dying

This pattern of consolation explains two features of Piro sociability that genuinely shocked me by their extreme differences from my own notions of humanity. The first is what I here term 'death-throe narratives', detailed accounts given to those who were absent from an event of death of exactly how that person died, and the second are jokes about dead people. The first appalled me with their horrific honesty, while the second appalled me by their callousness.

Returning in 1995 to the village of Santa Clara after an absence of seven years, I was told of the death of my *compadre* Artemio Fasabi during the epidemic of cholera. This news was bad enough, but I was not simply told that he was dead. His close relatives took me aside to tell me in excruciating detail exactly how he had died. These accounts numbed me, for dying is never pleasant, and death by cholera is particularly frightening. I had no idea of how to respond to them. The same happened with other people I had known well and who had died during my long absence, like Artemio's older sister Lucha and his brother-in-law Pablo. Even at the time, it was clear to me that the survivors wanted me to know the terrible details of these deaths, and even seemed to feel that I had some sort of right to know them. But I did not know why.

I have never been able to bring myself to discuss this matter with Piro people, but my sense now is that the death-throe narratives are, in themselves, a mode of 'consolation' directed at those who have returned after a long absence. Because such travellers have not actually witnessed the death, they might be tempted to disbelieve that it had really happened: Piro people do regularly lie about these matters to humorous effect. Were the returnee to

imagine that the death-throe narratives were lies, and that the death in question had not in fact occurred, they would be dangerously open to the imprecations of the dead person's soul. It is as if the death-throe narratives are saying, 'Believe us, the real living people, and not that dead person!' Because the *samenchi* of the dead person is still operative in the *nshinikanchi* of the person who has just discovered that the death has occurred, the death-throe narrative forces the listener to accept the reality of the death, and consequently the delusional nature of the wandering *samenchi*. As with all Piro personal experience narratives, it is the wealth of the detail provided that underwrites the credibility of the account. My experience was thus a simple effect of coming from a world where all people are said to 'die peacefully in their sleep'.

The second feature of Piro sociability which I found shocking is their remarkable gallows humour. Piro people will make jokes or comments about dead people which I found to be in extremely poor taste. For example, when I asked about a former resident of Santa Clara village with whom I had spent many happy times, I was told, 'Oh, she died! She went to Pucallpa, and starved to death. She'll be sitting in a hole there now!' The assembled people roared with laughter. It seems to me that the reason such stories are funny is that they demonstrate to Piro people that they have ceased to 'be helpless', that 'compassion' and 'consolation' have worked, and that the remembered dead, now that they are fully dead, are ludicrous. Collective laughter manifests that triumph, and the temporal distance travelled.

I hasten to add that this collective laughter is never fully triumphant, for Piro people will remain capable of sadness when they think about particularly close kinspeople throughout life. But such sadness is highly attenuated, as the person becomes capable of talking (and presumably thinking) of the dead kinspeople without the morose withdrawal that characterises *wamonuwata*. Overcome, the intense loneliness of 'helplessness' becomes a general attitude to the human condition, marked by the facticity of mortality.

I return to the Melanesianist's comment. Piro people probably are extreme narcissists, but of a very interesting kind. They are narcissistically attached to their own identities, but their version of Narcissus's reflection is their 'multiple other selves', their kinspeople. They know this to be true of themselves, for their core social value is *gwashata*, 'to live well, to live quietly': that is, to live in a good village in harmony with all one's close kinspeople. And they know this also to be true through their compassion for the helpless: they know that helplessness, and the compassion it elicits in others, are the affective preconditions of Piro social life.

Consolation ignored

There is, however, an exception: *kagonchi*, shamans. If asked why they underwent the rigorous training and continue to undergo the discomforts of their

practice, shamans give one stereotypical response. The shamanic career originates in the unbearable grief, experienced or simply feared, of losing a child to illness. The loss of a child provokes a particularly intense *wamonuwata* in many men, since men tend to live in the villages of their wives, and hence to depend on their children as a means to relate to their co-residents. The death of a child, and the subsequent state of *wamonuwata*, tends therefore to subvert the key value of 'living well' much more radically for a man than for a woman. Women also become shamans, but they do not, to my knowledge, engage in long shamanic apprenticeships. While this was never made explicit to me, I have the impression that women attain their access to shamanry through miscarried fetuses and children who died in infancy. A further condition of female shamanry is marriage to a male shaman, and the subsequent constant contact with the hallucinatory state and other shamanic activities.

Inconsolable over the loss of a beloved child, some men withdraw from social life, remaining inattentive to the solicitude of others. They fall quiet, talking little, 'thinking, loving, remembering' one who is now dead. The souls of young children are by no means as feared as those of adults, but they seem to stimulate an especially intense *wamonuwata*, perhaps due to the sense of the child's total helplessness in its condition of dead *samenchi*. Such men brood on their own inability to protect their children's lives, and fear that their other children will die too.

Contemplating his condition, the grief-stricken man conceives the project of becoming a shaman, and hence acquiring the knowledge and powers to defend his other children and other kinspeople. To do so, however, means forsaking a large part of the pleasures of life, for shamanry means avoiding sex as much as possible, not eating many things, and especially it involves the frequent consumption of hallucinogens. Apprentice shamans do not drink beer with their kinspeople, and avoid their company.

Shamanry involves a progressive increase in contact between the apprentice shaman and powerful beings. Increasingly, the shaman begins to live much of the time in a hallucinatory state of consciousness. There he acquires another 'social life': as the powerful beings begin to 'like' (*galuka*) him, and seek out his company. He becomes, so to speak, a double being, living 'here in the village' and simultaneously 'off there with powerful beings'.

This duplication is more than a metaphor for Piro people. A twin, a person who was born one of two, is an innate shaman.¹² Only one twin can survive, Piro people say. One woman (herself the mother of a twin and grandmother of another) told me, 'One of them just dies. If we struggle to keep both alive, then both of them will die.' The living twin is a shaman from birth, and already in a permanent state of dual consciousness: he or she can not only see the future, but is able to describe it to others.

The shamanry of twins is largely passive, but that of men who have trained as shamans is active. Because they have refused the 'good thinking' of their co-resident kinspeople, and hence refused to be consoled by them, they enter

another form of multiplicity, that of the multitudes of powerful beings met in hallucinatory state. In hallucinatory state, these powerful beings reveal themselves to the shaman as *yine*, 'humans', and in turn they treat the shaman as *yineru*, 'a human'. The shaman therefore becomes one of the elements in the multiplicity of given powerful beings/sets of powerful beings. This multiplication of the shaman was vividly expressed to me as follows, by Don Mauricio Fasabi, 'A man who takes drugs no longer sleeps. The things you have learned don't let you sleep. The things you know are walking around and around, they won't let you get to sleep any more.' For non-shamans, insomnia is caused by hunger, and leads to unhealthy broodings on close kinspeople who are far away or dead. Shamans, by contrast, experience the insomnia generated by the multiplication of their being through their acquired knowledge.

The doubling of the shaman makes him a member of otherwise diverse sets of human multiplicity, and sets up the dynamic connectivities that characterize shamanic action. In shamanry, the everyday form of the village full of co-resident kinspeople gives way: to visions of non-humans as 'human', *yine*; to the non-human spaces of the river and forest as the houses and villages of the powerful beings; to the 'here and now' as past, present and future; and to sick kinspeople as the wounded prey animals of powerful beings and other shamans. And, it should be added, in the seldom-voiced but ever-present language of sorcery, visions emerge of 'kinspeople' in other villages as potential prey animals of oneself.

In shamanry, the cosmos is revealed to be governed by the same actions which make up everyday life. But there is one key difference: the cosmos is not governed by the cycling of 'helplessness', 'compassion' and 'consolation' which make up everyday sociability. There is no suggestion in shamanry that shamans are 'compassionated' in their 'helplessness' by the powerful beings, nor that they are helped because the powerful beings seek to 'console' them. How indeed could the powerful beings 'compassionate' the shaman? For the former are immortal, and, knowing nothing of death, do and could not share the initial condition which drives a man to become a shaman.

The justification of shamanry, in relations with other people, is, however, 'compassion': shamans cure because they 'compassionate' their patients. They are, of course, also paid, but their primary motivation is 'compassion', the 'seeing of the helplessness' of others. This was a point all shamans I spoke to stressed, and some went as far as to insist that they prefer not to be paid. This is a tricky issue, for all non-shamans know that shamans lead a double life, and hence cannot necessarily be trusted. After all, it is widely known that sorcery is much easier to learn than curing, and it is by no means certain that shamans tell the truth when they say that they, personally, would never use it. This is why Piro people say, with a slightly resigned tone, 'There have to be shamans, those who know these things'.

The necessity of shamans in the Piro lived world brings us to the issue I raised at the beginning: the Piro conception of the human condition, and of the place of humanity in the cosmos. Piro humanity, as I have said, is intrinsically multiple, and relations between people are governed by *nshinikanchi*, 'mind, love, respect, thought, memory'. *Nshinikanchi* is a temporal phenomenon, developing in the growing child as it responds to others, and surviving the death of the person in the memories of others. The temporality of social life is a product of a key fact of the human condition: mortality. Social life is only possible because people are born and die, for it is generated in the relations people develop as a consequence of those experiences. The newborn baby and the mourning adult are in 'helplessness', other people 'compassionate' and 'console' them, and so make the Piro social world. Surrounding them is a cosmos based on very different principles, ever ready to impinge on their lives, and whose existential implications are constantly glimpsed in dreams, in helplessness and in hallucinations.

A plateau of consolation

When I was living in Santa Clara, the sound of shamans singing the drug songs would make the hairs stand up on my arms. Out of the pitch darkness, and from a cacophony of retching, vomiting and spitting, would come the thin sound of the whistled melody of a drug song. The shaman was now hallucinating very strongly, and he was beginning the process of taming the drug spirit people through the entrancing artistry of his voice. Then the shaman would start to sing the strange words of these songs, coming from languages nobody here speaks. This man was now fully alone, far out there in that separate reality. Using all of his courage and all of his accumulated knowledge, the shaman was now singing powerfully, as he sought to beguile the torrent of imagery cascading over him into yielding up the secret he needed to know in order to cure this sick person. Out of their compassion for him, other people would join in, wordlessly accompanying the shaman's song in an unfamiliar counterpoint, or they would sing their own songs, thereby generating spectacular harmonic convergences which chased each other through the night air. And when I had taken the drug too, this unearthly concert would reveal itself to be an extraordinary opera, played out by multitudes of uncanny creatures on an enormous stage of vast complexity. I would be completely overwhelmed.

Daily life in Santa Clara, by contrast, was often very boring. Nothing much seemed to happen beyond the to-and-fro of people gardening, fishing, visiting, sending food, getting firewood, cooking, bathing, gossiping and so on. It was all perfectly pleasant, but I often longed for something, just anything, to happen. I would grow restless and peevish, irritated by every host's polite response to every visitor's enquiry about their current activities, 'I'm doing

nothing'. How very true, I would comment bitterly to myself, and I would wonder at why local people seemed to be content with doing so little when they had the proven capability to do so much. And these feelings were compounded by my sense of their total unworthiness, and that it was I who was at fault, and not they. A constant consolation to me in these moments was the memory of those two chapter titles from Peter Rivière's study of the Trio (1969), 'Life's dull round I' and 'Life's dull round II'. Well then, I thought, so it's not just me.

This sense of the assailing boredom of life in indigenous Amazonian communities is not restricted to Rivière and myself, for it has been noticed by others, even if they are seldom willing to comment on it to a wider public. Cecilia McCallum remarked, on a visit to Santa Clara, 'Gosh, these people keep themselves busy! They're always doing things. Cashinahua people just sit about all day doing nothing!' I was bemused, but later discovered that Cashinahua people are capable of having even less happen in their villages than Piro people. Other Europeans have commented to me on the extreme tedium that they have felt in Campa villages and in Yaminahua villages, so the pattern seems quite general. A whole eternity seems to have passed, but it is still only eleven o'clock in the morning.

This boredom is not really an ethnographic fact about indigenous Amazonian peoples, since in each case the informant is European. This boredom doubtless tells us much about a specific middle-class European aesthetic of social life, in which 'doing nothing' is strongly frowned upon (cf. *Passes*, this volume). Even if it is one's current state, European convention demands that it be carefully masked, at the very minimum, by the claim to be 'just watching television'. That said, however, ethnographers must proceed in their work by attending to the mismatch between their own prejudices and expectations and those of the people they are studying, so perhaps it is possible to translate this experience of 'boredom' into an ethnographic insight. What does it mean that Piro people openly assert that they are 'doing nothing'?

In part, the statement, 'I'm doing nothing' is an invitation to interact: the hosts are assuring the visitors that there is nothing already happening to distract their full attention from the manifold pleasures of this new activity, 'being visited'. But more than this, we have seen that this is an aesthetic of life that asserts that company is, in and of itself, desirable. People should be 'doing nothing' when visitors come, for nothing is more important than everyday sociability. Of course, visits can be untimely and visitors unwelcome. Piro people like to have a good view from their houses, in order to see visitors early enough to hide any object or activity that they would not want those visitors to see, and it is also common practice to avoid unwelcome visitors by hiding inside the walled-off section of the house. But in general, Piro people spend large amounts of their time sitting openly in their houses, 'doing nothing', and ready for interaction with anyone who approaches. And when they are not doing this, they are often off visiting others in turn.

The key to 'doing nothing' lies in its possible alternatives. In my early months in Santa Clara, I would confuse my own visitors by trying to specify what I was up to when they asked me. I slowly learned that 'I'm reading this book', 'I'm thinking about my family', or 'I'm trying to decide when to go to Lima', were not acceptable Piro responses. Such answers confused and worried them. Some of my responses were presumably simply too bizarre for them to hear, but some lay dangerously close to genuine and alarming Piro responses to the question, 'What are you doing?' Such answers can be: 'I'm lying here sick', 'I am dying', or the sullen silence that leaves the visitor wondering what exactly might be wrong. Such answers cause fear and consternation. The alternative to 'doing nothing', I thus discovered, is 'suffering'.

So, the something that does not happen in these villages is 'helplessness', suffering. The flatness of everyday life turns out to be fully intentional, it is an achievement. It is won from a cosmos that is governed by other kinds of reason, and which invades Piro people's lives with dramatic events of emotional extremity. In the face of such events, Piro people know themselves to be helpless, for they know themselves to be virtually powerless to change the given structure of a cosmos which was not created for their benefit and which is totally indifferent to their fate. Knowing this, Piro people know they must help each other. Piro people know that they have been and will be helpless. They see the helplessness of others, and this compassion leads them to heighten their social regard for them, in specific acts of consolation. In everyday life, when things are going well, this 'thinking beautifully' transforms into the sustained plateau of kindness and companionship that Piro people call 'living well'.

'Living well' is the key value of an aesthetic of social life in which mastery lies with making sure that nothing ever happens for, like every plateau, this one is surrounded on all sides by sharp descents into very different regions. I used to find it boring, and to long for the nights of shamanry, when the exotic show would be performed. In retrospect, I was in blissful ignorance. I knew that the nocturnal operas of the shamans were directed at curing illness, to be sure, but I had not realised then how these spectacles originated within the terrors of suffering, nor how these songs, which could take me to those places of such otherworldly beauty, were a courageous transformation of the singer's former state of silent pain.

Acknowledgements

My fieldwork on the Bajo Urubamba between 1980 and 1999 was funded by the Social Science Research Council, the British Museum, the Nuffield Foundation and the British Academy. This chapter was written, at the invitation of Anne-Christine Taylor for the session on 'Mind, Affect, and the Image of the Self' at the International Congress of Americanists, in Quito in July 1997, and I thank her, Joanna Overing and all of my peers in the British

school of Amazonianists for their perceptive comments and questions, and Alan Passes for his excellent editing. Comments from Christina Toren, Heonik Kwon, Edward Schiefflin and Olivia Harris seeded some key ideas, and a conversation with Claire Jenkins allowed me to think its conclusion. I owe a very special debt to Aparecida Vilaça, who first helped me to talk about Piro death-throe narratives.

Notes

- 1 There are excellent accounts of grief and mourning from Basso on the Kalapalo (1985, 1995) and from Taylor on the Achuar (1993, 1996).
- 2 Isabella Lepri informs me (personal communication) that there is also a Piro community in northern Bolivia.
- 3 See Overing (1996).
- 4 This is likely to be a relatively recent development in Piro from a proto-Maipuran form which was not intrinsically plural. Piro *yine* is cognate with Campa *-shani-*, Amuesha *yanasha* and Terena *shane* (see Payne 1991).
- 5 There are two exceptions: the Panoan-speaking Amahuaca people are *gipetuneru*, 'Capibara People', while the Machiguenga people are *kiruneru*, 'Peach Palm People'. They are thus treated as if they were Piro endogamous groups, and the Amahuaca and Machiguenga peoples have long occupied a rather special place in Piro regard in more ways than this.
- 6 See Gow (1997) for discussion of this theme (also Mimica 1992 and Urton 1997).
- 7 See note 3.
- 8 Piro people seem much less animated by a concern for other people's ultimately unknowable intentions than Melanesian people (Wagner 1967; Munn 1986; Strathern 1988).
- 9 *Samenchi* is the Absolute form of the root *-samenu*. As with the Campa cognate *samentsi*, this Piro Absolute form can strictly speaking only refer to a dead 'samENCHI'. Here, I use it quite ungrammatically for both living (attached) and dead (detached) souls.
- 10 The only dreams defined as 'true' by Piro people, those taken as actual experiences of lived reality, are those mediated by hallucinogens, particularly *toé/gayapa*.
- 11 Body parts, like the upper arm, can also make augury quite independent of personal will. Many other objects in the world are attributed the same power.
- 12 This is literally true: the Piro word for 'innate' also means 'twin'.

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