

Towards Epistemic Diversity: Ways of Knowing Among the Asháninka of the Peruvian Amazon

Lorena Reinert
Sociology and Anthropology, Spanish, and Philosophy
Messiah College
One College Ave
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jenell Paris

Abstract

Alternative epistemologies are ways of knowing that challenge dominant notions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Feminist, Latino, and more recently indigenous thinkers have pointed to these epistemologies to indicate that supposedly universal models of rationality exclude ways of knowing that are central to their experiences. Minimal work has been done, though, to study alternative epistemologies empirically. This paper analyzes three weeks of fieldwork on indigenous epistemology conducted in August 2018 among the Asháninka of the Peruvian Amazon. Its findings consider the use of social identity as an indicator of epistemic legitimacy. This person-oriented way of knowing is juxtaposed with more “Western,” reason-based models. Person-oriented epistemologies offer an important contribution to the ethics of knowing. Whereas reason-based models aim towards knowledge that is true abstractly and independently of context, person-based models place importance on particularity and place. Consequently, they connect us to our contexts and identities in a way that dominant, reason-centered epistemologies cannot.

Keywords: indigenous epistemology, Amazonian ethnography, postcolonial theory, decoloniality

1. Introduction

Alternative epistemologies are ways of knowing that challenge dominant notions of what constitutes legitimate thought. Feminist, Latino, and more recently indigenous thinkers have pointed to these epistemologies to indicate that supposedly universal models of rationality exclude ways of knowing that are central to their experiences. Feminist sociologists, for example, have demonstrated that women are more likely to justify their knowledge on the basis of intuition and personal experience than through reason and logical explanation.¹ Latino thinkers in the United States have argued that identity and experience are central to learning for minority communities.²

With respect to indigenous epistemologies specifically, recent literature has drawn attention to the kinds of knowledge seen as central to indigenous life. One such sphere, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), considers the ever-evolving knowledge indigenous people hold of the land they inhabit. TEK has become particularly valuable in light of the contemporary environmental crisis and is now a key consideration in global conversations regarding natural resource management,³ biodiversity,⁴ and sustainable agriculture.⁵ Indigenous knowledge has also been studied for its potential to contribute to medicinal practices,⁶ and an entire legal field has developed to protect indigenous knowledge from “biopiracy” – the theft of indigenous knowledge by multinational pharmaceutical companies and other corporate stakeholders.⁷

These considerations of indigenous epistemology recognize its value and potential to inform the way we approach problems on a global scale. At the same time, they often separate indigenous knowledge from the local contexts within which it has developed and held significance.⁸ In this regard, indigenous knowledge is treated as an extractable resource, valuable and useful for very different contexts than those out of which it arose. In addition, many of these perspectives

conceive of knowledge primarily in terms of a set of facts related to ecology and medicine. Knowledge is not limited to factual information or content, however, but extends beyond this to include more fundamental questions related to how we view the world. Carothers, Moritz, and Zarger recognize the importance of going beyond an understanding of knowledge as a mere set of facts in ethnographic work.⁹ They highlight the importance of deeper ethnographic questions: “What is knowledge? What is knowing? ...How do local people conceptualize knowledge? ...How do we best construct formal models of representation, and how do we represent not knowing?”¹⁰ Their work moves beyond an understanding of indigenous knowledge as factual information independent of context, highlighting instead the idea of knowledge as a particular way of orienting towards the world *within* a given context.

More recent literature has aimed to better engage this understanding of indigenous knowledge as a particular orientation towards the world. Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, for example, writes that indigenous knowledge is holistic and tied to different spheres like ethics, health, education, and in particular the land, from which it cannot be separated.¹¹ Knowledge arises out of experiences with people, places, and contexts, and that knowledge is fundamentally relational. It both shapes and is shaped by the people we interact with and the places we inhabit. Wilson advocates for the recovery of traditional indigenous knowledge in order to regain “the ways of being that allowed our peoples to live a spiritually balanced, sustainable existence within our ancient homelands for thousands of years.”¹² Indigenous knowledge in this sense is not just about knowing information, but also about knowing how to live well within a certain environment. The idea of *buen vivir*, or sustainable well-being, is inseparable from the question of knowledge.

2. Theory

In a world shaped by colonial structures, notions of knowledge and identity are charged with inherited meaning. Franz Fanon demonstrates this in his examination of the racial frameworks that have come out of the colonial encounter.¹³ Among the characteristics that have become associated with blackness are instinct, irrational impulse, and primal sensuality. Fanon finds himself trapped here in the double bind of a binary framework. If he acts rationally, he becomes “less black” and fails to represent his people and culture. On the other hand, if he acts irrationally, he reinforces the idea that this is what it means to be black. No matter what choice he makes, he loses.

Achille Mbembe considers related questions of knowledge and identity by mapping out a genealogy of black reason.¹⁴ He outlines the historical construction of black identity and rationality from the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the contemporary world, pointing to how “black” has come to signify irrationality, but also indicating the many ways in which black people have resisted this domination by adopting new subjectivities – learning to read and write, leading slave revolts, and initiating abolition movements – that express their agency.

Like black identity, indigeneity has come into being as the irrational Other to Western rationality. The irrationality of indigenous people was codified through the creation of formal categories that distinguished civilized Europeans from savage natives. Bartolomé de las Casas argued in 1552 that the natives of Latin America were human beings just like European colonists,¹⁵ and this led to the belief that the natives had souls and could not be killed indiscriminately. But this concession of humanity was accompanied by an epistemic distinction between white Europeans and the native inhabitants of the lands they colonized. Europeans occupied the top of the epistemic pyramid, while the savage inhabitants of the Amazon, seen as lacking both written language and political organization, occupied the bottom. A racial hierarchy became an epistemic one, with “Western” identity and thought constituting the pinnacle of rationality.

This epistemic hierarchy forms the historical backdrop against which indigenous ways of knowing are perceived. Given these conditions, painting indigenous ways of knowing as legitimate forms of rationality means locating them within a framework in which the more rational they are, the less indigenous they become. But the alternative – claiming that the indigenous somehow oppose rationality or modernity – only serves to reinforce the dualistic framework created by colonialism in the first place. As Santiago Castro-Gómez argues,¹⁶ indigenous identity is located at the fringes of modernity and rationality, not outside of these structures. Its perspective is neither anti-modern nor irrational. The critique indigeneity offers of coloniality is powerful precisely because it represents an experience of an alternative rationality, which de-centers the “Western” tradition from the place it has occupied at the forefront of rational thought.

Indigenous epistemologies have been historically marginalized and constitute a valuable contribution to epistemology in their own right. But the contexts they represent cannot be viewed in isolation, since postcolonial conditions of power are always already present in their formation.¹⁷ Though indigenous epistemologies are legitimate in and of themselves, I follow post- and decolonial thinkers in considering these perceptions of knowledge as they shed light on global conditions of domination, not because they are different or Other to European epistemologies, but because they are historical hybrids that tell a story of adaptation and transformation in the face of cultural marginalization.

3. Methodology

In August of 2018, I conducted three weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in the province of Junín, located in the central Amazonian region of Peru. Prior to that time, from August 2017 to July 2018, I had spent two semesters studying abroad at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP) in the capital city of Lima. During a semester break in February, I worked for several weeks as a volunteer on a jackfruit farm in Junín. While there, I was introduced to Lourdes, the assistant director of development projects for the native communities in the district. She was a young, easy-going Asháninka woman who had grown up in a nearby native community. She became interested in my project, and we maintained contact during the months that followed after I returned to Lima. During that time, I completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process at Messiah College and received approval to conduct fieldwork in her community. When I returned to Junín in August, she brought me to her parents' house, where I stayed over the course of my fieldwork.

My fieldwork itself consisted primarily of participant observation, which I conducted at typical community events like church services, sports games, and political gatherings. I also conducted interviews, both unstructured and semi-structured, with individuals who had ties to the community. Some lived there permanently, while others had grown up in the community but lived in nearby towns. Still others lived in the capital city of Lima, approximately eight hours away by bus, and returned only occasionally to visit their families. Though most were native Asháninka, some were *colonos*, migrants from the Andean highlands who lived in neighboring villages or who had married Asháninka members of the community. Some older members of the community still spoke the native Asháninka language to one another, but most Asháninka people were more comfortable speaking Spanish. Apart from a few basic phrases I learned in Asháninka, all communication between myself and Asháninka people took place in Spanish. Quotes from conversations and interviews are my own translations.

4. Analysis

Angélica, the mother of the family I lived with in the community, often told me stories about the self-help seminars she would attend. "Time for another meeting," she would say many nights after dinner as she prepared to leave for the community center. Sometimes medical professionals came to the community to talk about health and nutrition, and Angélica always made sure to be there. Other organizations occasionally offered workshops on conflict resolution or self-improvement, and Angélica would go out of her way to participate in those, too. As a devout Seventh-day Adventist, she also took the opinions of religious leaders seriously. As often as several times a month, she traveled to the city an hour away to consult a well-known Adventist leader on matters that concerned her.

In each of these cases, Angélica justified the knowledge she received on the basis of the personal qualifications of the people who shared their expertise with her. She described these encounters with phrases like, "These people are professionals, so they know." In the context of health, the knowledge she gained at the meetings was reliable because the people who shared it were experts in the field of nutrition. The seminars she attended on conflict resolution and self-improvement were organized by professionals who had also studied and practiced the techniques they shared. Similarly, the advice she sought from Adventists was legitimate because of their role as religious leaders. She described the Adventist leader she traveled to see as wise and well-respected. Though the distance to the city was far, his spiritual authority made the journey well worth it. Angélica used personal characteristics of these people to justify the legitimacy of their knowledge. Both their educational qualifications and their social position as a professional or religious leader were taken into account.

My knowledge, too, was frequently tied to my qualifications and social position. Aspects of my identity were made explicit when members of the community asked for my opinion. Often, members of the family would ask me for information or advice on topics related to health or nutrition. They cited my status as a "professional" – someone who has formally studied for a profession – as evidence for why my opinion was reliable, even though I had no formal qualifications that would legitimate my knowledge on topics in these fields.

My personal qualifications were also used as an indicator of my knowledge in the realm of education. On days I taught English at the elementary school in the community, the teacher often asked me to continue teaching the class even after I had finished my English lesson. Again, the word "professional" was used to describe me and to indicate that my knowledge was reliable. I was not formally qualified to teach, and there was no way to verify if the information I taught was true by detaching it from me as the knower and considering it independently of me. My status as a university student from the United States granted me epistemic authority. I taught English, geography, and history, sometimes for over half

the school day. Had I not stopped and taken a seat, the teacher probably would have asked me to continue for the rest of the day.

Gender was also cited as an aspect of my identity that determined what knowledge I was qualified to have. The community depended economically on agriculture, and its primary crops were cacao, bananas, and sachu inchi nuts. Because agricultural work is labor-intensive, both men and women worked long hours each day and performed the same tasks. Working the land requires as many hands as possible, so everyone, children included, participated. In the home, though, most responsibilities fell upon women. They were responsible for cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. As a woman, I was expected to have knowledge pertaining to each of these things. When it came to cleaning and caring for children, I fulfilled these expectations. I knew how to wash my clothes by hand properly, and the adults of the community entrusted their children to me, particularly when they were busy or needed a break. But I did not know how to cook, and that was a serious problem.

Angélica's request one day was simple: "I won't be home until late, and there's not enough rice for everyone to eat. Can you cook more?" I told her yes. *It's just rice*, I thought. *It can't be that hard*. But I had spoken too soon. First, the matches were too tiny for my hands, and my repeated attempts at lighting the stove were useless. Then, after Angélica's son came and lit the stove for me, I overestimated the amount of water to add to the rice. It cooked eventually, but it was soggy and inedible. When even the dogs refused to eat it, I carried it to the ditch where food waste went, dumped it in, and covered it with banana leaves.

When Angélica and her husband came home, they scolded me and told me that it is essential for a *señorita*, a young lady, to know how to cook rice. Angélica remarked that my mother had failed to teach me one of the most important skills a *señorita* should have. As time went on, it became a bigger problem. I often offered to help with the cooking, but Angélica quickly realized that this would require her to take the time to explain to me what to do, which wasn't actually helpful at all. I didn't have the knowledge that corresponded to my social role. That was a problem.

The situation repeated itself when Angélica's twelve-year-old granddaughter came to visit from the nearby town where she lived with her mother. She was chastised many times for not knowing how to do tasks like cooking and washing clothes, seen as important responsibilities for a girl her age. When Angélica asked her to make rice one day, she responded that she didn't know how. Angélica's husband scolded her: "She doesn't know anything! She doesn't even know how to make rice. That's not okay. That's not how it should be. A *señorita* should know how to cook." Angélica stood up for her by responding, "She's just a girl! When I was her age, I didn't know either. I had to learn a little at a time."

At its core, the argument between Angélica and her husband revolved around the relationship between knowledge and identity, and in particular what knowledge their granddaughter's identity should merit. This was characteristic of discussions about whether or not someone should be expected to know something or whether or not their knowledge should be considered legitimate. The heart of the debate lay in whether or not characteristics of the knower merited knowledge of the topic, not in consideration of the knowledge as an independent, stand-alone piece of information.

Characteristics of the knower were also used to disqualify that person's knowledge when it came to topics they were unlikely to be familiar with based on their social position. In these cases, the person's social identity was invoked as an explanation for why their knowledge was unreliable. I experienced this in the context of agriculture and in other situations where Asháninka people believed that my social identity disqualified me from knowing something that their identity qualified them to know. Members of the community referred to my status as a professional to indicate that I lacked knowledge of cacao and other crops. Angélica told me straightforwardly while working in the cacao fields one day, "You're a professional. That's why you don't understand cacao." My social role indicated that I lacked legitimate knowledge of the agricultural world.

On another occasion, a friend of Angélica's daughter shot a deer and sent meat home with everyone in the family. I told Angélica and her husband that there are deer where I'm from, too, and that my father and brother often go hunting. My own social identity as a white, North American "professional" undermined the legitimacy of my claim and aroused skepticism. Angélica's husband asked me what color deer were, and I responded that they were brown with white spots. He then asked me if they had antlers. I answered yes, then clarified that they do if they are male. He was shocked and exclaimed, "I thought you were trying to trick me! But I guess you're telling the truth." My own identity initially disqualified me from having legitimate knowledge of hunting. My reliability as knower was only restored after I had correctly answered his questions. This tactic seemed to be used for all topics related to agriculture and ecology, which someone in my social position would likely know little about.

Social classifications were also referenced in the interviews I conducted. When I asked questions about knowledge and identity, interviewees were hesitant to share their own views. After responding to interview questions, they often asked me, "Is that correct?" even after I assured them I wanted to hear their perspective and that there was no single, "correct" answer I was looking for. Some respondents offered information about themselves that intentionally discounted the legitimacy of what they shared. For example, in one interview, an older woman hesitantly responded to a question I had

asked about learning and then said, "But what do us illiterates know anyway?" By classifying herself as part of "the illiterates," she discounted the legitimacy of her own knowledge.

Person-related characteristics connected to the identity, experiences, and qualifications of individuals were key to establishing epistemic legitimacy among the Asháninka. Members of the community used these characteristics both to assert the legitimacy of someone's knowledge and to discount it. Knowledge was not considered on its own terms, as isolated information, but was instead evaluated on the basis of the identity of the knower. Person-related epistemology formed the foundation of knowledge for the Asháninka.

5. Discussion

These findings indicate that for the Asháninka, characteristics of the knower and context are inseparable from knowledge. Knowledge is context-dependent. In the contemporary world, however, context-independent ways of knowing are dominant. Preference is given to knowledge that can be disconnected from the social and material conditions in which it is found. This is particularly evident in the realm of science, which seeks universal explanations that are true across context. Science seeks to integrate isolated data points into explanatory theories that account for all the data as precisely as possible. The more generalizable a theory, the better. Universal knowledge holds more weight than particular, contextualized knowledge. Even the objects of scientific inquiry are removed from their contexts and considered as independent entities. Plants are uprooted from the ground and placed on black metal microscopes, where they are viewed as solitary specimen independent of larger landscapes. This method is privileged over an approach that studies plants within particular environmental contexts, seeing them as having meaning as part of larger ecosystems.

The structure of the Western education system itself privileges context-independent ways of knowing. The dominant model of Western education fails to allow for learning in context, learning in nature, and learning while moving – all approaches that historically have characterized learning for indigenous people. Students are removed from the contexts of their ordinary lives and required to sit in confined spaces for hours on end. Seana McGovern writes that "the establishment of school buildings in the Peruvian Amazon created indoor education, separating 'learning from the territory' and resulting in the 'resettlement of...dispersed clans to living in concentrated native communities.'"¹⁸ This physical separation between learners and their particular contexts is considered to facilitate learning, not to hinder it.

The way in which we know is not neutral. It influences the way in which we orient towards the world. Knowledge is inherently ethical, since the act of knowing relates us to the world in a certain way. It is closely connected to who we are and what we value. "What is knowledge? What is knowing?" These questions raised by Carothers, Moritz, and Zarger become important in this context. Such queries force us to think about why we know and what it means to know well.

Our epistemologies, or our justifications for our knowledge, indicate the values we hold. Justification based on principles tied to reason and argumentation – legitimacy that can be abstracted from context, made universal, and considered on its own terms – indicates a cultural context that values principles of universality and consistency. This ethical framework extends back to the liberal tradition that came out of the Enlightenment, when modern philosophers sought to establish ethical models that would hold true across all contexts. Modern theories of ethics find their origins in universal assumptions about human nature. They are taken to be true in all contexts, resulting in ethical models that prioritize universal principles over contextualized values. The doctrine of human rights is based on this model. It makes claims about how human beings should be treated in all contexts, regardless of who they are. These universal epistemologies are indicative of the Western modern value of knowledge being independent of context.

If justifications for knowledge that can be abstracted and made universal are indicative of a cultural context that places value on these things, justifications based on contextualized, localized factors are indicative of a value system that places priority on particularity and local context. This kind of epistemology sees knowing as an interconnected act whose purpose is to relate us to the world around us. When knowledge is inseparable from social identity and the environment, acts of knowing and legitimating knowledge connect us to our social and environmental contexts. This kind of knowing recognizes that ethical ideals based on principles of sameness fail to take into account difference, especially the differences of minority communities. Knowledge and truth here do not abstract us from gender, ethnicity, geography, and language – the things that make us who we are – but instead more deeply connect us to these identities and contexts.

The findings of this study have important implications for how knowledge is to be understood in the contemporary world. First, separating knowledge from context is not the only epistemic framework available. While context-independent ways of knowing are often prioritized in contemporary education and thought, they constitute only one kind of epistemology. Context-dependent ways of knowing offer another alternative. This framework views context as essential to determining truth. Knowledge is best understood when characteristics of the knower and the knower's

context are taken into consideration. Determining the reliability of knowledge requires considering the identity of the knower, not merely evaluating their knowledge as an isolated, stand-alone piece of information.

Secondly, this study demonstrates the ethical implications of epistemology. When epistemology aims to isolate a person's knowledge in order to consider it on its own terms, the result is alienation. The identity of the knower is something to move beyond, to abstract from. Detachment is seen as the goal. When, on the other hand, epistemology regards the knower and the knower's context as integral to the reliability of their knowledge, acts of knowing foster a deeper connection to identity and context. Epistemology more deeply sediments the knower's relationship to the environment they inhabit as opposed to requiring the knower to disregard its significance.

Finally, this study has practical implications for indigenous education programs. For the Asháninka and for many other indigenous people, knowledge is not separate from context, but directly dependent on it. Indigenous identity, along with the environments indigenous people inhabit, are central to indigenous knowledge. In light of this, indigenous schools cannot continue to isolate students in classrooms where context is largely disregarded. Indigenous education programs must move towards educational models that incorporate identity and the environment into learning. Epistemic justice depends on it.

6. References

-
- 1 Mary Field Belenky, Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, Vol. 15. New York: Basic Books, 1986.
 - 2 Paula M. L. Moya, *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
 - 3 Tapan Kumar Mishra, "Users Become Managers: Indigenous Knowledge and Modern Forestry," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 6 (1998): 262-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4406372>.
 - 4 Madhav Gadgil, Fikret Berkes, and Carl Folke, "Indigenous Knowledge for Biodiversity Conservation," *Ambio* 22, no. 2/3 (1993): 151-56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4314060>.
 - 5 Suman Sahai, "Importance of Indigenous Knowledge in IPR System," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 47 (1996): 3043-045. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4404790>.
 - 6 David Orozco and Latha Poonamallee, "The Role of Ethics in the Commercialization of Indigenous Knowledge," *Journal of Business Ethics* 119, no. 2 (2014): 275-86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42921290>.
 - 7 Charles H. Norchi, "Indigenous Knowledge as Intellectual Property," *Policy Sciences* 33, no. 3/4 (2000): 387-98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4532511>.
 - 8 Leanne R. Simpson, "Anticolonial Strategies for the Recovery and Maintenance of Indigenous Knowledge," *American Indian Quarterly* 28, no. 3/4 (2004): 373-84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4138923>.
 - 9 Courtney Carothers, Mark Moritz, and Rebecca Zarger, "Introduction: Conceptual, Methodological, Practical, and Ethical Challenges in Studying and Applying Indigenous Knowledge," *Ecology and Society* 19, no. 4 (2014). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26269650>.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, 42.
 - 11 Angela Wilson Waziyatawin, "Introduction: Indigenous Knowledge Recovery Is Indigenous Empowerment," *American Indian Quarterly* 28, no. 3/4 (2004): 359-72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4138922>.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, 359.
 - 13 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
 - 14 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
 - 15 Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. London: Penguin Classics, 1992 (1552).
 - 16 Santiago Castro-Gómez, *Crítica de la razón latinoamericana*. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2011.
 - 17 Ida Kerner, "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trajectories Towards a Renewed Political and Social Theory," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44, no. 5 (June 2018): 550-70.
 - 18 Seana McGovern, "Reclaiming Education: Knowledge Practices and Indigenous Communities," *Comparative Education Review* 44, no. 4 (2000), 525.