



# Ethnography in-sight: Amasonic politics<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The photo captured in 2018 during a one-week stopover on a trip between two Central Rainforest regions of Peru is the point of departure for a reflection on the use of sound by Asháninka, Nomatsiguenga, and other rainforest peoples for “Amasonic” politics. A wide span of genres ranging from autochthonous songs produced by ensembles playing percussions and pan-flutes to school bands performing military marches is key when rainforest peoples exert pressure in the provincial capital to obtain land titles and other rights. Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga leaders also create soundscapes pervaded by politics at local gatherings to consume manioc beer and ally with supporters to enhance their demands. Disputes take place within these shared soundscapes, as evidenced by a Mother’s Day celebrations at which Indigenous and nonindigenous school teachers chose diverging music and dances for their grades to perform because of disagreement about what is essential for the Peruvian repertoire.

I captured this photo (see Figure 1) in 2018 during a one-week stopover on a trip between two regions of Peru’s Central Rainforest: the Gran Pajonal and the Ene River basin. I needed to pause my ethnographic research and check the drafts of a recent book of mine, which the publisher had just sent; the tranquility of a hotel room in the provincial capital of Satipo seemed ideal for concentrating on that work. But during a short break in the plaza, a completely different and unusual soundscape suddenly erupted. First I heard rhythms of drums and rattles, then a woman and chorus singing in Asháninka, and then a single pan flute playing a lively melody while shouts of “*Música original!*” (“That’s autochthonous music!”) in Spanish and “*Tsame Tsonkiri!*” (“Let’s go with Tsonkiri!”) in Asháninka accompanied the spectacle (Kummels, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/829859790>).

When I caught up with the group marching down the street, I was immersed in a parade or *pasacalle* organized for the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples on August 9. I immediately forgot about my manuscript, instinctively switched on a voice recorder, and began taking pictures with a small camera. Among the motifs that attracted me were the Asháninka musicians dressed in tunic-like *cushmas*; some women had decorated their garb with seeds of rainforest plants, and the men wore elaborate headdresses with multicolored feathers. Visually and sonically, they laid claim to being the original inhabitants of the region. Such displays used to be rare in Satipo, even though this bustling rainforest town is also home to the Asháninka as well as neighboring original peoples—Nomatsiguenga, Yánesha, and Kakinte; today they represent 20 percent of the province’s population.

This type of Indigenous music performance has become characteristic of what I call *Amasonic politics*. It is tied to demands for government land allocation, which until the 1980s decisively favored settlers who grabbed the fertile and easily accessible valleys. But since then, Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga leaders (*pinkatsari*) and their organizations have successfully acquired titles as Comunidades Nativas<sup>2</sup> in river basins and territories adjacent to the Ene, Tambo, and Perené rivers. As evidenced by the Tsonkiri ensemble, the creative use of rhythms, lyrics, and instruments is an essential strategy for securing land as a Comunidad Nativa and paving the way for development on one’s own terms. Indigenous teachers speak of *reactivación* when promoting original, ancestral Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga genres, such as songs performed with a *sonkari* (a five-pipe pan flute often played by a duo) or *tamporo* (drum), *matikantsi* intoned by men, *maninkerentsi* sung by women dancing in a row, and *amampaantsi* love songs. They are precisely staged in multicultural contexts such as International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples to convey

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FIGURE 1 Tsonkiri performing at the International Day of Indigenous Peoples. Photo by Ingrid Kummels, August 9, 2018



political messages and attract local crowds of settlers (*colonos*) or civilians (*civiles*), most of whom are migrants from the Andes now living in this hub of coffee and cacao production and rainforest logging. When Indigenous Peoples lay claim to land and demand bilingual education and infrastructure for their communities, they make an impact by literally raising their voices and emitting original tunes. They harness traditional melodies for Amasonic politics but have no qualms about adopting Andean rhythms and the popular sounds of Amazonian cumbia to enhance sonic diplomacy.

I first became acquainted with Amasonic politics when I organized a workshop with colleagues at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin in 2014 to which we invited representatives of the Kotiria (Wanano) and Wira poná (Desana) from the Colombian Amazon region for a “reencounter” with artifacts that anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg had brought to Germany more than a century ago. Chanting and dialoguing were crucial for reanimating these “Sleeping Objects” (Kummels, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/474203931>). It became evident that knowledge did not materialize solely in the artifacts at the museum depot. Instead, knowledge was produced and conveyed in the act of singing and by involving anyone witnessing it in the emergent soundscape. Chanting to a butterfly dance-mask displayed in a showcase, Gaudencio Moreno made a sonic intervention in front of us—a non-Indigenous audience of anthropologists—and to my video camera and the larger audience of future film viewers (see Kummels, 2018a).

To clarify the concept of Amasonic politics, I rely on two schools of thought regarding sound, oratory, music, and dance. The first offers fresh insights into the sound traditions of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples from an ontological perspective. This scholarship analyzes basic differences in the perception of the world mediated through verbal arts and musical sounds. Its theoretical framework offers a new access to the way Amazonian peoples themselves interpret sonorities from different ontological vantage points. These distinct perspectives on sound create multiple universes or multiverses (Brabec de Mori, Lewy, and García, 2015). The intricate nature of human-nonhuman relationship in Amazonian Indigenous music rests, for instance, on specific ways that sacred flutes are associated with nonhuman agency in the world (Hill and Chaumeil, 2011). A second theoretical current highlights how certain musics have been shaped by migration, for example in how citizenship and Indigeneity are reconfigured in the context of festivities in Lima and the Andes (Cánepa Koch, 2010; Tucker, 2019). Tsonkiri’s Amazonian *pasacalle* resembles strategies deployed in the Lima urban setting due to migration and reorganization (Odria, 2017). Addressing the strategic adoption and diversification of musical trends in the Northern Amazonian metropolis of Iquitos, Kathryn Metz (2013, 169) rightly points out the necessity of considering the Amazonian roots of tecno-cumbia despite its association with Lima’s Andean migrant population—which may also apply to other genres assumed to be exclusively Andean. The intense interchange and fluidity between Amazonia and the Andes should be taken into account (Kummels, 2018b). To summarize, these approaches have rarely been addressed together with respect to Amazonian Indigenous Peoples’ soundscapes, which increasingly render the interconnectedness of rural and urban settlements. Reconciling these contrasting approaches promises a better understanding of the profound transformations in Amazonian Indigenous life. Sonic ontologies are constantly reworked locally, but ruptures may occur when influences from neighboring regions are adopted to affirm identity in the face of land-grabbing and state reluctance to guarantee land and infrastructure on par with more privileged citizens. Tsonkiri is an example of intervening politically by both

relying on sound traditions while also making them legible for a wide audience by absorbing current music fads, instruments, and technology.

Tres Unidos de Matereni, the Asháninka-Nomatsiguenga community where our work on sound concentrates (see Barreto et al., 2023; see also <https://www.shared-soundscapes.net>), has a long tradition of Amasonic politics, and has innovatively developed oratory, music, and dance to obtain and bolster specific rights to a land title as a Comunidad Nativa since the late 1970s. Music and dance remain indispensable for alliances and political negotiation within this entity and beyond. Delegations of neighboring Comunidades Nativas and their subdivisions (*sectores*) participate in each other's festivities. Chiefs called *pinkatsari* contribute to the soundscape of commemorative celebrations by delivering impromptu speeches, often in three languages (Asháninka, Nomatsiguenga, and Spanish), when addressing those attending and establishing or confirming alliances. Current festivities build upon an older pattern of honoring abundant prey and basic staples like manioc during the full moon but also diverge considerably from this ontological pattern. Nowadays, feasting centers on the date the land title was acquired and schools were founded; several national holidays and Andean festivals are observed as well—even though they are not considered “ancestral.” Matereni boasts a well-trained school band (lead by an Andean music teacher) that plays military marches. Many of the men here have worked as contract laborers for settlers, an experience that incited them to become independent and some raise cattle themselves. This in turn paved the way for Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga communities to adopt Andean cattle fertility rituals, like the Santiago celebrations, as a way of affirming sonically that they had become successful cattle breeders. The mobilization of Andean culture for Amasonic politics is reflected in the Tsonkiri repertoire at the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, as we can see from the lyrics of one of the songs performed:

*Pamarankari katsimari toro*

*Pamarantiyari katsimari toro*

*Irotakija abisainta shirontantsi*

*Anampikika*

*Ariyajai akiyajai iraakiya*

(Beware of the raging bull

Beware of the raging bull

Wherever he goes people rejoice

In our community

That's how it is, that's how it should be)<sup>3</sup>

Since Amasonic politics combines multicultural artistic skills and tastes with demands for development on one's own terms, it has promoted the appropriation of Andean music and dance, which now are part of a familiar repertoire that Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga people enjoy. Even in rainforest communities like Matereni that are inhabited exclusively by original peoples, there is a longstanding tradition of playing records or recordings from Andean *orquestas típicas*, often popular *huaynos*, fast-paced songs executed with instruments like guitars, violins, trumpets, and harps. Matereni was quick to adopt the latest accessible sound technology, starting with radios, small record players followed by record players with a loudspeaker built into the case lid, cassette recorders, Walkmans, and CD players. Festive soundscapes that relied on a variety of traditional men and women genres were intensified by integrating the technology used to reproduce popular music. By the 1980s, Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga were dancing to Amazonian cumbia records of Juaneco y su Combo and Los Shapis as well as to the British rock band Genesis. Today they rely on cell phones and attach USBs to sound systems.

According to what the inhabitants of Matereni have told me, their self-determined sonic practices have suffered several major setbacks. Particularly tragic was the period between 1988 and 1997 (the years differ according to community), when soundscapes of silence prevailed: Matereni had to defend itself from the Shining Path, which had declared war on the Peruvian state and infiltrated several Central Rainforest regions. Women and children hid in remote *chacras* (agricultural plots) and avoided making loud noises that might reveal their whereabouts. In the course of self-managing the timber exploitation boom that began in 1998,

the community seized the opportunity to use its initial earnings and celebrate in a big way. The chief contracted a band (similar to the idolized Juaneco y su Combo) known for popular Amazonian chicha cumbias (for a history of this genre, see Romero, 2007). Amasonic politics had made a dream come true, converting what the community could only hear on records into a live event. Currently, Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga bands such as Invasión Asháninka and Arawak Tropical record cumbia songs that refer to Indigenous lifeways, often sung in their Indigenous mother tongue.

Today new sounds invade Matereni, the by-product of infrastructure developments that happened to take place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bridges were constructed, finally making it possible to cross all the rivers of the basin by road. Small concrete houses were built, financed by a government program with the Quechua name of Sumaq Wasi. Engineers and construction workers—mainly from the Andean region—would turn on their sound systems to listen to popular music ranging from classic Mexican corridos to heavy metal played by the German band Rammstein. Adults now say that, because of these bustling rhythms and powerful sound systems, their children often mock traditional Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga music with its adagio-paced rhythm. Instead, they prefer tecno-cumbia, rap, and reggaeton songs they can download in Spanish or English. Like most Amazonian Indigenous regions, Matereni has long been deprived of digital infrastructure, but during the pandemic children received tablets for homeschooling. A few teachers with regular income set up home internet networks; others had television sets and cell phones for the first time. The Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga welcome and insist on these developments but are struggling to control them on their own terms. Mass media programs rarely include Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga news or cultural expressions. Moreover, the improved transport network promotes a market economy and monetarization that in turn threatens to undermine the daily practices of reciprocity still in force.

Amasonic politics counteracts the inadvertent outcomes of the development desired by this Comunidad Nativa. Its counterstrategies are rooted in everyday informal gatherings at which *masato* (or *pearentsi* in Asháninka), a lightly alcoholic beverage made from manioc, is consumed. In these soundscapes Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga listen to one another, exchange opinions, laugh, and voice their queries while sharing *masato*. They also engage in cultural production like singing and handicrafts (see Barreto et al., 2023). Humorous songs about people drinking so much *masato* that they are ready to drop remain popular; these have a deeper meaning regarding the veneration of manioc as an indispensable staple. As Sandoval Chobiavante, an expert *sonkari* player, explains, “When we get drunk [with *masato*] we feel an urge to sing—if we don’t get drunk, we cannot sing.”<sup>4</sup> I experienced how listening to historical recordings from this same community also pushed people to repeat a song they had just heard—in different versions. Each person would build upon their memories and resources. Sometimes they reacted by singing a version close to the original; other times, they would sing a completely different tune and lyrics. Whatever their response, singing the song again brings encoded music back to life. *Masato* gatherings therefore generate soundscapes imbued with original music and its knowledge. Despite radical changes since the 1970s—or because of them—the frequency of these drinking parties has increased. While the local diet has shifted from rainforest resources to purchased foodstuffs, sharing manioc beer has become an everyday form of bypassing the market logic that pervades other social realms—and of controlling unleashed progress. Drinking parties are also easily adapted. In May 2022, when I visited a birthday celebration for a community chief in a Matereni settlement, I realized that the leaders had gathered not only to party but also to discuss urgent affairs. Their agenda included demands for additional government financing to build feeder roads and to compensate community members for their work as day laborers. The chiefs were busy making phone calls to engineers, lawyers, and functionaries. However, they would do so in the midst of those present, increasing their cell phone volume so that all could hear and actively participate in the negotiations.

*Masato* gatherings are not the only place where Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga practice Amasonic politics and negotiate development by renewing sound, its messages, and its technology. Matereni’s schools also intervene when generating shared—and simultaneously disputed—soundscapes. Five primary school teachers are Asháninka and four are *hispanos* (Spanish-speaking Peruvians; those in Matereni are from the Andean region). This mix applied by the Ministry of Education discriminates against communities like Matereni where practically all children grow up monolingually in Asháninka (nowadays, only a minority speak Nomatsiguenga). Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga teachers have worked out ways of promoting the mother tongue by creating songs in collaboration with their pupils. “Kametsa Tsimeri” (“Beautiful Small Birds”) deals with the threat of extinction of rainforest birds due to environmental change and was composed by a teacher and his class. While autochthonous genres used to be composed by individual authors, teachers have devised a novel collective authorship; several songs have become quite popular throughout the region. *Hispano* teachers, however, promote distinct cultural ideas. On Mother’s Day in Matereni in 2022,<sup>5</sup> they organized most of the program according to Peru’s tripartite division of Coast, Sierra, and Rainforest (a concept first implemented by the Peruvian state in the nineteenth century), neatly classifying the presentations of poetry, music, and dance. The group exerted subtle pressure on one of the Asháninka teachers to rehearse an Afro-Peruvian Coastal dance called *Festejo* with her preschool children. This genre, characterized by the rhythms of a wooden box, is not often heard in Matereni. As a result, she ended up dancing frenetically by herself to compensate for the fact that her pupils remained petrified in front of a crowd of nonetheless amused mothers.

As an anthropologist engaged in image and sound return, I also influence Matereni’s soundscapes. In June 2019, Gisela Cánepa and I organized a workshop at the Institute of Ethnomusicology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru in Lima and invited three men from Matereni, two of them elder *sonkari* pan-flute musicians. When returning to their community they enthused about the experience of performing before an appreciative audience in Lima. They told others about the sound archive they had

visited, which specialized in music; they thought of new ways to preserve music and dance traditions in Matereni. During my visits there was much talk about practicing and disseminating the art of Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga music and dance genres.

At the general assembly held in May 2022 to prepare for the big celebration commemorating the acquisition of the community's land title, the chief made a point of first mentioning that *sonkari* musicians, men chanting *matikantsi*, and women singing *maninkerentsi* as they danced in a row would be a priority this year. They had always been part of the festivities but were no longer the main protagonists. These performers have an especially hard time when participating in an anniversary soundscape dominated by powerful sound systems that play Amazonian cumbia at full volume. Due to my curiosity, after the assembly I hurried to ask the chief who would be performing these Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga genres. His curt and self-confident reply was, "We'll search for performers and find them." To my surprise, he did just that in June, during the event I call the "Matikantsi Festival" (see Kummels, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/802792154>). Without further ado, he grabbed the microphone and started singing "Noshigopitsatanakari Pakitsara" ("The Monkey Escaping the Eagle"). Many other chiefs and ex-chiefs present at this event spontaneously followed his example of affirmative Amasonic politics—singing current versions of a sound legacy that they consider their very own.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I borrow the term *Amasonic* from the SLACA website: <https://www.salsa-tipiti.org/es/salsa-scholarship/amasonic>. Here I conceptualize this term according to my ethnographic findings in the Peruvian Central Rainforest.

<sup>2</sup> The legal figure of the Comunidad Nativa is based on the leftist Velasco Alvarado government (1968–1975) land reform. According to Peruvian law, land is allocated to Indigenous collectives self-governed by a general assembly.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Rocío Barreto, revised by Pablo Jacinto.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Sandoval Chobiavante, Matereni, June 19, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Research in the Central Rainforest between 2021 and 2023 was supported by the by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Anthropologist Rocío Barreto accompanied me during the May 2022 research stay.

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