

Creating community: Feasting and chanting among the Nantis of Peruvian Amazonia

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1. Introduction

Feasts like the one in this image presently take place every six to nine days in the Nanti village of Montetoni in southeastern Peru. During this twenty-four hour event, Nantis of all ages form groups in the communal spaces of the village, clasp hands, and chant with and to one another, all the while consuming copious quantities of *oburoxi*, a mildly alcoholic drink made from yuca mash.¹

¹ Nanti is a Campan Arawakan language, together with Asháninka, Ashéninka, Caquinte, Matsigenka and Nomatsiguenga (Dixon and Aikhenvald 1999). There are approximately 380 speakers of Nanti. About 190 Nantis live in Montetoni and about 60 live in Maranjejari; these two communities, located on the upper Camisea river in southeastern Peru, have regular, if infrequent, contact with non-Nantis. About 130 Nantis continue to live in voluntary isolation in small residence groups on the upper Timpia River. I have carried out 11 months of linguistic and anthropological research in the context of humanitarian work with the Nanti communities of Montetoni and

Located in the headwaters region of Peruvian Amazonia, Montetoni is a village of about 190 people who live well through hunting, fishing, and subsistence agriculture. First formed in 1992, Montetoni is unlike any Nanti settlement that preceded it. The village of Montetoni was formed when a number of distinct extended family groups – or, as I’ll call them, residence groups – came to live together in a single settlement in order to ensure their access to an important material resource – metal – which is only available from the non-Nanti world.

Over the years since coming to reside together in Montetoni, Nantis have adapted various aspects of their daily activities to accommodate their new multi-family settlement. But in many ways, day-to-day life in Montetoni follows patterns of activity that are continuous with the patterns of daily life in the small, dispersed residence group settlements that preceded this large village. Most hunting, fishing, farming, and other productive activities are still conducted on the scale of the residence group, and residence groups are largely self-sufficient from an economic perspective. At the same time, living in a large village composed of a number of previously distinct residence groups is an entirely new social formation for these Nantis.

How, one might wonder, do Nantis in Montetoni deal with the new social fact of the village? How have these residence groups responded to the novelty of living right next to one another? How, in short, does everybody get along? One answer to all these questions is: feasting.

2. A thumbnail sketch of Nanti feasting

Over the years since 1997, feasting has become a weekly event in Montetoni. Innovative feasting practices have emerged from the complex social relations made possible by this new village, and at present, feasts are the principal opportunity for village-wide interaction in Montetoni. Every person in the village is welcome to participate in every feast, and most do.

Feasting is composed of a set of overlapping and sequential activities that provide participants with opportunities to situate themselves as members of a social unit larger than their residence group. As such, feasts are a crucial activity in shaping and defining the community of Montetoni as an enduring social entity. Feasting has become both the focus of village-wide sociability and the primary locus for the public expression of individual opinions, concerns, goals, and aesthetics. It is the practice of feasting, I suggest, that transforms the physical fact of the village of Montetoni into the social fact of the community of Montetoni.

No less interesting than the internal complexities of the feasts is the contrast between how Nantis act and interact with one another during the feasts and how they act and interact outside of them. Feasting constitutes a dramatic and comprehensive break from

Maranjejari. My work with these communities began in 1995, and I have spent between one and four months of each year since 1997 in these two communities.

The field research described in this paper has been made possible by support from the University of Texas at Austin, the Liberal Arts Graduate Research Grant, and the National Science Foundation. My humanitarian work has been carried out through Cabeceras Aid Project. For more information about Cabeceras, please visit www.cabeceras.org or contact me at chris@cabeceras.org.

both the expectations and the limitations that characterize social relationships in Montetoni outside the feast. In general, Nanti individuals are quiet, non-aggressive, and non-confrontational in their interactional style. During the feast, people become boisterous, spontaneous, and very direct in their verbal and physical behavior. I have provided a table summarizing some of the most dramatic contrasts between Nanti behavior inside and outside the feast in Appendix 1.

My fascination with Nanti feasting, and with Nanti chanting in particular, is shaped by a discourse-centered approach to culture. In studying Nanti feasts, I seek to understand the ways that speech and related social action are used by human beings to locate meaning and continuity in lived experience. I take instances of discourse and of other verbal practices like chanting, not only to represent but to *constitute* the social and cultural life of the community in which they occur. From this perspective, Nanti chanting exemplifies how innovations in communicative practice articulate with profound changes in social configurations, economic strategies, and political relationships.

With this context in mind, let's now turn to some of the particulars of Nanti feasting. In the late afternoon of each feast – after community members have participated in an early morning communal work party, a late morning soccer game, and a mid-day meal of meat, fish, and yuca – two or three men enter the communal chanting area of the village, join hands, and begin to chant. During the first hour of chanting, other men, then boys, join that line, and a parallel line of women chanters forms. In these early hours of the feast, as the number of chanters grows, the energy and enthusiasm of all the feasters grow likewise. By dusk, a huge, unwieldy line of exhilarated male chanters will be careening around the central area of the village, paralleled by a shorter but no less energetic line of women. Eventually, that first long chant line, unable to contain the energy of its participants, breaks into several smaller lines of chanters.

Through the rest of the night and on into the next day, several chant lines move about the public spaces of the village. The composition of these lines changes frequently, as small lines join and separate, and as chanters of all ages and either gender join and leave each group. Once chanting has begun, it is usually continuous until the end of the feast some 20 hours later. When darkness falls, feasters must rely on all their senses – hearing, smell, touch, and memory, as well as vision – to guide their movements around the village. Many feasters chant throughout the night and into the following day with no sleep and very little rest.

Throughout the feast, everyone is drinking *oburoxi*, which is shared out to participants by the women and girls who made it. Women move among the feasters carrying a small pot or bowl full of *oburoxi* taken from their residence group's batch. They offer *oburoxi* cupful by cupful to each and every participant, chanters and spectators alike. According to my calculations, at a typical feast these days, feasters consume about 200 gallons of *oburoxi*. Consider for a moment that this is a village of about 190 people – plus or minus two anthropologists – and that the feast is only over when the *oburoxi* is gone or when no one is left standing to drink it.

Upon joining a chant line, the individual feaster becomes part of a moving organic entity. Feasters clasp hands tightly, often entwining their forearms to make a solid bond between them. As the feast progresses and feasters become more intoxicated, the movements of the line become more erratic and feasters must hold on to their neighbors tightly to stay upright and remain a part of the group. The movement of the group as a

whole combines the movements of the individual feasters, and thus supersedes them much of the time.

Being part of a moving chant line, intoxication from *oburoxi*, sleep deprivation, and the darkness of the night are all part of what makes the experience of the feast unique unto itself and all these elements help to transport feasters to an altered state of being. But it is the style and the intensity of the chanting within the chant lines that perhaps have the *most* transformative effect on feasters. To support this argument, I will now offer a discussion of what Nanti chanting is like.

3. Chanting and *Xarintaa*

When a Nanti speaker refers to the verbal activity around which feasting revolves, he or she will say, “nomatixi”, which means “I chant”. I have chosen to translate the verb stem *matix* as ‘chant’ to reflect several key characteristics of this verbal art form. First, the central element of Nanti chanting is the short chorus phrase which I will call a formula. The repertoire of chant formulas is impressively large, and Nantis as young as ten years old know as many as fifty chant formulas. Each formula consists of a line or pair of lines that make use of a restricted pattern of tones. The pitch of the tones in the sequence is less regular than their pattern and rhythm.

A group of chanters generally employ the same formula simultaneously but not synchronously. Most chant formulas are quite short, and are repeated ten to twelve times a minute, perhaps hundreds of times in a row. Any one formula is performed for an arbitrary amount of time, anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or more, until someone in the group begins to chant another formula and the rest of the group follows suit.

Being part of a chant line is a tremendously intense experience. Each feaster is surrounded by and enveloped in the sound of other voices, all similar to but not the same as their own. The steady, pulsing repetition of the chanting, which governs and guides the chant line’s physical movement, is as intoxicating to participants as the *oburoxi* is.

At this point, perhaps a few examples might help clarify my description.²

(1)	sarixojani sarixojani							
		<i>sarixoja: species of bird</i>						
beat	1	•	2	•	3	•	4	•
		ri-						
<hr style="border: 0.5px solid black;"/>								
		sa:-		xoja:-ni		sari-xoja:-ni		--
<hr style="border: 0.5px solid black;"/>								

While some chant formulas are composed of words with easily recognizable referential meaning, many more consist of what one might call vocables, that is, sound sequences that are prosodically, phonologically, and even morphologically Nanti ‘words’, but that carry no referential meaning in terms of daily discourse. Consider the first example: *sarixoja* is the term for a species of bird. But when this chant is performed, it

²You can listen to this and the following examples at The Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America, at www.ailla.org.

neither refers to nor invokes any particular *sarixoja*. In the second and third examples, the words in the formulas have no referential meaning at all that I have been able to learn.

		(2) inx yojiyojina															
beat	1	·	·	·	2	·	·	·	3	·	·	·	4	·	·	·	
		<u>inx</u>		<u>yojina</u>		<u>inx</u>		<u>yojina</u>		<u>inx</u>		<u>na</u>		<u>inx</u>			
		<u>yoji-</u>				<u>yoji-</u>				<u>yojiyoji</u>				<u>yojiyojina</u>			
beat	5	·	·	·	6	·	·	·	7	·	·	·	8	·	·	·	
		<u>inx</u>		<u>yojina</u>		<u>inx</u>		<u>yojina</u>		<u>inx</u>		<u>na</u>		<u>inx</u>			
		<u>yoji-</u>				<u>yoji-</u>				<u>yojiyoji</u>				<u>yojiyojina</u>			

		(3) yojina yojina														
beat	1	·	·	·	2	·	·	·	3	·	·	·	4	·	·	·
		<u>na</u>				<u>ji- na</u>				<u>-- na-</u>						
		<u>yo- --</u>		<u>ji-</u>		<u>yo-</u>		<u>--</u>		<u>yo- ji-</u>		<u>yo- ji- na</u>				

While the chant formulas themselves are quite structured, their performance involves a substantial amount of variation and individual creativity. Of great interest is the improvised line, or *xarintaa*, that Nanti chanters alternate with a matrix formula. Into the melodic pattern and rhythm of the formula, the chanter weaves utterances of sometimes humorous, sometimes highly socially salient content. Word pronunciation, stress patterns, and morphology may all be altered in order to match the shape of one's *xarintaa* to the matrix formula. *Xarintaa* is complex, provocative, and highly creative in both content and form.

Xarintaa may be performed in several ways. A chanter may perform a *xarintaa* to a group at large, with no obvious recipient. Or, a chanter may direct a *xarintaa* to a particular feaster. The recipient, in turn, may either simply continue to chant the matrix formula and listen to the *xarintaa*, or they may respond in turn with their own *xarintaa*, creating a form of dialogue within the chant performance.

Let's consider a brief example of *xarintaa*. This *xarintaa* was performed by Sonya in June 2001. The matrix formula Sonya chants is *yojina yojina*.

		(4) Sonya's <i>xarintaa</i>³							
30	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina
31	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina	yojina
32	<i>jaroxa</i>	<i>birotyo</i>	<i>pajiraninityo</i>	<i>jaroxa</i>	<i>birotyo</i>	<i>pajiraninityo</i>	<i>jaroxa</i>	<i>birotyo</i>	<i>pajiraninityo</i>
	had-not	you	long-ago	had-not	you	long-ago	had-not	you	long-ago
	<i>Had you not,</i>	<i>long ago,</i>	<i>Had you not,</i>	<i>long ago,</i>	<i>Had you not,</i>	<i>long ago,</i>	<i>Had you not,</i>	<i>long ago,</i>	<i>Had you not,</i>

³ Each numbered line or set of lines in this transcript corresponds to a poetic line in Sonya's original chant. The first line, after each number, is my transcription in Nanti. The second line provides word-level glosses. The third line of text is a free translation into English. Segments in bold type indicate high tone. The words and segments in italic type correspond to the referential meanings I have provided immediately below them, while the words and segments that are not in italics do not have a referential meaning that is clear to me. This transcription, translations, and any errors they may contain, are my own. This chant was recorded June 16, 2001.

- 33 *gotaganaterityo pixantityo xarintaa*
 began-to-teach-him you-said xarintaa
began to teach them, you (would not have then)
said, xarintaa,
- 34 *pamujigaxerira pisyandinxatentityori*
 "you-aid-them-thus your-people-here"
"You will aid them now, your people here"
- 35 *yojina yojina yojina yojina*
 36 *yojina yojina yojina yojina*
 37 *yojina yojina yojina yojina*
 (2.0) [Sonya breathes]
- 38 *jametyo xari pajiranityo*
 had-not long-ago
Had you not long ago
- 39 *pogotaganaxeri jametyo xari*
 you-began-to-teach-him had-not
you began to teach him, had (you) not
- 40 *jametyo xantityo pisyandinxatenityo*
 had-not said your-people-here
You would not have said, "(Aid) your people here."
- 41 *yojina yojina yojina yojina*
- 42 *pinej aryorityo noxenxijanaxeri*
 look indeed I-begin-to-remember-about-him
Look, indeed, I begin to remember about him.
- 43 *noxantityo xarintaa yagatagani*
 I-said xarintaa he-was-the-one-who-finished
I say, xarintaa, "He was finished (with your
training and your medicine)."
- 44 *pinej aryorityo noxenxijanaxeri*
 look indeed I-begin-to-remember-about-him
Look, indeed, I begin to remember about him.
- 45 *noxantityo xarintaa yagatagani*
 I-say xarintaa he-was-the-one-who-finished
I say, xarintaa, "He was finished (with your
training and your medicine)."
- 46 *yojina yojina yojina yojina*
 47 *yojina yojina yojina yojina*

I chose this example because Sonya's *xarintaa* has overtly political referential content, and it is this aspect of *xarintaa* performance that I will now discuss.

In addition to their beauty as extemporaneous poetry, *xarintaa* are fascinating because in them, individual Nanti chanters publicly express ideas that otherwise remain private or unspoken in daily interactions in Montetoni. At present, *xarintaa* is the only form in which it is socially acceptable to directly address sensitive topics and social tensions in public. By addressing these topics in the context of *xarintaa*, individuals are able to make

opinions, desires, grievances, and emotions publicly known whose expression in any other form or setting defies the accepted norms of Nanti interaction.

In Sonya's *xarintaa*, for example, Sonya voices criticism of a young man who had begun to receive training as a healthcare provider for the community but who subsequently chose to stop receiving training and had abandoned his new role. Up until this moment, no one had spoken at all about the young man's actions, much less criticized them. But later on in this *xarintaa*, Sonya turns her criticism of the young man toward a positive end: she creates a contrast between him and the other trainee – her own spouse – emphasizing that he is continuing his training and wants to be able to provide healthcare for the community. Sonya chants about an issue that transcends the concerns of her own residence group, and in her *xarintaa* she directly addresses the impact of some individuals' actions on other individuals as members of the same community.

As I suggested previously, in their interactions outside of the feast Nantis are extremely non-confrontational, women even more so than men. Sonya's *xarintaa* exemplifies the transformations that many Nanti feasters embody: what can be said and how it can be said are radically reconfigured.

4. Feasting and Transformation

In this paper, I have suggested that feasting activities differ substantially from activities during the rest of the week. Certainly what villagers do during a feast is strikingly different from what they do on an ordinary day. But I am also making a stronger claim. Feasting has a transformative effect on feasters *and* on their relationships to one another. During feasting, Nanti individuals often behave and express themselves in ways that are dramatically different from their usual selves. They interact directly with individuals whom they may have little contact with, or social access to, outside the context of the feast. But most importantly, through the feast, Nantis enact their willing participation in a social group that supersedes, and in fact temporarily negates, the residence group as the most salient social unit.

Consider again the experiential aspects of feasting. The duration and the intensity of the simultaneous stimuli that define feasting are physically and emotionally very demanding. And yet the stamina Nantis have to continue feasting, hour after hour and week after week, is astonishing. Nantis are tremendously motivated to continue feasting to the limits of their physical capabilities. What might it be about feasting that is so worthwhile?

Speaking as a sometime feaster, the first, obvious, answer that I will give to this question is that feasting is fun and feels good. But I would like to suggest that there is something durable and profound about this particular way of having fun and feeling good. Feasting is always *both* an intensely individual and an intensely social experience. Participants both feel good and feel good *together*, sharing and expressing powerful emotions with one another. Feasting creates an intensely pleasurable common experience of unity that every individual feaster collaborates in creating, and each feast endures through time as a shared historical memory.

As I suggested earlier, the salient social network for daily life in Montetoni is the residence group. Very few activities inherently generate interaction or collaboration among residence groups. The feast, however, is *defined* by interaction and collaboration

among these smaller groups. In pondering the contrasts between Nanti communicative practices inside and outside of feasts, I have come to marvel at the tremendous efforts of the residents of Montetoni, week after week, to make an intentional community where there might otherwise just be a village.

I would like to close with a comment on the political aspect of my interest in Nanti feasting. In the five years that I have been participating in and observing Nanti feasting, various aspects of feasting have changed. At the same time, of course, various aspects of daily life and relationships in Montetoni have changed as well. And yet at every moment there is continuity between what has gone before and what is emerging. From the sociopolitical perspective of an outsider committed to aiding the Nanti communities in maintaining and promoting their own well-being, I see feasting as a powerful expression of the creativity and agency of Nanti individuals as they act to embrace their ever-changing world of experiences. Changes aren't happening to the Nantis in Montetoni – these Nantis are making changes happen. So, although I do not know *how* feasting will change in coming years, I am confident that it *will* change, because Nantis will continue to innovate ways of engaging with one another and a changing social world.

Appendix One: Inside and outside the feast: a concise comparison

The following table summarizes the key elements of feasting in relation to the activities of the rest of the week in Montetoni. This table reflects two analytical goals: to demonstrate how these two spheres of activity contrast with one another and to suggest how they complement one another from the point of view of a *system* of communicative practices. The table provides the key data that evidence the distinction between the social groups in which Nantis presently interact inside and outside the feast; while most activities during the rest of the week are bounded by the residence group, virtually all activities during feasting take the entire community as the meaningful group. A pattern emerges here: communicative practices that are appropriate among residence group members differ from those that are appropriate among community members in Montetoni.

Inside the feast	Outside the feast
<i>Verbal behavior</i>	
loud, boisterous talk	quiet talk
most interaction occurs in public spaces	little interaction occurs in public spaces
explicit opinions, criticisms are expressed in public spaces	explicit opinions, criticisms are rarely expressed in public spaces
chanting	no chanting
joking, teasing in public spaces	little joking, teasing in public spaces
loud effusive laughter and hilarity in shared spaces	little laughter and no hilarity in shared spaces
<i>Use of physical space</i>	
people inhabit and fill up public spaces	people only pass through public spaces
men labor together in the <i>xanpo</i>	no labor in the <i>xanpo</i>
men fish and/or hunt in large groups to provide <i>sima</i> and/or <i>ibatsa</i> for all villagers	men fish and/or hunt alone or in groups of two or three to provide for family or residence group members
village-wide fishing parties in the river near to the village on the day(s) prior to feasting	no village-wide fishing parties
<i>Physical behavior</i>	
adults hold hands and move around in groups	adults do not hold hands
adults have substantial physical contact with	almost no physical contact between adults

each other, especially in chant lines	
demonstrations of affection among adults in public spaces	no demonstrations of affection among adults in public spaces
intoxication in public spaces	no intoxication in public spaces
village-wide soccer games	soccer is rarely played, and if it is, it is played by small groups of boys ?
individuals sit, lie, and sleep where ever their feasting activities take them	individuals visit others for relatively brief periods and sleep inside their own huts
urination in the company of others	urination is done discreetly, usually by lone individuals
vomiting in the company of others	no vomiting in public spaces
<i>Social interactions</i>	
villagers coordinate their activities and place themselves in the company of others in public spaces across residence group lines	villagers coordinate their activities among their family or residence group and do not seek out others' company in public spaces
any person may expect to drink any <i>oburoxi</i> available in public spaces	<i>oburoxi</i> is drunk inside cooking huts by individuals or small groups - no expectation that it will be offered
<i>oburoxi</i> is shared all around the village by the women and girls who made it	individuals are given portions of <i>oburoxi</i> by the woman who made it, entirely at her discretion or at the invitation of her spouse
open sharing of uncooked food, primarily <i>sima</i> and <i>ibatsa</i> , across residence group lines	discreet sharing of uncooked food among family and residence groups
open sharing of prepared food, primarily <i>sima</i> and <i>ibatsa</i> , across residence group lines	discreet sharing of prepared food among family and residence group members

Key words in Nanti:

ibatsa : generic term for meat

nomatixi : a verb complex which means, "I chant"

nosinxitaxa : a verb complex which means, "I became intoxicated"

oburoxi : mildly alcoholic drink made from fermented yuca mash

sexatsi : yuca (genus *manihot*), a tuber that is the staple food in the Nantis' diet

sima : prototype term for fish

xanpo : large cleared area in the center of the village, primarily used during feasts

xarintaa : improvised lines chanted by feasters

Appendix Two: Recommended Readings

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