COMPETING FOR THE FUTURE
Play, Drama, and Rank in Amazonia

Natalia Buitron

Abstract: This article explores competition as a technique of social transformation in Amazonia. In recent years, the Shuar of Ecuadorian Amazonia have begun staging festivals to celebrate the unity and autonomy of their new sedentary communities. Festivals include sporting games and beauty pageants that create a positive spirit of competition through dramatization and ranking. In these competitions, the drama and ranking take place within a ‘play-frame’—a frame that separates the festival from everyday life, but also re-enacts new practices of commensuration that have become part of daily life via schooling, markets, and electoral politics. If commensuration works against Shuar autonomy, the play-frame of the festival creates future possibilities for autonomy and mutuality.

Keywords: Amazonia, change, commensuration, competition, dramatization, future, play-frame, ranking, Shuar

During a village’s festival in 2013, the president of Ipiampats, a Shuar village in Ecuadorian Amazonia, presented trophies to the winners of the football tournament.1 To my great surprise, after handing trophies to the teams’ captains, he harangued the players from all villages for not caring enough about training to become competitive footballers. Bemoaning the youths’ laziness and contrasting it to the discipline and victories of his own generation—a time when, in his view, the district had been competitive at the provincial level—the president mentioned that his office was going to increase the stakes by investing in uniforms and in a football school that would open in 2014. In an effort to strike an overall positive tone, he then pleaded with the youths to start training more diligently, while encouraging their parents by underscoring the economic prospects of professional sport. To drive his point home, he cited other minority peoples in Ecuador who suffer high levels of discrimination, yet are good at football:
We say that Black people are smokers and thieves, just like the colonists [i.e., mestizo people], but the fact is that they make a lot of money playing football. Why can’t Shuar do the same? … Youths, you need to think about money! … Come on, let us work in a coordinated manner!

Below the stage sat a crowd of young sportsmen wearing team uniforms and displaying the names of their communities on shining banners. Their exhausted faces were testament to three prior days of intense feasting, constant cheering of their villages’ contestants, impassioned speeches about winning in sports and cultural performance, and a general spirit of competitive solidarity. Through harangues like the president’s, village authorities project competition from the playing field onto a larger social field where Shuar compete among themselves, and symbolically with other groups, for the sake of their own betterment and progress. This article seeks to understand the realities that participants imagine and enact through the competitive solidarity in contemporary Amazonian festivals.

Shuar village festivals embody two key paradoxes. The first concerns the apparent mismatch between content and message: the festivals celebrate internal unity and progress through the appropriation of external colonial forms. In particular, they make use of many competitive elements of mestizo origin. In Ecuador, all towns and cities organize festivals that celebrate the origin of their urban foundation. While some of these festivals maintain their religious orientation, commemorating the patronage of the town’s saint, more recent festivities are secular and celebrate the civic act of foundation or bureaucratic upgrade within the political administration of the country. Shuar village festivals recall and continue this national urban tradition.

The second paradox pertains to the playful framing of the festivals themselves. While continuously branded as the most momentous Shuar celebration of the year, in which villagers observe their sedentary life, little of what is represented during a festival actually occurs in everyday village life. In other words, the festival creates a world of make-believe, most notably in the fact that it features staged contests and games of all kinds that display an insistent emphasis on ranking and dramatization, features that are extremely rare in daily life. Productive gaps and tensions between the ordinary and the ritualized are key to the structure of a ‘play-frame’. But what I wish to emphasize is that although ranking and dramatization are rare in ordinary life, villagers are not indifferent to ranked orders, scripted drama, and make-believe space. Far from it: they care immensely about these. Within a competitive play-frame that is both structured and pleasurable, they enact a different future for their communities. How then should we understand the paradoxically competitive character of these festivals, and what does competition do in the Shuar context?

The articles in this special issue are united in exploring competition as a structure of action with specific rules, but also as a contextually situated practice that
might exceed structural prescription and produce ambiguous relations and unan-
ticipated outcomes. In line with this, I propose to seek answers to the meaning, uses, and effects of competition among the Shuar by scrutinizing the festival in relation to everyday life, or, we might say, the interface of quotidian and festival realities. The distinction between the ordinary and the festive is one that Shuar villagers keenly draw and invest in by insisting on respecting specific rules of comportment and activity, and by carefully circumscribing playful competition from everyday life. It is in this sense that the festival is a *programa*, a series of events that follow a plan within a demarcated or bounded time-space.

Through the festival Shuar villagers create a play-frame in which they experiment with competitive sociality as a positive aspect of a desirable future. This is achieved through dramatization and ranking: what is put on stage and measured are the complex relationships between Shuar villagers and the wider mestizo environment in Ecuadorian society. It is here that we see the meditative quality of competition, a theme that runs through this special issue. Mediation may take different forms. It can make contradictions apparent or hide them, yet most commonly it does both and thus can help reconcile oppositions. Competition within Shuar festivals allows villagers to bridge indigenous and mestizo forms of social and political organization without resolving or losing sight of their differences. Because competition in festivals enacts and relativizes competition elsewhere—for instance, in markets and electoral politics—it allows the creation of alternative ‘what-if’ scenarios. Commensuration is central to these practices, but while the scales of mestizo society are often out of reach for Shuar villagers, in the village festivals Shuar playfully measure themselves. They thus deactivate the potentially destructive force of commensuration and rebuild new forms of autonomy in mutuality for the future.

**Commensuration and Play**

The competitive sociality of the Shuar festivals is all about comparing and measuring oneself against other Shuar, other villages, and mestizo society. Comparison and measurement are not exclusive to the festivals. Following sedentarism, missionization, and the introduction of schooling, the Shuar, like many native Amazonians (Rubenstein 2012; Turner 1993), constantly compare themselves with mestizo society. This amounts to commensuration, “the transformation of different qualities into a common metric” through rankings, ratios, prices, statistics, and so forth (Espeland and Stevens 1998: 314). Within nation-state institutions, performances of commensuration can often develop new levels of regimentation and standardization (Handelman 1998). Such is the case of schools, the military, and the markets of colonial border towns. But the platforms and media of commensuration are often biased, making it...
difficult for Shuar to compete for jobs or to become powerful politicians or successful entrepreneurs.

Practices of competition based on comparison and measurement thus challenge Shuar autonomy. This is perhaps the core dilemma of Shuar society today—how to use the tools and the powers of mestizo society without losing autonomy and succumbing to a world of inequalities, both in relation to mestizo others but also internal to Shuar society (Buitron 2020). In more general terms, these developments perhaps signify the end of Shuar egalitarianism. Elsewhere I have argued that what is commonly described as ‘egalitarianism’ should be understood as a combination of autonomy, mutuality, and incommensurability (Buitron and Steinmüller 2020). The triad certainly held for pre-missionized Shuar society: practices of autonomy were embedded within ties of mutuality and remained so precisely because they could not be measured and stabilized from an independent vantage point. Furthermore, whether expressed through conflict or cooperation—through alliances formed by feuding or the informal networks of a working party—mutuality remained unstable, allowing people the necessary flexibility to shift social arrangements. This is what I mean by incommensurability. But once practices of commensuration are introduced and incommensurability wanes, what happens to autonomy and mutuality?

In the staged events of the village festival, practices of commensuration are introduced. However, because this is done in the spirit of play, it introduces an element of separation that allows for conscious reflection and experimentation. Competition during festivals allows Shuar to experience the excesses and the promises of competition without committing to either. Hence, they experiment with how they might deploy competition to foster autonomy while rewiring mutuality.

What differentiates play from not-play is what Don Handelman (2021b), inspired by Gregory Bateson (1972), calls a ‘frame’ or ‘boundary’. To be perceived as play, actions must come with a metacommunicative message that frames them as such: “This is play” (Handelman 2021b: 160). In doing so, play-frames separate playful action, as fictional, from actuality. Bateson recognized that that this kind of frame or boundary has a peculiar, paradoxical character. Recalling Bateson’s’ example of a nip that looks like a bite, but that signifies something quite different, Handelman argues (ibid.: 154):

It is a bite, and it is not a bite, at one and the same time. It is a different bite, perhaps an imaginary bite, a bite that does not exist, yet does, for it is consequential as a bite that wasn’t … Or, one may say that the playful nip is a bite on its way to becoming what it isn’t.

For Handelman, play is an “experiential manifestation at the grassroots level” (Shapiro 2021: 9) with potentially concrete implications in the world of not-play. For this reason, he suggests that we must peer into the boundaries, at the
nexus between play and not-play. Especially important to Handelman’s (2021b: 157) argument is “the powerful thrust of processuality” that is put in motion by play. The processual and transformative nature of play is productive when analyzing Shuar festival framing. Through the play-frame of festivals, villagers bring forth a positive image of the future in which they appear as entrepreneurial and market-driven individuals organized into a unified collectivity. In this sense, festivals are events that “re-present the lived-in world” (Handelman 1998: 49)—comparing everyday social reality, and enabling alternative and potentially different visions of the social.

By showing how competition during Shuar festivals constitutes a future-oriented form of social experimentation, I offer a corrective to the analytical trend in Amazonian anthropology of understanding change exclusively from the perspective of the past—that is, as prefigured in ontological structures or indigenous tradition (High 2015). This has been the preferred route in anthropology more broadly and is the reason why the future has received short shrift in the discipline (Bryant and Knight 2019; Robbins 2007). I follow my Shuar informants as they reverse the picture—seeing the present from the future—to ask, how does the future seep into the present?

I begin by introducing the Shuar people and their experience of village formation in past decades to demonstrate the importance of village festivals. The ‘foreignness’ of festivals is part of a long-standing logic of other-becoming whereby native Amazonians appropriate external principles (in this case, competition) to reproduce themselves. I then turn to ranking and dramatization, which constitute the play-frame of the festival and give the event its competitive character. I show how Shuar villagers experiment with competition by projecting it toward the outside: re-presenting themselves as people capable of surpassing in talent and efficacy their mestizo rivals. Throughout I show how villagers tailor different aspects of competition to renegotiate the internal dynamic of autonomy and mutuality beyond the play-frame of the festival. So while competition might appear to have predictable outcomes—for example, reinforcing emerging hierarchies and a sense of corporate unity in the village—such changes take place selectively and in non-hegemonic ways, always in the spirit of experimentation rather than wholesale adoption.

**Shuar Festivals: Paradoxical Appropriations**

The Shuar are the largest group of the Aénts Chicham-speaking conglomeration in the Amazonian rainforest. They number more than 100,000 and inhabit a large territory of Ecuadorian Amazonia. Until the 1950s, no chiefdoms, village communities, or unilineal descent groups existed, and people lived widely dispersed. This was a society of independent mobile units. Within each
endogamous group, the household operated as a politically autonomous and economically self-sufficient unit of production and consumption, while permanent tension and armed feuds structured relations between endogamous groups.

Like many native Amazonian peoples, over the past century Shuar have experienced a rapid transition from a semi-mobile lifestyle to relative sedentarism in large nucleated communities. It is in this new sedentary context that Shuar have begun to celebrate village festivals. Since the 1960s, Shuar have lived in villages called *centros* (lit., ‘centers’), which are administrative and jural entities recognized by the Ecuadorian government. This is the result of a century-long process of state-led colonization pursued through missionization and settler encroachment. Colonization pushed Shuar to place increasing emphasis on political unification and economic progress, which previously had little relevance to them. Shuar have largely gone about this within the framework of state-sanctioned development projects that promote ‘civilized’ living and community entrepreneurialism. Civilized living is mostly understood in terms of collective unity and political organization. This is because economic progress requires harnessing resources from the outside the group in order to achieve prosperity or productiveness, as Shuar villagers refer to their ability to live well and self-sufficiently.

The pursuit of autonomy in a context of marginalization creates a dynamic of competitive antagonism vis-à-vis Ecuadorian mestizos, also referred to as *colonos* (colonists), who came from the Andean highlands to colonize the eastern lowlands where the Shuar lived. Although they do not directly interact with mestizos during festivals, Shuar symbolize this relationship of competitive antagonism and resignify their own standing in relation to mestizos. Relations with mestizo others are thus central to the dynamic of competition during festivals.

My observations about village festivals apply primarily to the Shuar living in the network of forest villages of Makuma and Tuutinentsa within the Transkutukú region in the province of Morona Santiago. In this province, the process of colonization has heightened the political and social distinction between the Amazonian interior and the market towns of the Andean piedmont. The villages of the interior, in Transkutukú, are where Shuar celebrate festivals that mirror much of the civic life of the urban exterior.

The stated purpose of festivals is to recall the foundation of the *centro* while reaffirming the importance of living together in a *centro*. Although the festival is not the only occasion when villagers come together collectively, it is the only time when they do so publicly by hosting other Shuar and neighboring ethnic groups as ‘members of centros’. So every one or two years, the villagers of a *centro* invite members of neighboring and distant villages to attend a series of public events that include sporting games, cultural contests, formal speeches, and school performances. These events are called *programas*, the local Spanish word for a public, structured, or programmed event. *Programas* last two to
three days. Although Shuar of different villages are connected by multiple ties of kinship, affinity, amity, and enmity, when they attend each other’s festivals, they do so as official members of other such corporate communities or centros. This is the sort of formal order the festival is organized to bring into existence and to celebrate.

It is hard to overstate the importance that Shuar villagers assign to festivals. The work entailed in preparing and running festivals embodies the dilemmas of the sedentary village community—how to live well together, encourage participation, avoid problems and conflicts, and sustain esprit de corps (Buitron 2016, 2020). The very organization of the festival is a touchstone of cooperation and helps to reinstat formal participation and membership. During my fieldwork, for example, the villagers of Kuamar, Achunts, and Ipiampats routinely assessed the political standing of resident families according to their degree of involvement in the annual festival of the community. The ‘independents’ who kept apart and eschewed communal participation risked being singled out in village assemblies as troublemakers and sorcerers.

If festivals create a context in which the centro form is recognized as transformative, it also presents the sedentary village as a continuation of Shuar tradition. The programas featured in the festivals are largely modeled on the colonists’ festive repertoire: urban food (such as rice, beef, and noodles) is provided, participants wear the attire of professional sportsmen and school people, and many of the games and contests closely mirror Ecuadorian national games and performances, such as civic parades and market fairs. And even when the focus is on more native activities, such as singing or beer-making and drinking, the competitive framing of these activities highlights difference and the Shuar capacity to be better at competing. Although some of these activities also occur outside the festival context—for example, urban foodstuffs and reared animals such as cattle also circulate in villages, even if only to be sold rather than consumed locally—what deserves attention is that villagers want to engage in a different way of celebrating and of doing things, as is often made explicit in the speeches of the officials who take to the stage.

During the festival all these ‘different ways’ are brought together as a selective and condensed statement about what a centro and its members are or should be. The festival thus invites an outward and forward-looking image of the centro and defines its ‘inside’ in relation to the surrounding mestizo world. By partially mirroring the outside, villagers re-present to themselves what they consider to be a progressive version of social reality—in this case, the imagined future of their centro—as a way of shaping the present.

The use of external activities, places, and symbols in collective events is conspicuous in many parts of Amazonia. For instance, Peter Gow (1991: 225) documented how key symbols of the festival of the Piro native community in Peruvian Amazonia are all drawn from outside: from the title of the Comunidad
Nativa to the national holiday dates, from the ‘fine food’ served to the guests to the latter being treated as neighbors rather than kin. More recently, Harry Walker (2013) illustrates how football festivals engender a new mode of sociality in which Urarina people relate not merely as kin, but as good neighbors united through visions of fraternal equality and abstract rules of play tied to the Peruvian nation-state.

In addition to being widespread, the use of external symbols to appropriate the power of outsiders is a long-standing phenomenon that pre-dates the relatively recent trend of nucleation in Amazonia. The examples are numerous, and the overall theoretical trend in regional ethnographies has been to highlight the key indigenous logic at work in an effort to underlie how appropriation of the outside is an agentic form of other-becoming rather than a mode of acculturation under external pressure (Fausto and Heckenberger 2007a). While this analytic helps us locate the structural features that underpin indigenous agency, it leaves under theorized the pragmatics of becoming and the specific Shuar social capacities—specifically to do with commensuration and dramatization—that are being taken up or actualized in the process as central dimensions of competition. The Shuar are not just dressing up in mestizo garments and eating mestizo foods; they are also competing and staging in ways that are remarkably different from what they do most of the time. On the other hand, the transformation is bounded by the very nature of the festival. This is not just ‘becoming’ of a generic kind, but a specific kind of controlled transformation or mediation of change.

Villagers are acutely aware that festivals involve appropriation of a particular kind. In formal speeches and more informal commentaries, they highlight the specific character of contemporary festivals by comparing them with charged images of past appropriation. Take, for example, the speech by the president of Kuamar as he welcomed hundreds of participants to the village festival in 2013:

Nowadays it is this way: all the centros do their festivals. Before, our elders did it differently … They used to peel the head of a sloth or kill and peel a person itself, and that was for them the festival [námper]. But this no longer exists. Today we celebrate the creation of our community. This is the festival. The youths play football, we become friends with one another and bring about progress.

The president is alluding to the most famous Aénts Chicham feast, which involved the appropriation, production, and incorporation of a tsantsa or shrunken head trophy after a successful headhunting expedition—commonly known as a ritual of predatory or cannibalistic appropriation in ethnographic literature. In line with the logic of external principles of identity, the tsantsa feast involved incorporating a formal existential subjectivity, embodied in the
enemy’s head, for the benefit of the victor’s group (Taylor 1993: 671). Importantly, the feast was premised on a distinction between insiders and outsiders. The outsiders were the enemies or ideal affines, that is, Aënts Chicham persons of other tribes whose heads were appropriated. Conversely, the insiders were the guests of the feast, relatives, and real or potential affines (i.e., persons who might be assimilated into the endogamous group).

At present, Shuar continue to evoke the feast in private narratives of war and public occasions, such as the festival, in which solidarities and antagonisms are most markedly expressed. In the latter kinds of narrative, Shuar contrast the violence of the tsantsa feast with the peaceful and unifying qualities of contemporary celebrations, as the president does above. The festival indeed activates a very different set of self-other relations and a transformation of unranked rivalry into commensurate competition. As Hopkinson and Zidaru’s introductory article in this special issue makes clear, participants in competitions expect authoritative judgment to determine value, even if such value can then be contested. This judgment enables commensuration via the ranking of participants and operates even in the absence of absolute winners, as the Shuar case will reveal.

**Contemporary Festivals**

As villagers participate in a festival that is largely predicated on the pursuit of unity between hosts and guests, hosts are at pains to deter hostilities with Shuar neighbors as well as distant Aënts Chicham guests, such as the Achuar (historically classified as ideal affines or enemies). In fact, those old hostilities remind people of the rivalries of the past—rivalries that were unranked and based on shifting ties of kinship and enmity. The festivals, instead, celebrate new forms of competition that are ranked, staged, and corporate. The difference boils down to the possibility of institutionalizing advantage and superiority. If in traditional rivalries the possibility of capture remains reversible and dissociated from permanent status within a community, this is not the case in contemporary festivals. As Hamayon (2016: 151) shows in her analysis of the transformation of traditional playing into ethnic and national events, the meaning of competition takes on a new valence when individual victories are aggregated and wrestlers are granted prizes and titles that ensure the validity of official classifications. This is precisely what happens in village festivals where a judgment or classification creates the possibility of official ranking.

In both sporting games and cultural contests, which constitute the bulk of the festival, villagers compete exclusively as members of centros. The festival comprises three full days of programas. The first day starts with volleyball matches in the central plaza. During these matches, the atmosphere is
amicable and relaxed, similar to the tranquil afternoons when villagers play after work. But unlike informal settings, during the festival all players must be registered with the sports commission prior to the games. Individual players also cannot place bets since the acquisition and allocation of prizes are the responsibility of the centro hosting the festival.

On the second day, the sports commission inaugurates the football tournament. Football is the last game organized by the sports commission before it hands the festival over to the commission in charge of the socio-cultural programa, which is celebrated in the communal house during the second and third day of the festival. This programa includes an assortment of Shuar cultural performances modeled on mestizo folk contests, such as manioc beer preparation, nampet or festive singing, and blowgunning and basketry competitions. The afternoon of cultural contests closes with the ‘festival of song’, which functions as a prelude to the evening’s party. Both occasions feature artists who sing Latin American folk music such as cumbia in Shuar or Spanish and occasionally Hispanic romantic hits. These events all stress ranking and dramatization.

**Ranking, Formal Unity, and Entrepreneurialism**

Many of the events of the festival evoke a unified and entrepreneurial community. Both unity and entrepreneurialism make ostentatious use of ranking. As an occasion that gathers hosts and guests, everything happens in the idiom of formal invitation: host centros send written formal invitations to guest centros and to specific sponsors or donors to join the celebrations. The festival thus creates a unique space in which the centro becomes a social actor inviting and hosting other centros. Documents tangibly formalize and represent the will of a collectivity (whether as hosts or guests), and villagers insistently distinguish between written and verbal invitations. In the former, villagers use papi—from the Spanish papel (lit., ‘paper’ as well as ‘document’)—which is seen as a more legitimate and progressive medium for inviting others. The president of Kuamar, for example, made this explicit during one of the festival evenings: “Before, our elders used to send words [chicham] and comply with them. But now we do this with the written word [aarmia chichama].” The effect of this is that guests are inevitably ranked: on the one hand are those who have received written invitations (papijai ipiamu), while on the other are those who have only heard verbally about the event (papijai ipiachmau).

Another form of ranking that is systematically evoked to the point of becoming self-evident in the organization of the festival is that between profesionales (professionals)—typically, schoolteachers and village authorities—and the rest of the villagers, who are often verbally addressed as though they were children or schoolchildren. For instance, the professionals typically assume a counseling and didactic tone modeled on the characteristic genre of speech called
chichamat with which parents address their children. This speech takes the form of parental monologues or lectures consisting of moral advice and admonitions to live well. If in the home the chichamat implies asymmetry between speaker and addressee since it is unidirectional and monologic (parents to children), this is also the case in public events when a different kind of authority is involved, such as teachers or officials who are invested with collective roles and speak to all guests and hosts.

Professionals deploy chichamat to convey the key message of the festival: the importance of playing and performing well as a way of competing with absent others, thereby actualizing a positive version of the Shuar collective future, as we saw in the introductory vignette. For instance, they remark that when youths play well, they demonstrate that they can compete with the best players of the province—the colonists. So the competitive matches within the centros symbolize and prefigure competition with mestizo people. Even in cultural contests in which the display of specifically Shuar skills is more accentuated than in games, what referees and villagers alike emphasize is that contestants are able to ‘demonstrate’ their skills (manioc beer preparation, woodcutting, blowgunning, etc.) and those of others (catwalk, Spanish singing and speaking, etc.) just as capably and beautifully, or even more so, than mestizo people.

Shuar must first demonstrate their skills among themselves so they can then imaginatively project these capacities to future competitions with mestizo others. In doing so, they create solidarity—by fostering antagonism toward others—but also a hierarchized form of internal unity through ranking. A central characteristic of sporting games and contests is classification and ranking, that is, the separation of contestants into winners and losers, and ranking within these categories. Such asymmetry is important in Shuar contests, and it is manifested both in the informal classification of contestants on the basis of talent and in the official ranking enacted by the professionals. Of particular significance in this regard is the awards ceremony, which is the culmination of the festival.

During this ceremony, schoolteachers and elected officers acting as referees, judges, and festival organizers elevate themselves above others by bestowing awards to the winners on behalf of the whole community. But of interest is that even when ordinary villagers take to the stage, they build on the experts’ judgment and extend their message by congratulating and encouraging both winners and losers alike to continue improving their skills. This shows that what matters, more than winning per se, is the act of playing well for the sake of the greater social goal of progress and unity. This goal, however, is of one piece with the emerging kinds of specializations and formal hierarchies of centros. For instance, during the same awards ceremony discussed in the opening vignette, Estalin, the captain of the Ipiampats football team, congratulated
the guests from the community of Tukup on their participation in the football matches, even though Tukup had lost to Ipiampats. As a gesture of friendship, Estalin explained, Ipiampats had decided to present a trophy to the Tukup team. When he handed the trophy to his counterpart, Estalin said, “This I gift you because if you do not bring a trophy to your community, your president will be angry.” While this was expressed in good humor, it illustrates that the participation in inter-centro matches and the awarding acts that follow are intimately associated with the formal order of the community.

The image of formal unity is reiterated by the civic parade during the third and final day of the festival. A group of elected authorities from local governments heads the parade, marching alongside a group of student flagbearers, centro officers, and the elected queen and her ‘court of honor’ (second, third, and fourth queens). Following this group, the schoolteachers and a group of students march while performing as a military band. Nobody else parades that day. In these moments, the community is represented only by professionals and by students, who one day will become professionals themselves. This marks them as the most suited competitors for mestizos in contests of the future.

Let me now turn to entrepreneurialism. Unity achieved through ranking is put to the service of progress. Explicit throughout the speeches and preparations for the event is a sense in which feasting should not occur just for the fun of it (e.g., to dance and get drunk), but most importantly to be productive
and ‘get ahead’. A case in point is how villagers reconcile mutual sharing with an emerging interest in selling for profit encouraged by the competitive spirit of the festival. If hosts gain prestige from being able to collectively feed their guests during the festival in the spirit of mutuality, they also increasingly look to the possibility of profiting by selling local foodstuffs to visitors—something that never happens among villagers. When people visit each other outside the festival, they always visit individual households, and it is assumed that they share ties of kinship or affinity with their local hosts so that the latter can be expected to be hospitable, that is, to offer food and shelter.

As part of festivals, some centros have begun to hold expo-agricultural fairs or makeshift markets in the communal house. These ad hoc markets aim to showcase the development and progress of the centro by displaying local crops and handicrafts, but ideally also by presenting villagers with the opportunity to sell their family produce. The makeshift market materializes the progress of the centro. For instance, at several intervals during the festival of Kuamar, hosts would state that “Shuar will not be subdued,” and that there “will continue to be more [Shuar] people and more [Shuar] communities” to “continue carrying on and improving themselves for the future.” To do so, the same speakers would caution, Shuar need “to work harder and sell more.” This is a moment in which the productiveness and entrepreneurialism expected of centro life assume a normative character. The message is clear. Shuar should work to increase their produce, not just to live well and share with others in periodic festivals, but so that they can subsequently demonstrate their talent in urban contexts, such as the expo-agricultural fairs organized in market towns (see Buitron and Deshoulière 2023).

There is some similarity between the progress conveyed by the competitive spirit of sports and contests and that conveyed by hosting a market during the festival. However, sports and contests coalesce in a form of collective unity during the evening parties as I shall show in more detail in the next section. By contrast, the staging of sales risks celebrating progress by temporarily sideling the importance of mutuality—that is, by facilitating the competitiveness of some at the expense of others.

Observing festivals over time, it is possible to detect how experimentation with entrepreneurialism—and in particular with the desire for sales as a way to re-present progress—can have lasting effects beyond the festival. During my first stint of fieldwork in 2011–2013, the idea of sale profits was just that—an ideal or visionary wish. But in 2018, when I returned to Kuamar, the makeshift market had become predictive. The desire to attain economic progress had taken root to the point that villagers were holding discussions about the possibility of cooking less or not at all for festival guests so that the latter would have an incentive to buy food sold by the hosts. The meaning of this profit remained ambiguous, however, because while it continued to feature in
collective discussions of achieving autonomy through productive activities, villagers were aware that only a few families (specifically, those of professionals) were actually able to sell for profit. For the same reason, not all of the villagers agreed that selling was a good idea, which meant some centros that engaged in the practice subsequently revised it. On one occasion, for example, the villagers of Kuamar stipulated that all the women of the centro would be relieved from cooking for the guests (and professionals would pay for women of other centros to come and cook for the guests), so that all families could cook to try to sell food during the festival. This was a way of reintroducing some form of mutuality within a framework of profit.

So the engagement with different practices of competition within the play-frame of the festival—from playing well to selling to get ahead—can have enduring affordances through reinforcing the incipient hierarchies of centros, such as those embodied by professionals, and allowing for a temporary transformation of mutuality into profit in the context of formal hospitality. A makeshift market can over time become a full-blown market, and a disposition to sell is no longer just rehearsed and experimented with but fully realized as one of the desired, present ‘ends’ of a festival. But critical to this sense of experimentation is the fact that the villagers are active participants in the discussions that precede and follow the festival, and tailor competitive activities to fit an evolving local situation.

**Dramatization, Specialization, and the Mediation of Change**

I have discussed different ways of competing within the play-frame of the festival: playing well in sports or selling to get ahead in makeshift markets. Beyond ranking, different modes of competing are all dramatized. Dramatization both marks the play-frame as different from everyday reality and helps villagers to represent and embody new dispositions and attitudes that they regard as important for the future. This is particularly the case in the display of individual cultural skills in public spectacle.

Cultural contests also rank contestants and distinguish between commoners and authorities by installing a judging panel that assesses the performances. Moreover, the beautification and ‘spectacle-ization’ of ordinary domestic and artistic skill that these performances require have resulted in the specialization of cultural knowledge and emerging distinctions between laypeople and experts. For instance, girls hoping to perform well in a beauty pageant must find a schoolteacher to prepare them even if what they display on stage is a model of Shuar womanhood.

In fact, unlike football, cultural contests package a selection of Shuar cultural contents into a foreign format of presentation. The presentational skills involved in public performances require the embellishment of practices as well as the stylization of body language. What spectators, participants, and judges
emphasize during these cultural events is the ability to ‘demonstrate’ (i.e., to perform or dramatize) something on stage. In the speeches and comments preceding and following each performance, what villagers convey is their admiration for the ‘stage presence’ that performers radiate—their ability to produce forceful and captivating performances through the display of choreographic and oratorical skills.

The ability to perform and speak forcefully are some of the most important abilities a Shuar individual can have, but being able to do this on the stage is valued even more because this is what most national performances involve. Shuar are exposed to the national festive repertoire through their sporadic journeys to Ecuadorian cities, their participation in civic and political mobilizations, as well as through the continuous radio announcements in their homes and the DVDs they occasionally watch. This explains why commentators at the festival frequently state that performers are demonstrating their skills “like the colonists,” but usually “better than colonists.”

By bringing together what Shuar continue to value most of themselves and by providing a venue to display their sophisticated appropriation of performative formats appreciated by the outside, cultural contests offer a fertile terrain for cultivating pride and a broad sense of belonging. Shuar accord high value to the acquisition of external knowledge, especially if this knowledge grants efficacy and power. In this sense, the stage—by melding verbal and visual arts, and its association with figures such as priests, governors, and beauty queens—fuses the rhetorical skills that Shuar consider essential to manage everyday affairs with the aesthetic powers to captivate others in mestizo settings. But what kind of otherness and change are Shuar hoping to embody and re-present? Beauty pageants, and their stakes, yield some insight.

Seen as a whole, the festival moves from the sporting games to the cultural contests, thus sequencing different kinds of competitions: from heightened rivalries (in football) to shared sentiments and common values (in cultural contests). So after a sequence of sports that has fueled antagonism between communities, cultural contests facilitate the job of bringing everyone together into the kind of union required to project competition against the outside—the mestizo world. Thus, the sequence of competitions closes with an event that emphasizes internal solidarity. This progression enables a projection of competition from the intra-ethnic to the inter-ethnic political realm (i.e., vis-à-vis non-indigenous people).

In fact, this overall progression is already prefigured in the first evening of the festival when the election of the queen of the centro is celebrated. During the election, three unmarried youths compete for the prize of queen of the centro—sometimes also called ‘Nunkui nua’ (the female garden owner/spirit). The pageant is split into two performances. The first, called ‘typical garment’, consists of a short choreography in which each of the girls, wearing traditional
attire (*tarash*), mimes an offering of manioc beer to the public while dancing to the rhythm of a festive song (*nampet*). In the second performance, the same contestants sport an urban evening gown and high heels and strut along the stage accompanied by a catwalk melody.

This intriguing transformation from Shuar to mestizo appearance is noteworthy in light of the ideas of other-becoming discussed above. It is common to see native Amazonians display double or ‘mixed’ identities as inscribed and experienced through bodily and clothing choices (Ewart 2007; Gow 1991; Kelly 2005; Turner 1992; Vilaça 2007). Santos-Graneros (2009) offers examples of Yanesha individuals who at certain points in time dress like ‘the ancient ones’ while at others dress ‘like Peruvians’. The startling individual transformations led the author to argue that the Yanesha have historically shaped ‘hybrid bodyscapes’, even if hybridity is the result of native conceptions of other-becoming that have been operative since pre-colonial times.

In this vein, we could see the beauty pageant as a microcosm where hybridity gives expression to a sensuous appropriation of others’ stage power. However, in these performances Shuar are less interested in the creation of hybrid or doubled bodies as they are in producing two pure exemplars. Not unlike the Yanesha (Santos-Graneros 2009: 488), while valuing their own capacity for transformation, Shuar never imply that they are turning into mestizos or even consider such a transformation to be desirable. Instead, what they eagerly seek is the possession of stage drama. Instead of operating as an act of mimesis of the mestizo, the contest works to emphasize Shuar capacity for producing stage-like performances, and thus provides a way of “competing with the whites at their own game” (Taylor 2007: 145). In this sense, Shuar beauty performances are better read as opening up new spaces of *becoming*. This aspect has been highlighted in recent work on Amazonian pageants that explores how contestants fashion new public versions of themselves within intersecting spheres of value—intimate familial, indigenist, nationalist, capitalist (Deshoulière and Dziubinska 2017; Erazo and Benitez 2022; Wroblewski 2014).

The typical and gala performances of the pageant should be understood within the goals of the *centro* festival insofar as they activate the play-frame, and indeed can be seen as a condensed version of the whole event. During the course of the festival, Shuar make a point of portraying themselves as a forward-looking, organized, and productive collectivity capable of maintaining their *centro* and hosting people from other such *centros* in a spirit of hospitality. In the pageant, girls simultaneously bring to life both images: on the one hand, the model of hospitality, canonized in the offering of manioc beer to the public; on the other hand, the model of progress, manifest in the powerful image of development and integration by embodying ideals of national beauty on stage.² Shuar are very much aware that no Ecuadorian town would deserve its name without electing a queen. Indeed, queen elections celebrated in Ecuador are
not simply artistic or cultural performances, but complex representations of political administration and collective unity (e.g., Rogers 1998). Thus, since the queen represents the whole community, the queen election, perhaps even more powerfully than football or cultural contests, brings forth an image of a unified collectivity while summoning progress and equality vis-à-vis the non-indigenous world. This was neatly expressed by Jaime, a village authority, when crowning the elected queen of Kuamar:

Shuar too have beautiful girls, not just the colonists. We are as capable as them. All we need to do is to continue improving our work, our crops, and sales, and when this will happen, not only our daughters but also our sons will be able to confront the public.

Here Jaime presents an analogy between the performance of the queen and the productivity of the centro. Just as women create an image of progress on the stage during the festival, villagers, and specifically men, should be able to generate progress in the centro through their hard work and entrepreneurship. This points to the rise of a different kind of autonomy, one achieved within the broader canvas of the Ecuadorian nation-state. Shuar measure themselves against external standards, such as those of the market and the ‘plurinational’ state, and sometimes they can recombine external metrics and models into their own performances.
Conclusion

To understand the pervasive use of competition in Shuar village festivals, we must look at the broader social dynamics Shuar are currently negotiating—how to foster productive, autonomous villages in a competitive relation with the encompassing mestizo world of market relations. We must also consider the playful framework in which the festival takes place. The play-frame brings forth a world of make-believe that re-presents reality, but does not simply recast actual reality in a revised version (Handelman 1998: 49). Rather, this recasting acts on the potential to be otherwise in the future. Events that re-present are like multiple or magic mirrors that play with forms of order and project desired and potential futures and developments (ibid.: 49, 56, 188). Correspondingly, the play-frame has a “preparatory” effect—that is, it is “liable to have a series of consequences” (Hamayon 2016: 123) beyond the world of make-believe. In so doing, the festival raises possibilities and questions about the validity of social forms as these are constituted in the lived-in world. What would the world look like if the Shuar were truly to live by competition?

To be competitive in the outside world, the Shuar must navigate significant levels of inequality that are often experienced in terms of marginality and humiliation, such as not having enough, enduring significant disparities and mistreatment at the behest of mestizos, and so forth. Some of these contrasts are obvious enough when the Shuar become daily laborers in the city and are exploited by bosses, discriminated against by doctors, or denied participation in civic urban life (Buitron 2023). For instance, Shuar girls are not considered beautiful or cultured enough to become beauty contestants in urban pageants, and Shuar youths never make it to the provincial football tournaments. It is difficult to compete with the mestizos because practices of comparison and commensuration are framed against the Shuar.

In the festival, these negative experiences are re-presented in positive terms within the internal world of relations but with a view to projecting a desirable future in relation to the outside world. The play-frame, enacted through constant dramatization and ranking, is like a mirror of envisioned change where Shuar engender productiveness and autonomy. To achieve this, the Shuar must activate their potential for competition, which is a way for the inside to be shaped in the image of the outside. By embodying or making concrete the capacities required for competition—playing well, selling their produce, doing a catwalk, exuding stage presence—Shuar quite literally embody common practices of commensuration in Ecuadorian society without sacrificing a sense of self-efficacy. Rather, they enhance it. The play-frame is the mode through which new social forms emerge. It is also in this sense that the play-frame is pleasurable—it deploys rules and commensuration to magnify the possibilities for social action at a complex historical crossroads. Rather than depict
themselves as marginal, in comparative terms, the Shuar create forms that would not exist otherwise. Competition is central to this play-frame, but it is ‘just a game’. Precisely by establishing such a play-frame, Shuar villagers allow themselves not to be dominated by the practices of commensuration (ranking, evaluation, measuring) of Ecuadorian society. Instead, they constantly rewrite the rules so as to keep in sight concrete changes to long-standing practices of autonomy and mutuality.

The festival play-frame thus allows Shuar to find a creative middle way to compete with others. In doing so, they do not just simply ‘prey on others’ or ‘familiarize others’ in terms of classical Amazonian schemes of appropriation. When they dress like mestizos and celebrate village festivals similar to those of the mestizos, they do not really become mestizo. Instead, the play-frame of competition at the festival makes it possible to creatively engage with different social forms that are crucial for the future.

Ultimately, the play-frame is experienced as entertainment and fun. Its practices of competition—from the footballers and the beauty queens to the awards ceremonies and the leaders’ harangues—are not seen as oppressive, but as a source of great joy and pleasure to the community.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Leo Hopkinson and Teodor Zidaru for their energy and patience in overseeing this project, and to all the participants and discussants of the workshop “Ethnographies of Competition and Its Afterlives” for their feedback on the original article. I am also hugely grateful to the peer reviewers for their careful reading and insightful questions. Last but not least, I would like to thank my Shuar hosts for initiating me into the pleasure of competitive feasting.

Natalia Buitron is Jessica Sainsbury Assistant Professor in the Anthropology of Amazonia in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. A social and political anthropologist, her research has involved long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Ecuadorian Amazonia, focusing on village formation, moral values, and collective personhood as ways to explore indigenous people’s perceptions of change and, more generally, their political creativity. She is currently examining the comparative purchase of concepts such as autonomy, equality, and sovereignty. E-mail: nb668@cam.ac.uk
Notes

1. I draw on 24 months of fieldwork between 2011 and 2018 in Ecuadorian Amazonia. All personal names are pseudonyms.

2. The power of these images, as iconic embodied images in scripted forms such as sports and dance, derives partly from their ability to spark widespread participation and interpretation as they give rise to reworked identities (see, e.g., Dyck and Archetti 2003: 1–2).

References


