



The Intersubjective Life of Cassava among the Waiwai

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SUMMARY *Most accounts of cassava cultivation in Amazonia interpret the indigenous assertion that “plants are persons” at a purely symbolic or metaphoric level. On the basis of my fieldwork with the Waiwai of Southern Guyana, this article offers an alternative interpretation, namely that Waiwai womanhood and cassava can be seen as fractal images and divergent embodied forms of a common intersubjective being, one that is holistically represented in the mythic figure of Cassava Mother. In this interpretive stance, it is argued that womanhood and cassava acquire their meaningful specificity within Waiwai sociality through their aligned capacities, affects, and perspectives, as much as through their differences in scale and form. This foregrounding of modes of alignment and fractal similitude provides an analytic space for considering the embodiment of intersubjectivity across the ontological divide we frequently insist on between “human” and “nonhuman” realms. Waiwai mythic narrative and agricultural practice suggest that, while differences in scale and form are significant, they are often eclipsed by an emphasis on aligned capacities and affective stances that are self-similar across scales and forms. [Waiwai, cassava, womanhood, intersubjectivity, fractal]*

The Gardenscape and Cassava Mother

Late one morning, the sun already getting high, my Waiwai mother Laurita and I were working a section of the cassava garden. It was the older of her two active gardens, now thick with underbrush. I was covered in sweat, my machete occasionally getting tangled in vines as I cleared enough space to cut several cassava stalks and then, using all of my weight, wrestled the enormous, starchy tubers from the ground and tossed them next to my *warichi* basket. Laurita was sweaty too, but as always, worked steadily and quietly, neatly extracting her tubers from the ground. We packed our baskets full and tightly fastened the thin ropes that held the tubers in place. She reminded me that our work was not yet done. We needed to replant some cuttings from the long cassava stalks we had tossed aside in pursuit of their fleshy tubers. If we neglected to cut portions of the stalks and replant them in the ground, we would suffer with pains in our arms, possibly even fever, or worse. It was irrelevant that this garden site would soon be left fallow and reclaimed by the forest. And so we tiredly picked up our machetes and chopped several of the stalks into three-foot sections, then pushed them into mounds of loose earth at a side angle. Only after this final step was completed did we help each other onto our feet with the heavy baskets—

the thick, fibrous bark straps pulled taught across our foreheads. We walked back to the river's edge where the canoe was moored on a large rock and eased into the unsteady boat with our baskets. After paddling back to the village and taking a brief reprieve in the river, we made our way to the kitchen. But again, before embarking on the seemingly endless task of scraping and grating the tubers, it was imperative that we neatly extract the tubers from the baskets and stack them. To neglect to do so would invite difficult and painful childbirths.

As I often did while scraping tubers with the women, I placed my tape recorder on the ground and asked Laurita if she would tell a story. Following is the narrative she recounted that afternoon of "Cassava Mother."¹

There was a lady, and her daughter, and her son-in-law. They lived together, in one house. Yes, a long time ago. And one day now, the old lady sees her son-in-law leave to go hunting. Now, whenever he leaves, the lady starts to . . . to sit down. She sits down, and she messes or shits. When she shits the cassava, they come out just like this [Laurita points to the long tubular shaped sections of hard cassava flour in the canoe-shaped basin in the corner]. Yes, it was coming from her bottom. Then she and her daughter began to work on the cassava bread, and the starch, and they made drink out of it. By the time her son-in-law returned from hunting, the cassava bread and drink were already prepared.

Yes, that is how they lived. They were always doing that, every time he went out, the mother-in-law would make the cassava like this. It was secret. But one day, something started to bother her son-in-law. He wanted to know where they were getting the cassava bread from. So he decided to hide in a little bush, as though he was gone. He told his mother-in-law and his wife, "I goin' again." "Alright," they said. The mother-in-law got her basin, and she shit again. But this time, her son-in-law was watching from inside the bushes. He saw everything she did, and this made the man get worried. He was very worried. He never knew his mother-in-law was like that, and that she was getting the cassava bread from her . . . you know . . . her bottom.

So that time now, when he came home and they had cassava bread ready for him, he asked his wife, "Why is your mother like that? I never knew you all used to do that, you know." Then the daughter got worried and she called her mother. "Mommy, you know what? My husband now knows everything about your secret, Mommy. He says he is dirty from you, because you are passing the cassava from you bottom."

Then the old lady says, "I was sorry for you all. I was always helping you all, but I see that he has caught me now. Alright. Tell he to go cut a little farm, and when it is dry, to burn it. Then I will have to die," she tells them. "And you all must bury me in the middle of the farm," she says. So the man did as he was told and when he finished cutting and burning the farm, suddenly, the woman died.

After she died, they buried her according to what she told them. They dug a hole and they buried her in the middle of the little farm. And after several days, the cassava started to grow up. Yes, the cassava started to grow. And it's from there that they started to get cassava. Now they had cassava sticks. So every year now they have to cut a new farm, and plant cassava sticks, and now they have to work hard. Grating, scraping. So now when you are pulling out the cassava root, and the cassava stick, you have to plant it back. If you just leave it so, then the cassava will beat you up, it will beat you, and some days you will suffer with pain in your arms.

That is what my mother always tells me. That is why whenever we pull cassava, we always plant it back and get a second crop. That is why I am always frightened. Whenever I pull out cassava, I always plant it back. Yes, but my sister now, I saw that yesterday on the farm where we went with her, she didn't plant it back. And whenever I see her now, she will be suffering with pain; you will see. You get some ladies who does complain. Cassava does beat them, they say. Punishment from cassava sticks. And we believe this thing is a person. Yes, that is what we say. A person.

Toward an Alternative Analytic

I have thought a great deal about what to make of this story. It sheds light on many topics, from issues of trust in the mother-in-law–son-in-law relation to ideas about death and transformation to the relation between techniques of cassava production and human bodily techniques of consumption, digestion, and excretion.

Here, I suggest we can further our interpretive understanding of the complex social life of cassava through recourse to a notion of intersubjectivity. For Waiwai women with whom I have worked in their gardens, such seemingly mundane activities and gestures as harvesting cassava tubers and replanting cuttings from the cassava stalks entail a mindful and deeply embodied alignment with the subjective being or “perspective” of the plants with which they are interacting. The tending of gardens marks a close engagement with social beings that have points of view, highly charged affects, memories, and various forms of agency. I would venture to suggest that gardening could be described as an intersubjective moment or space, wherein women handle plant matter that is an alternative form and scale of their own bodily capacities, specifically, the capacities to generate and nourish new life. In other words, I think it would be inaccurate to interpret the relation frequently alluded to by the Waiwai between human women (defined here as persons with the socially acknowledged capacity for pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood), and the postmythic, vegetative form of Cassava Mother (as embodied in cassava plants) as merely a symbolic relation based on perceived similarities or parallels. It is a relation of identity.

In my understanding, Cassava Mother is neither fully separate from nor fully embodied by the women who tend cassava gardens. She might be described as fractal person (Wagner 1991), manifesting at the different scales of cassava and the women who cultivate it—thereby influencing the bodily orientation of both.² Cassava Mother manifests as tubers hidden beneath the ground’s surface, as pain in the bodies of neglectful women, and as the embodied *tino* (knowledge–memory) of how to avoid such pain. She is the register of abandonment on the part of the cassava stick that is callously discarded, the register of pain that surges up a woman’s arms, and also the memory that traces back to the moment when the cuttings were discarded. Interestingly, in women’s descriptions of “Cassava Mother pains,” they are not inflicted from an external source or separate agent. Cassava cuttings themselves do not inflict physical harm onto women’s bodies, nor is this a case of a “spirit guardian” of the plants exercising a form of mystical violence. Rather, and significantly, it is as though the pains are triggered from within. In this sense, it might be said that the name and the figure of Cassava Mother refers to an aspect of both human womanhood and cassava plants, one that enables for an intersubjective alignment between them.

The notion that plants have personhood, agency, kinship, even memory, is certainly not new to Amazonian anthropology. Viveiros de Castro’s theory of perspectivism (1998) has been instrumental in providing an interpretive language that encapsulates this distinguishing feature of Amerindian philosophies. Yet in this theory’s privileging of alterity as the necessary precondition of

all physical and metaphysical exchange, it relies on (in fact insists on) the presence of rigid ontological boundaries between kinds of beings or persons. Although I am not attempting to challenge the conceptual relation between alterity and exchange, an overemphasis on ontological differences between components of Amerindian lived world (e.g., proper or “real” persons, animals, plants) can have the unintended effect of obfuscating our ability to analyze those instances in which these components bring each other into being through their intersubjective alignment as well as their difference (or oppositions) in form and scale. The relation of identity between Waiwai women, cassava plants, and even the woven implements involved in transporting and processing cassava such as the basket, sifter, and strainer, can be taken as a case in point.

Women and the sociophysical capacities most intimately associated with womanhood are largely enacted through their embodied, perspectival alignment with cassava in its various forms. To embody the capacities of motherhood is at one and the same time to embody the capacities for cultivating and processing cassava. Perhaps largely because of how cassava plants are understood to have originated from the remains of a woman’s body, cassava is considered an embodiment of womanhood. Likewise, womanhood can be seen as an embodiment of cassava. One small illustration of this notion of mutual embodiment and aligned subjectivity can be found in the direct association between cassava starch and breast milk. The consumption of cassava starch is understood to produce rich and filling breast milk and having the capacity to produce breast milk is an integral part of one’s body’s capacity for cultivating cassava and generally embodying Cassava Mother in human scale and form. To fail in the arts of cassava cultivation (e.g., to simply drop one’s warichi without emptying and stacking the tubers) is to ensure failure, or at least great difficulty, in the arts of reproductive womanhood. Likewise, cassava cannot be conceptualized or experienced apart from the women who create and transform it on a daily basis. To be cassava is to be in sustained and intimate intercommunication with the women who plant and tend the gardens.³ In short, women and cassava not only make each other, but to an extent, can be seen as alternate images of each other. Although it may be tempting to interpret this alignment as symbolic or as the outcome of an “exchange” across ontologically distinct realms, I suggest interpreting it as the recognition of an alignment between embodied capacities and points of view that is both facilitated by and gives way to an “inter” subjective condition.

In general, Amazonian anthropology has tended to depict the social life of plants as less important and less complex than the social life of animals—with discussions on animals focusing disproportionately on a few “key species” such as the jaguar, peccary, and anaconda. In some anthropological genres, the social life of plants continues to be reduced to a matter of “symbolic representation,” wherein Amerindian accounts of plants as persons are taken to be metaphorical (Rival 2001). Or—harkening back to animistic theories of the relation between “nature” and “culture”—such accounts are explained as merely the projection of social concepts and attributes onto the natural world to render the latter more ordered and understandable (cf. Descola 1992). Perhaps most common of all is the inadvertent suggestion that direct interrelations between humans and plants are unique to the specialized—and often masculine—realm of shamanism.

Here, I suggest “everyday intersubjectivity” as a potential means of departure from such genres, while at the same time fully noting the limitations of the term, deriving as they only could from a prior, and thoroughly Euro-American, notion of the individual subject. (I return to this point in the conclusion.) My principal interest here lies with the everyday flows or movements of a shared affect and perspective through and between what Euro-Americans would likely perceive as distinctive, self-contained forms, specifically in and around the gardenscape. These forms include women’s hands and arms, their wombs and breasts, cassava stalks and starchy tubers concealed in the earth, the warichi basket that holds harvested tubers, the canoe that transports humans and cassava between garden and village.⁴ In this alternative way of framing things, the focus is not on what makes women’s bodies ontologically distinct from cassava tubers and sticks, or whether and how both are ontologically distinct from the woven implements used to process cassava. It may well be that this analytic approach—where women are depicted as harvesting plant material and then using certain manufactured objects or implements to transform that plant material into foods for human consumption—strikes us as rational and clear largely because it maintains the rigidity of our distinction between human and nonhuman realms. And although perspectivism has certainly been effective at translating a major aspect of indigenous worldviews into our dichotomous terms in its attribution of perspective–subjectivity to the nonhuman realms, I am not certain this approach is the most effective at relaying what I believe to be a central underlying message within Waiwai mythic narrative and everyday practice: namely, that these multiple forms (women’s bodies, cassava tubers and sticks, implements involved in transforming cassava into food) are, on a certain level, seen by Waiwai as ontologically the same as women in terms of many of their most significant capacities, affects, and perspectives. This is very different from saying that the Waiwai understand cassava to see itself as human while they (*ewtoto*, Waiwai; lit. “proper/real people”) see cassava as nonhuman plant matter and only see themselves as human. It is true that Waiwai speak of ontological differences that give way to distinct perspectives (and like other Amazonian peoples, understand that it is possible to become skillful in “shifting” between these perspectives, as in shamanic journeying). Yet, at the same time, there are also everyday or mundane instances in which alignment and similarity are stressed over and above differentiation, and it seems worth noting that women’s cassava gardening is a prime instance. Women’s engagement with plant cultigens entails a form of alignment or “shared perspective” that exists without “ontological transformation” being required (at least not beyond the mythic transformation that first gave way to cassava gardening).

Cassava Variation and the Dynamics of In-Corporation

Having suggested the possibility of cassava gardening as an intersubjective way of being, where what we refer to as subjectivity manifests at different reproductive scales that give way to the substantive presence of womanhood and cassava alike, I now consider how cassava, in the specific form of cassava cuttings or sticks, facilitates the intersubjective and affective dimensions of

women's relations with each other. Here, I will draw from my research on how women incorporate cassava sticks from each other's gardens into their own.

As a part of my fieldwork in Erefoimo in 2005, I documented the different *po* (varieties) of cassava that were under cultivation at 13 different household gardens.⁵ I recorded a total of 62 varieties, some with Waiwai and some with Wapishana names. There was an average of 11.4 varieties per garden, with the lowest figure at four and the highest at 25. In addition to the high levels of variation from one garden to the next, I also found that there was very little continuity in the varieties that women cultivated from one planting season to the next. In numerous instances, I would record the presence of a variety at one woman's garden only to discover that the woman who provided her the cuttings for that variety was no longer cultivating it at her own garden. For example, Annie listed 14 different varieties on her garden, nine of which she said were from cuttings given to her in the prior planting season by her mother, Doris. Out of those nine varieties, Doris had only continued to cultivate one of them at her garden, along with others she had received from other women. Such patterns revealed that the vast majority of cassava varieties under cultivation are not transplanted by women from their former gardens but, rather, incorporated from the gardens of others.⁶

This rapid turnover suggests little emphasis on retaining particular varieties or combinations of varieties over time. Quite conversely, there is great emphasis on obtaining new varieties and combinations. The annual clearing and planting of new gardens presents the greatest opportunity for doing so, but new varieties may be incorporated into existing gardens at any stage. Although certain popular varieties such as *cay cur po* are found on virtually all gardens and for this reason are transplanted directly from old to new gardens fairly often, the real art of gardening hinges not on the sustained replication of the same varieties over time but, rather, the incorporation of new and unfamiliar varieties through sustained contact with a broad network of other women, both from the same community and from afar. Here, I hasten to argue that cassava cuttings do not merely "represent" women's positive social relations with other women, nor should they be thought of as discrete objects mediating (or graphically objectifying) the relations between women as discrete subjects. According to the interpretive framework I suggest here, cassava cuttings can be seen as so many different scales and substantive forms of womanhood. In so far as the cassava that a woman plants and cares for in her household garden can be seen as a fractal version of herself (also more holistically embodied by Cassava Mother), the circulation of cassava cuttings might be seen as the flow and incorporation of a common subjective stance or position into the lived experience of all its "givers" and "recipients."

The flow of cassava cuttings between gardens is most pronounced at the start of the planting season, after new garden sites have been cleared and burned. On the freshly cleared grounds, basket after basket of cuttings is brought to the site by members of various households until they accumulate in large piles. Even at this scale, however, cuttings are not anonymous "bulk material" for making a garden. The woman will be well aware of which varieties are being brought to her household's future garden site, and by whom, and will have carefully considered where she would like each variety to be planted. In the weeks

leading up to the event, she and her husband most likely will have discussed and envisioned the new garden at length, delicately but tactfully utilizing their relations with neighbors and still more distant contacts in the interest of achieving a high level of cassava variation on their garden, always with new or favorite varieties in mind. Among other things, the desire for numerous varieties of cassava extends from the way that such multiplicity at the gardenscape embodies its caretaker's relations with other women (the more distant the source of a variety, the more expansive her social world), and partly because most of the common foods and drinks made from cassava are ideally composed of a blend of multiple varieties. Husbands often bring back hitherto unknown varieties to their wives from distant villages they may visit for other explicit purposes such as trade. Women commonly discuss the varieties of cassava in their gardens, the others they would like to have, and the fine-detail qualities they use to identify them. In these ways, varieties acquire a certain social biography, often spanning back several generations and/or into communities hundreds of miles away.

On one level, all of this may seem to suggest an emphasis on differentiation, yet it is revealing to note that the way the Waiwai categorize and name their cassava varieties is essentially the same as (and sometimes directly coincides with) the categorization and naming of kinds of human persons. Just as a human person's identification with a particular category is not necessarily permanent or based on inherent traits but, instead, highly susceptible to change depending on social and environmental factors such as place of residence, kinship ties, life history, way of life, and, of course, the perspectives of others, so too is a cassava plant's identification with a particular *po* subject to change in ways that can foreground similarities over and above differences with others. Just as in human kinship relations (as examined in the long debates concerning how we interpret the dynamics of consanguinity and affinity in Amazonia), this is simply a matter of where emphasis is placed—that is, on similar capacities or the capacity for similarity or the differences that help to make these similarities so significant. Although arguably “two sides of the same coin” (see G. Mentore this issue; Santos-Granero this issue), the question of what our informants foreground in various contexts (e.g., cassava cultivation, shamanism, kinship) can and should have major consequences for our analyses.

Some varieties of cassava are named after kinds of persons or specific individuals from whom they were obtained. For example, there is *Atoroway-po*, named for the Atoroway peoples in Brazil; *Kariwa-po* named for the Kariwa peoples in Brazil; *Jan-ip* named for Janet Yaimo, a middle-age woman from Masakenyari village. In her dissertation, Catherine Howard (2001) mentions a variety named *kayana-po*, which her informants in the Brazilian village of Kaxmi told her they received from extended kin across the border in Guyana. Although names mark differences at the most basic level of *po*, what I refer to as “varieties,” the overarching message presented in Waiwai agricultural and social techniques for the transformation of cassava plants into foods safe for human consumption is a message of blending, mixing, and incorporation in order to produce a form that contains no traces of a prior differentiation. This is most directly evidenced in the use of cassava flour from multiple varieties to make cassava bread and other cassava-based foods and drinks. It is also evidenced in women's ways of speaking about the social life of cassava plants on

their farms as essentially the same as life in their own village communities—as a continual process of obfuscating differences in the interest of achieving the more moral or “good life” marked by perspectival and subjective alignment. Like humans, cassava plants are understood to strive for intersubjective being through the moral force of “coresidence” at the garden site.

Cassava cuttings also can be said to instantiate intersubjective flows on a spiritual or metaphysical level. Each variety possesses a distinctive *šere ekatī* (cassava spirit-vitality). In my understanding, the distinctiveness of a cassava cuttings’ *šere ekatī* results from the memories, affects, and dispositions it acquires as a result of intimate contact with its human caretakers, and the plants with which it coresided at former garden sites. Women refer to their gardens as the *ewto* (village communities) of the plants, and to a large extent the bountifulness of a garden is understood in terms of the success of the plants at entering into positive sociable relations with each other—much as successful human communities are understood in terms of safely placating the differences between persons who were once considered to be distinctive in “kind.” And again, such placation entails work of a spiritual as well as embodied nature (see Overing and Passes 1998).

Given all of this, perhaps it is not surprising that in 2010, when Laurita and her husband Ekufa came to visit me in a Makushi village far north of Erefoimo (and in the very different landscape of the savannas), Laurita wasted little time in tactfully discerning which women were the most avid gardeners, and requested to help them with their cassava work. In return for this, she was invited to their gardens—whereon she marveled at the varieties she had never seen before and took equal delight in recognizing several others that were familiar. At the end of their stay, Laurita chose to leave behind many of the clothes and other items people had given her, filling her bag instead with bundles of cassava cuttings from six varieties, each with distinctive and unfamiliar (and therefore very potent) *šere ekatī*. She left eager to introduce these varieties to her new garden and, eventually, to other women in her community and beyond. These new varieties would mark an expansion of her subjective experience of the world while at the same time expanding and thereby vitalizing the pool of cassava flesh and spirit from which she and others can generate cassava foods and drinks in their most ideal (seamlessly blended) forms.

Conclusions

It could be argued that intersubjectivity is essentially a conceptual tool for the Western imagination, only tenuously capable of helping it to go beyond the barriers of its preconceived ideas about radically individuated, self-contained forms of the subject and subjective. Perhaps it is only in the context of our historical production of the subject that intersubjectivity can really register as an “alternative” or “non-Euro-American” way of being. Conversely, it could be argued that what we imagine as intersubjective being is simply our closest approximate to the everyday order of things (or at least the ideal order of things) in Waiwai communities—where there is constant emphasis on breaking down the borders and boundaries whose presence is always looming, if in nothing else than in the body’s seemingly self-containing surface. Amerindian

ways of engaging plants such as cassava can have far more to offer than a critique of the weary Western idea of “human society divided from nature” if we take seriously the plants’ potential to be seen as fractal images and alternative forms of human beings themselves, with inextricable ties to their intersubjective experience of being in the world.⁷ And so it is with full recognition of the likelihood that the “inter” in intersubjectivity is essentially a grammatical trace of the constraints of our own history of the subject and its body, mind and soul, that I have ventured to suggest it may nonetheless help us to further think through a world where plants are persons, and such persons not only resemble or “stand for” human persons but also actually share in common many of their most potent capacities, affects, and points of view.

Notes

1. Fock (1969) provides brief mention of a slightly different version of this story, in embedded in the creation myth centered around the male culture hero Mawari.

2. For further developed studies of Waiwai sociality and lived environment as fractal, see George Mentore (2006, 2008) and Laura Mentore (2011); see also Robin Wright (this issue).

3. Both Waiwai and Makushi women stress the importance of talking to their cassava plants while planting and tending them. The plants are encouraged to grow large and heavy with starch, sometimes with joking references to sexual anatomical parts shared in common with humans.

4. Indeed the Waiwai refer to the process of burning and hollowing out a fallen tree for making a dugout canoe as *netankeh*, the same term for the “opening up” of a woman’s cervix and vaginal canal in childbirth. Again, the point to stress is that these instances may not be best understood in terms of the canoe being “like” the birth canal but, rather, the canoe as a birth canal in alternate form. I discuss this in more detail in my dissertation (Mentore 2010).

5. I prefer to use the term *variety* whereas in standard Euro-American scientific terms we would typically use the term *species*. The latter is problematic in this case because it is based on a system of classification that cannot account for the forms of consubstantiality that occur as these varieties coreside with each other in Waiwai gardens. Place figures prominently in women’s techniques for identifying varieties. Not only are they identified according to the places and persons from which they were obtained but also according to their physical location at the garden site. Varieties may be further identified through physical characteristics such as stem coloration; leaf shape and coloration; and tuber size, color, and density.

6. See Pujol and colleagues (2007) for another study of cassava varieties. Although theoretically driven by Western notions of species biodiversity, the data (from multiple Amerindian groups in the Guianas) reveals striking similarities in terms of the social emphasis on high levels of variation.

7. This of course raises many questions for further inquiry, such as the moral ramifications of consuming cassava in light of the notion that it is intersubjectively aligned with womanhood. Such questions are beyond the scope of this article, although I would suggest that significant insights might be drawn from the fact that Amerindian cultivators use the technique of clonal propagation over and above sowing cassava seeds to “reproduce” the plants (despite the feasibility of both methods).

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