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Between will and thought: Individualism and social responsiveness in Amazonian child-rearing

Abstract.

This essay provides an ethnographic account of how moral dispositions towards independence and social responsiveness are forged during infancy and toddlerhood among the Runa, an indigenous people in the Ecuadorian Amazon. I will show how two local concepts, *munay* (will) and *yuyay* (thought) shape children's early experiences of the self and the self in relation to others. In particular, I will argue that, unlike middle class Anglo-Americans who repute paternal responsiveness to be necessary for a "healthy" child development, Runa adults strategically chose not to respond to children's will in order to make them "thoughtful". Such state of thoughtfulness, I argue, emerges from socialization practices which stress a child's unique will while at the same time forcefully encourage the development of social responsiveness.

Keywords: Child-rearing, individuality, responsibility, attachment, indigenous Amazonia

Introduction

Upon arrival to my friend Leticia's house after nearly a month of absence, I find her kitchen full of people whom I have not met before. Leticia explains to me that they are from *adentro* (inside), a Spanish colloquial term to refer to people who come from remote forest villages only reachable by plane or canoe. The visitors are from Conambo, a small Kichwa speaking village located at about forty minutes flight from Puyo, the provincial capital where Leticia lives. The people in question are a father, a mother and their three small children, two little girls and a barely walking boy. The mother displays a slightly protruding belly, an evident sign of an incipient pregnancy. When I ask when they arrived, the woman explains she had been in hospital in Puyo for a month and that she was recently discharged. Her husband, with a backpack on his shoulders, says he has just arrived from Conambo. "And your children?" I ask. "They came with their mother", he answers. I asked if they stayed with her in the hospital. "No!" he replies laughing, "They stayed here", and with his chin he points to a small adobe house adjacent to Leticia's, a dilapidated place that I had always assumed to be abandoned. "Alone?", I say in a tone of voice which perhaps reveals too much of my incredulity. His reply is laconic: "There was food and my eldest child always looks after her siblings". Leticia nods her head in approval, commenting how, in the last month, she had hardly ever heard any crying. For the rest of the afternoon I cannot stop staring at Marisela the five-year-old girl who, for an entire month, has been cooking, cleaning and taking care of her two younger siblings.

Despite Marisela's case being remarkable for a variety of reasons — her very young age, the fact she had to take care of her siblings in a foreign urban environment — it is by no means exceptional. Among the Runa of the region of Pastaza, in the Ecuadorian Amazon, children of five or six years old routinely take care of infants and are responsible for helping in a wide range of domestic tasks such as cooking, fishing, washing clothes etc. From a very early age, these children are self-

sufficient. To me, however, the most striking thing about Runa children is not so much the fact that as youngsters they are already capable of skinning a spotted paca or lighting a fire with drenched wood (although these are quite admirable skills) but rather, that they often do so without being asked to. Innumerable times, during my fieldwork, I have seen children helping others — related and unrelated people — to prepare food, to fetch water and so forth without ever being asked for assistance. Equally common is the experience of seeing very young children coming forward to soothe, comfort, feed or entertain a fussy toddler/infant, often giving up their own things or food in order to meet the baby's desires. How do Runa children develop such responsiveness to others?

This essay attempts to answer these questions through an ethnographic account of how moral dispositions towards independence and social responsiveness are forged during infancy and toddlerhood. Drawing on anthropological and psychological research on the developmental trajectory of individualism, responsibility and autonomy (Keller 2012; LeVine and Norman 2001; Murray et al. 2015; Ochs and Izquierdo 2009; Weisner 2001), I will show how, among the Runa people of the Ecuadorian Amazon, two local concepts, *munay* (will) and *yuyay* (thought) shape children's early experiences of the self and the self in relation to others. My interest in children's development of social responsiveness first emerged from the conundrum such behavior seemed to pose in relation to another striking feature of local child-rearing practices and, more generally, of Runa social life: the moral imperative to respect each person's individuality and independence.

Like many other indigenous Amazonian people (Clastres 1989; Lévi-Strauss 1945; Overing 2008; Rivière 1984), the Runa display an "obstinate individualism" (Overing 2003: 306) which is manifested in a generalized dislike for authoritative power and coercion and in a strong emphasis on independence and autonomy. In the field I have often been struck at how individual choices, from basic to important ones, are mostly taken individually and rarely discussed with others. My Runa friends strongly dislike being told what to do and, generally, tend not to comply with orders. In

every day interactions, people hardly make attempts to change someone else's mind but rather prefer to verbally articulate their lack of approval in the absence of the concerned person.

Runa people are also extremely proud of their own practices of self-sufficiency and consider their material and emotional independence a trait of virtue. From hunting to making pottery, the Runa staunchly defend the uniqueness of their way of doing things: it is rare for someone to ask or offer advice on other people's work. In instances where someone is in the predicament of having to ask for help outside their own close family, their requests are made with some shyness or take the shape of formal requests. While being able to exert one's choice and will without any interference is considered to be a fundamental moral virtue, equally important is the capacity for living well with others (*sumaclla causana*).

With the adjective “moral” I refer not to a set of rules and obligations which people ought to fulfil but rather, drawing on James Laidlaw's work, to an ethical project which necessarily entails freedom, choice and reflexivity (Laidlaw 2002). For the Runa, the project of living well, which is often described as becoming a real “person” (*Runa*), entails being capable of doing things for others. People often explicitly claim that the reason for which they do things is to make other people happy (*cushi*). Yet, it would be misleading to understand such satisfaction as the fulfilment of some moral rule: any action undertaken for others is an individual decision and, as such, based on freedom and reflexive choice. This clarification is important in so far as for the Runa, as I will show throughout this essay, doing things for others is understood as an act stemming from individual will and valued precisely *because* it emerges from such individual will. The question which I seek to address in this paper then is how a particular kind of individualism — understood here as both material and emotional independence — is cultivated alongside an obvious responsiveness to others' needs. How do children become persons, in a society which, as Harry Walker put it in a similar context, “is

both more individualistic and more communal” (2013:3) than the one I am most familiar with?

It is worth highlighting that the coupling individualism-social responsiveness is by no means a uniquely Amazonian feature. Anthropologists have long observed how among many small-scale societies, the stress on individual autonomy and independence comes hand in hand with the cultivation of practices which stress cooperation and responsibility (Hewlett and Lamb 2005; Woodburn 1982). This philosophy of “cooperative autonomy”, as Kirk Endicott defines it with reference to the Batek of Malaysia, has been shown to deeply inform child-rearing practices (Boyette and Hewlett 2017; Endicott and Endicott 2014). Indeed, there is a large literature which seeks to address the question of how children develop responsibility and social awareness alongside strikingly early independence and autonomy, especially in the context of children's participation in domestic work (for a detailed review see Lancy 2018). This paper partakes to this body of research by focusing on how *llullucuguna* (that is, infants and toddlers up to the age of 3-4) are socialized into what seems to be the distinctive ethos of Runa people. The cultivation of such ethos, I shall argue, begins well before children are capable of contributing to household economy and takes place through what I describe in this essay as adults' deliberate withdrawal of attention.

What does this withdrawal consist of? At a first look, children seem to be the center of Runa social life. Carried around, constantly held, commented upon and gently teased, infants and toddlers are the source of much laughter, joy and conversation. And yet, despite children's ubiquitous presence, life in Runa communities does not revolve around accommodating their will. Nowhere this is clearer than in the way Runa adults nonchalantly approach their young children's requests for attention, which are often ignored or dismissed. It was exactly the absence of the belief that, for a child to become a well-adjusted adult, her needs and

individuality need to be taken into account and responded to, which first stirred my interest in Runa childcare practices.

After the end of my doctoral fieldwork I returned to Ecuador with the purpose of introducing my four months old son to my Runa family and friends. Much of my previous fieldwork, although not focused on child socialization, was spent in close contact with children: I was a teacher in two primary schools for over a year and I lived in families with many babies and toddlers. These experiences made me think, as I traveled back to Pastaza two years after the end of doctoral research, that I had plenty of knowledge about local childcare practices. And yet, on my arrival, I was completely, utterly unprepared to see my own baby becoming the recipient of such care.

As a middle-class, educated and cosmopolitan Italian woman, during my pregnancy and immediately after the birth of my child, I had received homogenous advice about what constituted “appropriate” childcare. In Paris, where I lived at the time of my pregnancy; in Italy, where my baby was born, and then in the UK and the US, where most of my friends live and work, I was given surprisingly similar advice on the practices I was to adopt to ensure my child's optimal development: all entailed, especially in the early stages of childhood, intensive emotional care and responsiveness. To me, at least at such an early stage of my experience as a mother, caregiving was undoubtedly “equivalent to sensitive maternal responsiveness” (Keller et al. 2018).

Throughout this paper I explicitly draw on my experiences of mothering in the Ecuadorian Amazon to highlight striking differences between Runa practices of child-rearing and my own. I take my own style of parenting to be quite representative of WEIRD (“Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic” after Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010)

approaches to child-rearing, which are characterized by maternal responsiveness, extreme care and a psychologized understanding of a child's self (see Kusserow 2004).¹

Being concerned more on the actual, mundane practices of childcare than its explicit conceptual apparatus, my main research tool was participant observation, which I carried out for five months in 2015 and other eight months in 2017. I also amply draw on my observations and notes which I took during over thirty months of fieldwork in 2011-2013 in rural and urban Runa centers. During my most recent fieldwork I lived with three different Runa families in two different settings, one rural and the other urban; the first family was formed by a couple and their three, seven and nine years old children; the second, a couple and their newborn and two and a half years old; and the third included a single mother and her one, three and nine years old. Although for the purpose of this paper I mainly used materials from the rural settings, the child-rearing practices I describe below are common to both urban and rural populations. In the field I participated into everyday life activities such as helping in the manioc garden, making manioc beer, going on hunting and fishing trips, going to the market, attending community events etc. During most of these activities we were accompanied by children of various ages. I observed babies and older children being fed, scolded, put to bed, washed and taken care of. I watched children's playing, going to fish and walking in the forest. I also recorded naturally occurring interactions and verbal exchanges between adults and children and interviewed both Runa adults and primary school children in the context of an educational project in which I participated in the provincial capital of Puyo. Throughout this time, the presence of my son, first as an infant and then as a toddler, was an invaluable “research tool”: it was through the process of letting my own infant being “helped to grow by others”, as Daniela Peluso (2015:50) appropriately put it, that I learnt the most about Runa ways of child-rearing and became more reflexive about my own.

***Munay*: Acknowledging individual will**

What is a child among the Runa? There are two distinct terms for children: *llullucuguna* (babies and toddlers) and *huahuaguna* (older children).ⁱⁱ The first generally refers to infants as well as toddlers who can't speak very well. The second term is used to indicate children up the age of twelve or thirteen. As in other parts of Amazonia (Cohn 2005; Morelli 2017; Peluso 2015), Runa children spend much of their time together with their siblings, cousins and other children, with minimal or no supervision by adults. From the age of five or six, Runa boys go fishing alone, accompany their fathers on hunting trips, cut wood for fire etc. Girls often go to work in the garden (*chagra*) in the company of their mothers to plant and harvest manioc and plantains, look after their younger siblings, and help with cooking. In addition to daily chores such as washing clothes and cutting wood, children spend most of their days gathering fruits, catching small prey, fishing or simply playing in the river.

Children carry out such activities with no interference from adults and indeed, they often lead lives which are quite independent from adults. There is very little attempt at deterring children from experimenting with the surrounding environment even when this might mean incurring in some risks.ⁱⁱⁱ Adults might say "*Urmaunguima*" (You could fall!) to admonish a child who climbs up a very tall tree or "*Pitiriunguima!*" (You could cut yourself!) when a toddler improperly handles a rusty machete but, apart from these bland admonitions, no further action is usually undertaken to stop her. This hands-off approach is related to Runa understandings of children's capabilities. To Runa adults, even three and four years old children are capable of undertaking most daily tasks. Danger or failure in accomplishing a task is thought to be a normal part of any learning process. This is explicitly recognized by Runa people. For instance, when I asked a friend what he thought was the main difference between Runa child-rearing practices and non-Runa child-rearing practices,

he commented: “*Ahuallacta (mestizo)* children are weak.^{iv} Their parents tell them: “Don’t do this, don’t take the knife, don’t climb the tree, it is dangerous. But then how can they learn if they don’t have experience?” Another friend, Antonio, referring to his two years old who was playing with other children in the river, explained: “That is how we live, we Runa people. You let your child play in the river, it is good for him, he will fall, he will drink water, will spit it out, he will cry, that is how he becomes strong.”

Whenever I felt the urgency to intervene in children’s seemingly dangerous activities I was explicitly told that I should let them be, because it is only by making mistakes and hurting themselves that they can learn. While there is an explicit sense that adults should not intervene in children’s activities, this principle of noninterference often appears simply as a lack of interest or concern for children’s activities: children are left to do what they want without the oversight of any grownups. This is also the case of very young children who often play in company of older siblings. There is a strong sense that children will “naturally” learn on their own without much adult input: Runa adults engage in very little formal teaching. In this sense Runa children “learn from nobody” as David Lancy (2010) puts it, referring to the absence of any explicit verbal teaching by adults. Children learn to make pottery, cooking, cultivating, hunting and fishing by closely observing adults and older siblings and “pitching in” (Rogoff 2015 et al.). While on the one hand, children are not praised for their accomplishments in the practical realm, on the other they are seldom corrected, given advice on “proper” way in which to do things, or offered practical help.

Such an attitude is not only the fruit of the belief that children are better off as “self-initiated learners” (Lancy 2016) who take the initiative and learn at their own expense but it is also characteristic of the broader Runa appreciation for individual autonomy and freedom. **When asked about how children learn, my host’s brother Jose said: “A child learns to make a canoe or to make her own garden only if she wants. If she wants (*pai munasha*), she will learn; otherwise**

there is nothing we can do.” Jose's explanation is significant for it points to the tremendous emphasis Runa people place on individual will. Learning can occur only if it stems from one's unique interest and no child can be forced to learn something if she does not want to. While there is no specific term to designate such individual will, often people refer to it by using the word *munay* or *munana*, which can be translated respectively as “desire” or “to want/ to desire”. For Runa people, *munay* — the capacity to want something — is shared by most living beings, including plants, animals and certain features of the landscape. When people refer to *munay* they do not talk uniquely about a mechanical impulse to fulfil one’s basic needs — such as that for warmth and food in the case of babies — rather the term seems to encompass broader ideas of volition, curiosity, interest, anything that, broadly speaking, could also be referred to as a unique will. My use of “will” here closely resembles what anthropologist Marjorie Murray and colleagues (2015) have recently described as “volition” in the context of their research on child-adult interactions among the indigenous Mapuche of Chile. Using the term to refer to “the capacity of executing self-attributed choices or actions according to one’s own desire” (2015: 379), Murray and colleagues show how pre-existing notions of an autonomous self shape in distinctive ways Mapuche attitudes to child-rearing.

Like the Mapuche described by Murray and colleagues, the Runa too think that infants already possess a well-defined, idiosyncratic nature. Adults are careful observers of infants’ behavior and like to remark, emphasize and comment on a baby’s distinctive way of crying, a way of moving the head or gazing around. While parents might wait for months before officially naming a baby, they often give her a nickname which appropriately reflects some of her distinctive qualities. For instance, a baby who lifts and turns her head as if she wants to observe other people’s actions will be named “toucan” in recognition of her exceptional sight; one who cries with a very high pitch will be known as “sloth” and so forth. These are not mere analogies: such behaviors are thought to give precious indications about a child’s individual nature and form the subject of adult discussion and

10

speculation. In other words, when children and even babies express their *munay* they do so in a way which is unique to them as individuals. What is implied with the use of *munana* is that a will is always *someone's specific* will, and not merely an intention common to a category of people (e.g. the category of babies).

The importance of this uniqueness will become clearer with an example. One day my friend Joaquin was holding his five months old nephew on his lap when the baby started pushing his legs to stand up and then mimicked an attempt to walk. Joaquin laughed in admiration and pointed out the baby's behavior to other family members who were sitting nearby. Everyone turned to watch the baby, making remarks on his strength and his will to walk. "Look, look, he really wants to walk" (*Ricui, purinatami munan*), a rather amused Joaquin kept repeating as he encouraged the child to stand upright. Other children quickly gathered around the baby and encouraged him "Walk, walk!" (*Puringui puringui*). "He is going to be a walker!" (*Chi runa sinchi purij tucungami*), commented the baby's aunt amidst everyone's cheering.

What is interesting in this episode is that a specific behavior — the baby's walking — also known in pediatrics as the stepping reflex — was not interpreted as a milestone of infant development but rather as indexing that specific baby's will to walk. Of course, Runa people have extensive knowledge about infants and are likely to be aware that many babies exhibit this kind of behavior. However, rather than ascribing the movement to a "natural" reflex typical of newborns, they willfully emphasize its volitional nature and thus its individual character. For my Runa friends, the baby's walking was not the common experience of the stepping reflex but rather a sign that *this* baby truly wants to walk.

At the time of the episode, Joaquin's and others' behavior seemed to me reminiscent of infant-adult interactions as commonly experienced in many middle-class Western contexts, whereby adults

routinely attribute specific desires or intentions to nonverbal infants or toddlers. For instance, anthropologist Elinor Ochs shows how when interacting with infants, Anglo-American parents behave “as if the young child has the capacity to act intentionally, in a directed, goal-oriented manner” (1982: 88-89). Among the Anglo-American parents in Ochs’ study “nonverbal behaviors and vocalizations are treated as if they were motivated, purposeful” (1982:88). Such parents engage in what psychologists Elizabeth Meins and Charles Fernyhough have termed “mind-mindedness”, a set of practices which signals “caregiver’s proclivity to treat the young child as an individual with a mind, rather than merely an entity with needs that must be satisfied” (2015:2).

Despite the similarity with Anglo-American ways of behaving with infants, there are at least three reasons for which Runa acknowledgement of children’s individuality is different from Ochs’ example. The first has to do with ideas of responsibility. Among the Runa, children are thought to be largely accountable for the consequences of their actions. This means that, for instance, if a child hurts himself during any activity or alternatively damages something, they are fully attributed with responsibility and, unless the injury is serious, no attempt is made to console them. In case of an accident, a parent would not be judged for not looking after the child, since it is assumed that it is this latter who “wanted” to play and there is little an adult can do to prevent such wish. This also applies to younger children. I shall give an example to clarify this issue.

In a discussion with Marcia, a Runa woman in her fifties, I asked her opinion about the way her grandchildren were being raised. Marcia's son had married with a *mestizo* woman from the provincial town of Puyo and they lived in the city. Sometimes they would come to visit Marcia and she always seemed to have some interesting thoughts on the peculiar child-rearing techniques of *mestizo* people. Marcia answered me at great length but here is a relevant excerpt: “The child [her own grand-daughter] doesn’t want to eat and the mother is there with the spoon, pushing her to eat. She puts the spoon close to her mouth and says “Eat, eat!”

Why does she do this, I think, I am surprised. She is not hungry, why is her mother forcing her to eat? It is her will, if she is not hungry, she should not eat.” When I suggested Marcia that perhaps her grand-daughter, who at the time was about one year old, might have not yet known what it was best for her, Marcia answered: “You can’t force a baby to eat, it is her will. If she is hungry she will eat, if she wishes”.

This is just one example of how a child, an infant in fact, is already attributed with a certain degree of freedom and autonomy. Since a child acts accordingly to her unique will, the kind of parental blaming reported in Western countries and analyzed in sociological and anthropological research on contemporary parenting (Furedi 2008; Lee et al. 2014) is much rarer in the Runa context. **From these examples we can see that Runa understandings of individual will are somewhat “stronger” than Anglo-American ones since in the former case, such will inevitably brings a certain degree of responsibility (responsibility which contemporary Anglo-American parents would be unwilling to attribute to very young children).**

The other reason why Runa conception of *munay* differs from the “soft individuality” (Kusserow 2004) middle class Western parents attribute their children is that, unlike the latter, Runa caretakers do not think that their children's will should be constantly acknowledged and responded to. **In her work on child-rearing and class in New York, Adrie Kusserow (2004) shows how among upper middle-class New York parents a child is understood as already an individual, whose tastes, preferences and will need to be properly responded to in order for the child's self to flower. That is not the case among the Runa. Even if Runa adults recognize in their children and infants an individual volition, they do not necessarily feel compelled to respond to it. This because, unlike most parents in Western countries, the Runa not think of children as socially formed “persons” (*Runa*) and, as such, their wills are not necessarily prioritized. To make my case clearer, I shall draw again on Ochs’s previously mentioned work on Samoan children.**

Ochs (1982) argues that, unlike American parents, Samoans do not view children as social persons. Ochs describes Samoan ideas of personhood are governed by two principles: one is the concept of *amio* (natural behaviour) and the other is *aga* (socially appropriate behaviour). Children are said to possess only *amio* and thus of being incapable of any meaningful act. This conception of personhood translates in the adoption of starkly different parenting practices. Taking as her primary example the case of “extensions” — a recurrent feature of Anglo-American child-adult interactions whereby children’s incomprehensible utterances are completed and decoded by caretakers — Ochs argues that such phenomenon is to be understood with reference to the process of decentering, that is, the practice of taking the perspective of the child in order to understand what she wants to communicate. Implicit in the use of extensions is thus the idea that the child is already a person.

According to Ochs, Samoans' lack of extensions is to be explained by the absence of this perspective-taking. Since a child is not recognized as a social actor and is thus in a position of inferiority versus the adult, “a caregiver is not expected to take the perspective of a young child, particularly when the child has spontaneously produced an utterance” nor he is expected “to assist the communication by relying on the idiosyncratic background of the child” (Ochs 1982:95). Ochs relates this absence of perspective-taking to the broader social hierarchy which characterizes Samoan society in which higher ranking members do not adjust their perspective in favor of lower ranking members.

Something similar, I suggest, happens among the Runa. While Runa people emphasize an infant or child’s unique will, they do not take the perspective of the child nor do they feel compelled to respond to a child's will. This is mainly because, for the Runa, children do not have *yuyay* “thought”, also understood a socially sound behavior and thinking. Like animals and drunk people,

children are said to lack *yuyay* and need to cultivate it through specific practices. **This understanding of children as not yet formed is a common feature of many cultural models of childhood whereby the infant/child is not fully recognized as a person until she reaches a certain developmental milestone (Lancy 2014). Yet, as specified earlier, unlike other ethnographic examples where the child is understood as another kind of being (see Gottlieb 2004), for the Runa, infants are unequivocally conceived as individuals. From a Runa perspective, what seems to be lacking in children is not some essential human quality (e.g. soul, speech) but rather, as I will explain later in the paper, the ability to recognize other people's desires and the capacity to fulfil such desires.**

This brings me to a third, fundamental point: the kind of individuality which I describe here for the Runa is not concerned, like in a WEIRD context, on the cultivation of an interior, psychologized self which is to flourish and fulfil its potential throughout life. While Runa understandings of *munay* emphasize uniqueness and individuality, such qualities are not spoken about as interior psychological characteristics but rather, significantly, as the idiosyncratic ways in which one does things, and more specifically, as the ways in which one does things for others — I shall return to this later in the paper.

Then, to summarize: while it is true that children are left to experiment and learn autonomously, it would be misleading to assume that Runa adults think their children will “naturally” grow into “proper” persons. The aim of Runa child-rearing is not to help a child “flower” as in the upper-middle American context described by Kusserow but rather of channeling such individual will towards valuable sociality. Despite the apparent lack of coercion and rigid discipline, Runa adults, as other indigenous people in Amazonian, put tremendous care into making their children thoughtful and “proper” persons (Conklin and Morgan 1996; Overing 2008; Santos Granero 2012). Such care often takes the form of body-work whereby children

undergo corporeal rituals — ingestion of plant concoctions, application of substances on the skin and ritual fasting — which help them grow “strong” (*sinchi*) and knowledgeable (*yachayuk*).^v Indeed, the closest term for parenting among the Runa is *huiñachina* which can be literally translated as “to make one grow”. The causative suffix *-chi* signals the active role taken up by adults which are literally said “to make the child grow”. Runa people are adamant that parental interventions are needed to “straighten” and make the child “strong” (*sinchi*). How does this Runa understanding of child-rearing stand in relation to their obvious respect of individuality and their lack of interference in their children’s learning processes? I will argue that we need to attend to the ways in which Runa people may respond or not to individual volition. As I will explore in more detail in the next section, a person’s will is responded to only if she is capable of demonstrating *yuyay*, that is, “thought”. I shall argue that two steps are necessary in order to attain this thoughtfulness: the first consists in developing autonomy and self-control while the second entails the development of the capacity to acknowledge and respond to others’ desires. In the following section I will show how such objectives are accomplished through child-rearing practices which encourage children’s gradual awareness of the existence of a hierarchy of wills.

Cultivating *yuyay*: “thought”, social responsiveness and hierarchy

During a 2015 trip to Pastaza I brought my four months old son to visit some friends living in a village downriver. During our stay I often spent the late afternoon laying in the hammock with my son, looking into his eyes and talking to him. After a few days of carefully observing us, my host — a woman in her seventies — asked me what I was telling my baby. She thought it was amazing that I could spend such a long time looking and talking to a newborn. Then she swiftly told me: “Listen! He doesn’t have *yuyay*”. I didn’t know what to say. A few days after we arrived, many people who came to visit us began taking my son away to their houses. I tried my best to resist the urge to go looking for him and I waited patiently for someone to bring him back, since I was made to

understand that requesting him back was not the most sensitive thing to do. On one occasion, a close friend of mine, who was about to return to her house located in the provincial capital — a good seven hours from the village where we were staying — came to say goodbye and took my son in her arms. She then told me: “Give him to me. I will bring him to my house and you can have a bit of rest.” A little nervous — unsure whether she was serious or not — I watched her walking away with him. I hesitated a few minutes before running after her. When I finally met them, she was already sitting in the canoe, holding my son in her lap. Although I am not sure of her intentions — whether she would have actually taken him away with her or whether she would have handed him to someone else before departing — her behavior, just like that of many other people around me, struck me as completely at odds with my own understanding of parent-child relationships.

My friends’ behavior is certainly related to the view that children, far from being an exclusive possession of parents, can be taken care of by many people. While mothers may “own” their children and develop very affectionate ties with them (see also Author 2017), it is evident that this sense of ownership is not, in any sense, absolute and that Runa people consider children not to be a unique property of their parents (see also Peluso 2015). Indeed, nobody, not even strangers, ever thought of asking me for “permission” to take away my baby. When on a few occasions I did eventually go to people’s houses to request him back, people either laughed at me or seemed genuinely puzzled as to why I had come. At any rate, I soon gave up the idea I could control his movements outside the house.

As children in many other small-scale societies (**Gottlieb 2004; Meehan and Hawks 2013**) Runa children do not live their entire lives in the company of their parents alone. Runa households comprise often of grandparents, cousins or other kin. In addition to their mothers, children are also taken care of by older siblings, aunts or grandmothers. In many occasions children are left to live for prolonged times with their grandparents or close relatives in other villages or in town. Forms of

alloparenting where the child lives for a prolonged time, even his entire life with relatives, usually grandmothers, are very common. The reasons for parents to leave children with other people are heterogeneous. In cases of conflict between spouses, children can be sent to live with relatives for some time; if parents find a job in the city they might decide to leave children in the village with other family members. In many other instances, children go to live away from their birth family because they themselves wish to do so. Just to give an example: upon arriving to the house of some Runa friends I noticed their three years old was missing. When I inquired about him, his mother replied that on a trip to the city, he begged her to leave him with his maternal aunt and so she did. He eventually returned home a few months later. On many other instances I witnessed children as young as three pleading their parents to let them go living with some relatives. Provided that the relatives in question agreed, their requests were met without much comment. Children can also be sent to live with other people because these latter explicitly “ask” for them. This is often the case of grandmothers who may ask their adult sons or daughters to send a child to live with her to have some company. In any of the above cases, the process of going to live with someone else is hardly permanent or irreversible: children often move in and out households throughout their entire childhood. Even in cases of adoption, the child may return to her biological parents after a few years of living with the adoptive kin.

From such descriptions it becomes apparent that, in taking away my son, people were just following a normal way of behaving towards children whereby these latter are not assumed to be their biological parents’ exclusive property. It is also clear that Runa people do not think children’s well-being depends upon the constant presence of a single caregiver. Indeed, I suspect that it was the exclusive manner of my relationship with my son — as indexed by our prolonged face to face conversations in the hammock and our constant physical closeness — which my friends found both puzzling and amusing. Indeed, in holding my son physically close at all times, ensuring I made constant eye to eye contact and extensively talking with him I was following — in blissful

unawareness — the cultural script of a specific folk theory of parenting, one which is predicated on an exclusive emotional attachment between mother and child. This folk-theory finds its best theorization in the work of psychoanalysts John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Attachment theory stipulates that the constant presence of a responsive and caring person is foundational for a child's future well-being. Maternal responsiveness, that is, the capacity for the mother to respond adequately to her child's needs is fundamental for the child's successful emotional and cognitive development. According to Bowlby, even brief separations from the mother in the first years of life are seen as having long term effects on the child's development: failure to bond or “maternal deprivation” (Bowlby 1998) leads to “insecure attachment” which in turns generates long-lasting personality disorders (Ainsworth et al. 1978). Face-to-face interactions, physical closeness, co-sleeping, extended breastfeeding and other practices figure among those practices which attachment theorists believe to enhance bonding. **Bowlby's insights have come to deeply influence social policy and contemporary parenting approaches in Western countries. For most parents in post-industrialized countries, the commitment to successfully bond with one's child has translated in to the adoption of a plethora of practices — popularized by parenting bestsellers and backed by health professionals and institutions — which include, amongst others, early contact with the mother, repeated eye-contact, physical closeness, immediate responsiveness to infant's crying.**

Despite the fact that many Runa actually undertake the practices described above by attachment theorists, the idea that a mother and a child should be together for the child to feel “secure” and thrive is completely foreign to the Runa. The Runa are certainly not the only ones to cast doubts on the central tenets of attachment theory. Anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists have heavily criticized some of the assumptions underpinning attachment theory and the parenting practices which stem from it (Keller 2012; Keller and Bard 2017; Weisner 2005). For instance, a recent volume edited by Naomi Quinn and Jeannette Mageo (2013) gathers ethnographic evidence

for the cross-cultural variability in the meanings of attachment and questions some of the theory's implicit assumptions. Drawing on the pioneering works of LeVine and Norman (2001), Quinn and Mageo argue that attachment theory and its casting of children as securely versus insecurely attached, is a folk theory which rests upon distinctively Western assumptions. One of these is for instance, the dyadic mother-child relationship upon which attachment theory rests and which reflects a standard bourgeois view of the family. This does not take into consideration that childcare outside Western nuclear families is often distributed across many other people. Furthermore, as highlighted by Morelli et al. (2017), this kind of care — reputed necessary for the creation of secure bonds — reflects very specific notions of personhood: within attachment theory, a great emphasis is placed upon internal psychological qualities and emotions, qualities which are articulated through culturally specific practices such as intense face-to-face conversations (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986) and emotionally related talk (Wang and Fivush 2005).

Perhaps even more foreign to the Runa than the idea of an exclusive attachment is the related belief that a child's will should be always and promptly accommodated by caretakers, in other words, that maternal responsiveness is necessary for the healthy development of a child.^{vi} The Runa start from the moral presupposition is that no “will” — especially not that of a baby— can determine or limit one's own. For instance, when I rushed to my son every time he cried, my Runa friends were startled at the promptness with which I went to soothe him. While at first they judged my behavior with indulgence, stating that it came out of a mother's tender heart, they seemed to look increasingly concerned as I kept picking him up whenever he was (somewhat) upset. They first suggested that I place him in the hammock and let him stay there while I could rock him slightly. When I ignored their advice and kept responding to the slightest noise he emitted, often abandoning my meal or a conversation to walk him around, people voiced their concerns — although they never criticized me openly since a direct critique would be considered rude and inappropriate — that my baby was growing to be *tzintziashca*, “fussy” or “demanding”. Alongside with *quilla* (lazy) and

20

mitsa (stingy), being fussy is perhaps one of the worst insult a Runa could receive. When I asked what they would do were they in my place, they answered they would leave him crying in the hammock so that he could get used to being on his own and become strong (*sinchi*). Importantly, they added that by doing so, he would learn not to disturb me when I was busy doing my own things.

This episode bears strong resemblances with parental strategies developed in other cultural contexts whose objective is to foster autonomy and self-reliance. For instance, Norman and Levine (2001) describe how Northern German parents let their children stay alone in bed or leave them crying in order to encourage them to become emotionally independent and undemanding. Like those parents, Runa adults emphasize the need for a child to become “strong” and learn emotional independence: yet their concern is not solely about clinginess or resilience. The term *tzintzayashca* has in fact another, related meaning. When deployed to describe an adult’s behavior, *tzintzayashca* takes on the connotation of “indolent” or “lethargic”. An adult who is *tzintzayashca* is someone who, in the words of a Runa friend, “does not want to do anything” or, in another person’s definition “does not have life, spends his time doing nothing”. Significantly, this state of lethargy is described as a bodily condition whose most important consequence is becoming of no use for others. Nobody wants a *tzintzayashca* wife or husband because, as my host cousin Leopoldo explained, “they would not work, they would not do anything”. This alternative meaning of *tzintzayashca* is important in so far as it highlights another, less obvious facet of being clingy — the danger of ignoring other people’s desires and, in doing so, turning useless.

It is to avoid both clinginess and the lack of interest for others’ wishes, that Runa people do not prioritize children’s will. While acknowledging a child’s idiosyncratic will, Runa adults do not no give in to her request if deemed as interfering with other people’s desires and actions —

especially those of a busy caretaker. Indeed, while children are involved at every level in communal life, meeting all their demands is not a priority for their parents or any other adult family members. Instead they are expected to look after themselves and to accommodate their own needs to those of the adults who surround them.

A further example might help to convey how the Runa approach to responding (or not) to a child's will has powerful moral implications. During a dinner with family members and two visitors, my host was distributing meat to family members when her three years old son Akangau began begging for a chicken leg. His mother ignored his requests as she kept serving the meat. Akangau became increasingly distressed and began to cry desperately for the chicken leg. Without looking at him, his mother continued serving the food and then sat down to eat, talking and laughing with the other adults. Despite Akangau loud sobbing and crying, everyone kept carrying on their conversation. Akangau refused to eat the food he had been given (obviously not a chicken leg) and when he tried to get closer to his mother she abruptly sent him away. After a good twenty minutes, Akangau eventually stopped crying and ate some of his food. No attempt was made to console him nor did anyone paid attention to him. Throughout the episode nobody — except Akangau and myself — showed any visible sign of discomfort.

Why wasn't Akangau given his chicken leg? To me it seemed no big deal and I would have happily renounced to my chicken leg for him. Indeed, when, as the drama was unfolding, I suggested to his mother that I could give my piece to him, she emphatically told me: "Eat!" with a tone which did not permit a reply. The bluntness of her answer suggested to me that her refusal to accommodate Akangau's needs was a fully intentional attempt at forging his *yuyay*. In what ways? It must be stressed that *yuyay* depends on two conditions: first, for a person to have "thought", she needs to be self-sufficient and independent. *Sinchi*, "strong" is perhaps the term which most closely describes this condition and it refers to both emotional and practical components of self-sufficiency. And yet,

independence is not a primary goal if such quality is not deployed to meet the desires of others: an attentiveness toward others' also needs to be developed. In other words, to develop *yuyay*, children need to be able provide for others as well as to have a certain responsiveness and awareness of others. When asked about *yuyay*, people would always stress this relational aspect. **For instance Severo, a sixty years old man described it as such: “When you have *yuyay* you have *pensamiento* (from Spanish “thought”). You do things with thought. You think about your spouse who might be hungry and tired, you think about your parents, you feel love towards your children. You worry about them and you go hunting, fishing so that they can be happy.”**

How do Runa children become aware and responsive to others' needs? Cross-cultural research on the development of responsibility among young children has shown that responsibility and social responsiveness are facilitated by certain socialization practices. In their ethnographic work among Highlands Maya, Paradise and Rogoff (2009) have shown that children learn to do communal tasks by being constantly participating in every day community activities and by being encouraged by adults throughout their learning process. Similarly, in a paper on cross-cultural practices of responsibility among Samoan, American and Matzingenka children in the Peruvian Amazon, Ochs and Izquierdo (2009) observed that frequent and close interactions between adults and children as they carried out daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning etc. was associated with a greater likelihood of the child to spontaneously initiate actions to help others. They argued that “socialization practices that promote children’s attention to the activity of others constitute a first step toward social awareness; social responsiveness and self-reliance in practical matters that affirm the worth of others and give dignity to the child’s own place within the family and community” (2009:405).

Other researchers have highlighted how social recognition is a fundamental factor in the process of becoming responsible. For instance, Aude Michelet (2016) shows how, among rural Mongolians, participation into communal activities alone does not ensure children’s

willingness to work for others and contribute to the domestic economy. Whereas young children might be eager to help and do things for others, such willingness begins to fade as they grow older. Mongolian parents then use scolding as a means to force their children to undertake tasks. What is particularly significant in Michelet's example is that such scolding focuses less about the technicalities of the learning process than the development of the moral commitment to be dependable and responsible. Scolding, Michelet highlights, is primarily about reminding Mongolian children of their responsibility within a web of relationships.

It is this very commitment to be socially responsive which the Runa parents attempt to cultivate with their children. This commitment, I argue, commences well before children are actually capable of doing something for others. It begins with adults' withdrawal of recognition of children's will until they have shown "thought". Sometimes such withdrawal takes the shape of a deliberate strategy, like in the case of Akangau's mother; in some other cases, it appears as if is done less consciously. This attitude has two concomitant emotional outcomes. For instance, in Akangau's example, through a refusal to acknowledge his *munay*, his mother forced him to self-soothe and become "strong" (*sinchi*). Being strong and self-reliant is a quality deemed fundamental to live "*sachaibi*", "in the forest", as Runa friends constantly comment in their everyday life.

At the same time, Akangau's mother directed his attention to the desires of others — of people with "thought". She socialized him in an evident hierarchy of wills, whereby adults and visitors, as people with "thought" had precedence over him. As noticed by Heidi Keller and colleagues (2018), good parenting for the Runa, as for many other people in the world, is primarily about encouraging infants to consider the needs and wants of others — of not becoming, in Runa terms, *quilla* (lazy), *mitsa* (stingy) or *tzintzayashca* (indolent). This, as Keller and colleagues further point out, "means that the responsibility to understand others falls to the infant, and

not the other way around” (2018:4). I believe that, for Runa children, adults’ withdrawal of attention is a major way in which babies and toddlers learn to develop attentiveness towards the wills of others. It is not until the moment in which they themselves are capable of contributing to others’ well-being — in the form of gifts of food, labor or care — that their wishes will be taken into account. A first step in the process of acquiring “thought” consists in developing an awareness of the hierarchy of wills which structures Runa interactions: acknowledging the desires of others —well before children are actually able to do things for others — is a fundamental step for becoming “persons”.

Nowhere is this hierarchy of wills evinced more clearly than within child to child relationships. In fact, while adults might not readily respond to infants and toddlers’ requests, they prompt older siblings to do so. As previously mentioned, childcare is often almost entirely delegated to older children.^{vii} When my son was three years old and we were in any Runa community I realized how, whenever he cried or made a fuss, nobody expected me to do anything about it. Instead other children were urged to take him away and to distract him from soliciting my attention. This is common practice and older children — usually girls — are the primary caretakers of the youngest. Through the injunction to take care of their younger siblings, adults convey to both older children and toddlers a powerful message about hierarchy. On the one hand, from very early on, children become aware that they need to direct their requests to an appropriate person — often an older child — and that they should not interfere with adults’ actions. On the other hand, in taking care of babies and toddlers, the older child is forcibly taught to meet someone else’s needs, often surrendering her own desires. In fact so strong is the expectation that children — even toddlers — will take care of younger ones that, as I mentioned in the introduction, they often do this without being solicited or forced to. I have always been amazed at how even toddlers seemed to be careful observers of babies’ needs and, at home, often preempted any explicit requests of help by anticipating the work. **I once expressed my admiration to my host Silvia, after I witnessed her three years old son**

coming forward to help a neighbor in the butchering of a tapir. He was not asked to help and yet, the little child had come forward with water and a knife and assisted the woman throughout the process. Facing my amazement, Silvia replied: “You shouldn't have to ask for help. Think: it's a hot day, your husband is building a house under a strong sun. Does he have to ask you to bring him water? No: you know he's thirsty. You don't ask a woman if she is hungry. You give her meat. That is what children learn”. In Silvia's mind, the anticipation and prompt acknowledgement of others' needs was not at all surprising, but rather the result of careful observation and an indication of “thought”.

Finally, I cannot stress enough the emotional importance of social recognition in the creation and maintenance of *yuyay*. During my last fieldwork, I collected some interviews with Runa children where I asked about some memorable events in their lives. The majority of these were stories about successful hunts, the building of their first house, or the creation of their first garden. **These stories unanimously emphasized how accomplishing a task felt good because that caused someone else to be happy. Just to give an example, I report here the narrative of Kiwa, a nine years old girl, who told me a story about making manioc beer.**

[...] One day I said to my dad "Bring me to the garden, I want to make manioc beer". My mum did not say anything but my dad said “That is good. You are old enough to make your own manioc beer”. So I was a bit afraid but we went nevertheless. We came back with a small basket of manioc. So I sat, with my mum, chewing and chewing. I filled a small *tinaja* (small recipient to store manioc beer). Then my dad saw my *tinaja* and laughed and was very happy and said to me: “Get ready because I will invite people over to drink”. On Sunday morning many people came to the house and I made them drink. I made them drink a lot, until they became drunk and laughed and joked and everyone had a good time. It was good.”

Another boy described how he felt happy to have successfully hunted a tapir because that meant his mother would no longer be hungry; a thirteen years old boy was satisfied with building his first house so that his younger brothers had a place to sleep; a young girl, like Kiwa, declared that she was proud when her manioc beer was served to guests and family members. All these children emphasized the relational aspects of their practical self-sufficiency (see also Walker 2013 for similar examples among the Peruvian Urarina). Runa children, as I previously mentioned, are not verbally rewarded: it is their actions, and their capacity to engender happiness through independent acts of care which act as the most valuable forms of recognition. It seems to me that in these relational accounts lays the key for understanding the experiences of a child like Marisela who, in caring for her siblings in the city, was acknowledged as someone with “thought”.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the different ways in which a child is made into a proper person in a context where a specific form of individual will (*munay*) and a kind of social attentiveness (*yuyay*) are given extreme moral value. While the former concept refers to an individual will or volition, intrinsic to most entities in the world, the second indicates the capacity to channel such will towards others in socially appropriate ways. I have shown how such concepts distinctively inform Runa approaches to child-rearing. In particular, I have argued that refusing to meet a child’s will is a key step for fostering a child’s attentiveness to others: in having his will unmet, the child learns to develop emotional self-resilience and self-control while simultaneously learns to acknowledge the presence of a hierarchy of wills, and the importance of being recognized as someone with "thought".

In these concluding remarks, I wish to briefly return to the seemingly paradoxical coupling of individuality and social responsiveness. I hope it has become clear by now that such paradox is, in the eyes of Runa people, not a paradox at all. For the Runa, individualism does not coincide with the psychological model of the self which underscores WEIRD parenting philosophies. *Munay*, understood as an idiosyncratic way of being and a fundamental characteristic of all living entities is the base from which any meaningful action can proceed. In other words, it is valuable only if accompanied by *yuyay*, that is, thought and care for others. Both form the ground for living well (*allita causana*): beyond any act of sociality, such as the sharing of meat with neighbors and family lies both the autonomous will which has allowed the person to hunt and bring the prey home, as well as the thoughtful decision to share with others. On the other hand, fundamental to *yuyay* is the freedom granted by *munay*: the freedom of doing something because one wishes to do so. While so far I have repeatedly stressed that an individual action is thoughtful only when undertaken for the benefit of others, it could equally be said that it is *precisely* because an action stems from one's own independent will that is valuable and thoughtful. *Yuyay* and *munay* are indissolubly linked: for Runa children becoming a "person" entails learning that one is meaningless without the other.

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Notes

ⁱ Of course, I do not wish to suggest that all people living in a WEIRD country will invariably adopt the same style of parenting. I am aware that even within Western societies parenting practices greatly vary depending on class (Kusserow 2004) and region (Keller et al. 2006). With the term WEIRD parenting here I refer to a style of parenting, which Adrié Kusserow (2004) describes as revolving around the cultivation of "soft individualism". Such parenting style is historically recent and seems fairly typical of university-educated, upper-middle class people across Western countries (indeed the similarity of advice I received across countries with regards to childbirth and child-rearing is a testimony to the transcultural popularity of such model; for research on WEIRD and attachment-based parenting see the excellent book by David Lancy (2015) and the edited volume by Lee et al. (2014).

ⁱⁱ There is an eminently relational aspect to these categories: for instance, a toddler may abruptly cease to be a *llullucu* because a new sibling is born, just like a child might cease to be a *huahua* if he able to show precocious skills and abilities.

ⁱⁱⁱ ⁴ Runa child-rearing is not entirely nor always devoid of adult interference. For instance, Runa adults verbally intimate their children to share food or to work hard: older children may be scolded or whipped with stinging nettles (or through the application of hot chilli in their eyes). Such punishments are however, in my experience, quite rare and only taken in extreme cases. Instead, when children are thought to be old enough to understand, it is common for adults to give them speeches or "advice" (*consejos*) on how to be hard-working and respectful.

^{iv} The term *mestizo* here refers to mixed raced and white urban dwellers.

^v It is important to stress that the Runa deploy a wide range of practices through which nonhuman entities are thought to effectively shape a child's body and character. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve more deeply here on the nonhuman aspect of child-rearing practices; for fundamental work on this see Cohn (2005), Conklin and Morgan (1996), Author (2018), Overing (2008), Rival (1998), Santos-Granero (2012), Rubenstein (2012), Uzendoski (2010), Vilaça (2002), Walker (2013).

^{vi} This does not mean, of course, that Runa caretakers ignore real and urgent needs of babies and children. For instance, newborns are lovingly taken care of and are often the object of lavish attention. Nevertheless,

as they grow older, their wills are less and less taken into account; partly because often a younger member of the family arrives, and partly because of the hierarchy of wills which is central to the constitution of *yuyay*.

^{vii} Within this hierarchy of wills, gender would deserve a note apart. While children of both sexes demonstrate the same responsiveness towards younger children, it is often girls who are in charge of most care-taking.