

Stories from Cuninico: A fieldwork-podcast

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This is a short reflection on how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced our field research among the Kukama Kukamiria population of the lower Marañón river in Loreto region, Peru. In our research project *From the margins of the Peruvian state: Corporeality, contamination and ethnic identities among Kukama peoples of the lower Marañón River* we seek to understand the responses of the national state, its management and articulation, to different actors and mechanisms of silence in the context of oil contamination of the riverine Kukama area at the lower Marañón. We work mainly in the community of Cuninico, located in Urarinas district. This area suffered from oil spills from time to time. The last one was catastrophic and occurred in 2014. In our project we investigate how people from Cuninico perceive themselves as they are conscious to live in a contaminated environment. This is the starting point for our project; from there we look at the state's responses and its performances.¹

We use ethnographic techniques to trace the spaces for dialogue between the state and the Kukama Kukamiria people to investigate the interstices between what is said to be done, what is done, and what is

left out, as well as the results of this. We did research on notions such as corporeality and agency to understand the dynamics of the dialogue. We started our study in 2019, mainly working with women. From the textures of their voices, their commitments and care, we learned to understand the magnitude of the oil spill and their sufferings from the pollution of the rivers and forests.

When we were about to begin our third and last field trip for our project in March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic spread throughout the Loreto region. We could not travel. We became, in the words of Behar (2009), a kind of “vulnerable observers.” Far away from the site of research, concerned, longing to see how the women in Cuninico, their children, and their partners were doing. We tried to find out how it would be possible to continue our collaboration with them. Ethical dilemmas around whether to continue when there is so much suffering or to stop were discussed. However, the Kukama Kukamiria women did not stop communicating with us. In the midst of the pandemic they organized their lives and cares and made decisions in a communal way. Their messages by WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger were followed by phone calls, extending and turning into interviews as we tried to understand some sentences: Why did he say that “they had returned to the times of their grandparents?” How is the *condorcillo* used to treat Covid-19? Why is medical oxygen harmful because it is cold? Who was the pregnant woman who was picked up and put through quarantine? What protocol followed the technicians of the telephone company to enter the community?

Without being very conscious of it at first, these communications became frequent. We had transformed the research project from an ethnographic investigation in the field into a remote and digital anthropological research. Long conversations by internet facilities became a very different way of “being there” (Geertz 1989), re-signifying physical distance. We had begun to use other techniques and to move with some comfort in these. Rereading Pink et al. (2019), we saw that we had made the leap to remote ethnography. As the

authors point out, digital ethnography does not result from the direct translation of face-to-face research techniques to a digital format. This also implies knowing the technological infrastructures to which we approach, and which the population with whom we work uses daily. We realized that the people of Cuninico prefer to use phone calls, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger since a telecommunication antenna was installed in the community after the oil spills. People use mainly cellphones of common use, which they generally recharge at night when the electric motors are turned on for a few hours. Women with less economic resources have less access to these compared to men due to the costs of internet services. Accessing these spaces was another way of entering the "field."

In our favor was that we had advanced in our study through on-site fieldwork and we already knew the people in Cuninico. We also had the permissions and authorisations required for our field research. However, this way of working also has its own ethical constraints, ranging from how to narrate suffering, uncertainty, and anguish to acknowledging the difference between a telephone interview and a spontaneous and intimate conversation. We had to work ethically: taking care of what they told us and understanding why and what they were telling it. They not only spoke to us about the suffering and adverse conditions in which they had to face the pandemic, but, above all, about their knowledge, practices, and memories with which they did so. Thus, the need to account for their voices and their stories came out, and *Our stories from Cuninico* was born as a series of podcasts, starring local women and broadcasted through a Facebook page.² Publishing these podcasts also become a way to return part of our research to the people in Cuninico.

We discovered that the voices of Kukama Kukamiria women and men at the lower Marañón river in Loreto region of Peru have always been strong and deserve to be heard. The podcasts at the Facebook page *Our stories from Cuninico* resulted from collaborative work and are also a form of recognition to them. These people understand that

the state will not come to them, or if it does, it will do them wrong. They must do something to resist, because finally surviving is that: to resist. And, this pandemic has again taught them and us that surviving is a political act. We understood the different levels of equivocation (Viveiros de Castro 2004) that arise between the state and these people: isolation is not understood in the same way, disease is not only a biological issue but a social fact, the "mothers of the plants" take care of us. It is through their voices that we turned to look at the authority of the state. It is not new that the state places responsibility with the citizens. The big social fractures, the great deficit in hospital infrastructure, the centralized health policies, or the lack of health workers, all these problems in Cuninico are not even remotely acknowledged by the government. When everything collapsed Cuninico's voices remained firm and steady, and therefore we decided to share their stories. This is the form of care that we learned from them by using remote ethnography.

Notes

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² <https://web.facebook.com/Nuestras-historias-desde-Cuninico-117582996749472/>

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