Chapter 5

Being A Good Person: Give and Take in Santa Rosa

An “ah ha” moment.

For a foreigner attempting to participate in and understand the lives of people very different from herself, it was usually far easier to accomplish the former than the latter. And while anthropological training had prepared me to quickly recognize specific configurations of social relationships that differed from those to which I was accustomed, there were few moments in the field more exciting than when a number of apparently disconnected practices I had noted unexpectedly came together in my understanding and made sense as an interrelated whole. One such “ah ha” moment occurred midway during my field research with a sudden reconceptualization of theft.

In Santa Rosa and throughout the region of my research, theft is commonplace. As noted earlier, typical of the sparsely populated tierras bajas, Santa Rosa was built as a long line of family compounds sprinkled along the river, with a walk of 3-10 minutes from one to the next. One side-effect of isolating compounds in this way is the ease of theft of any items left at or in the dwellings. Since typical house construction is of bamboo-like poles tied together with prepared fibers taken from certain trees, to enter the house one simply needs to cut the fibers with a machete or knife and throw the freed poles on the ground. This is, perhaps, why houses are rarely locked and some even lack doors. Rather than spending scarce resources on the purchase of a padlock, most people simply tie a door shut or put something
in front of it to block just walking in. The fact that the population is highly mobile, traveling
to hunt, fish, visit relatives, and changing residence with ease, makes catching suspected
thieves a challenge and recovery of property is relatively rare.

The most common and effective way to avoid theft of personal belongings is to leave a
family member at home when others depart to hunt, fish, tend crops, or visit neighbors and
relatives. Children or the elderly often stay home to fulfill this function. Hiding objects of
value and trying to prevent others from learning of the possession of such objects is another
way to minimize theft. Dogs, useful in hunting, are also depended on to discourage maleantes
(people with bad intentions). However, the effectiveness of these preventive practices is
limited and petty theft is common. “La gente son muy gallina.” which roughly translated means
people are like chickens, pecking (and picking up) all over.

Theft was not only a problem in Santa Rosa and other communities of the tierras bajas, but
was widespread throughout the region in urban areas as well as rural. In fact, experiencing a
relatively large robbery was something of a rite-of-passage for newly arrived foreigners
coming to Riberalta to work in NGOs or as researchers. I myself lost more than $1000
worth of personnel belongings and research equipment to theft. Shortly after a “newbie”
foreigner had passed through this same initiation, and long enough into my fieldwork that I
often found myself looking at things from a point of view formed from my experiences as a
Santa Rosa community member rather than simply that of a foreign researcher, I
experienced the “ah ha” described above: theft, I realized, was an extremely effective
leveling mechanism, functioning to dramatically control the distribution of wealth in the
region. Further, once theft was understood from this perspective, many other practices and
attitudes could be seen as internally consistent and profoundly understandable – I began to see a system at work.

Theft, in northeastern Bolivia, is a form of redistribution that redistributes without reinforcing hierarchy. In fact, theft is so common that it not only redistributes but also acts as a deterrent to accumulating possessions in the first place. After all, why should one go to the effort to do so if it is so hard to hang onto them.

In a provocative article attempting some general observations about mobile people, anthropologist James Woodburn (1982) describes a practice of the Hadza, a Tanzanian hunter-gatherer group, that functions similarly. Like theft in the region of my research, Hadza gambling is a non-obvious cultural practice that serves a major redistributive function. Both Hadza gambling and northeastern Bolivian theft function as highly effective leveling mechanisms that discourage the accumulation of possessions, redistribute goods,

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1 According to Woodburn,

It is the major means by which scarce and local objects are circulated throughout the country: much intercamp visiting is stimulated by gambling and winnings are constantly on the move. Objects such as stone pipes which are made in one part of the country circulate out to other areas where they are withdrawn from the game and put to use. (1982:442).

Gambling functions to redistribute these objects without binding Hadza in unequal relationships. Woodburn writes,

This circulation is accomplished, then, not through some form of exchange which would bind participants to one another in potentially unequal relationships of kinship or contract. The transactions are neutralised and depersonalised by being passed through the game. Even close kin and affines gamble with each other and the game acts against any development of one-way flows and dependency in relationships between them. (1982:443)

Not only does gambling serve to circulate goods without contributing to the creation of hierarchical relationships, but it undermines the accumulation of individual wealth.

The attraction of gambling mobilizes effort and skill but distributes its proceeds at random in a way which subverts the accumulation of individual wealth by the hard-working or by the skilled…It is paradoxical that a game based on the desire to win and, in a sense, to accumulate should operate so directly against the possibility of systematic accumulation. Its leveling effect is very powerful. (1982:443-444)

If an individual, by chance, is able to accumulate significant winnings, he is subject to intense pressure to keep playing so others can regain their lost items; even moving to another camp is insufficient as a strategy to preserve winnings (1982:443).
and reinforce egalitarian practices and values. Theft is part of a larger, coherent cultural system with a material basis, social norms, and values and beliefs that reinforce one another. Understanding theft in this way, as connected to multiple cultural layers, illuminates a number of other typical practices and attitudes that outsiders seemed to find especially perplexing among those who called themselves Tacana as well as many who did not.

In order to understand the social value of theft as a leveling mechanism, one must understand the importance of egalitarianism as both a fact and a value in Santa Rosa life; providing this explanation and how it affects identity is the goal of the current chapter. First, I examine the material basis for Santa Rosan egalitarianism. Then I turn to the social enforcement of egalitarianism by both overt and covert means, including theft. Third, I look at egalitarianism as a value, tied to Santa Rosan ideas of what makes someone a good person. Finally, I link this material, social, and moral order to the conflicted relationships between Santa Rosans and outsiders with whom they interact, outsiders whom, in the eyes of Santa Rosans, often act like bad people. The actions and reactions of Santa Rosans and their neighbors to governmental and humanitarian aid are rooted in this interrelated social, cultural, and material universe, which provides a basis for their understanding of these interventions. While elite outsiders often see themselves as magnanimous givers, seen from the perspective of below, representatives of government and NGOs have a long history of promising without following through and of taking without giving.

The moral order described in this chapter is of further importance in its portrayal of one of the most salient identities of Tacana people – that of being a good person. At the time of my research, the group of diaspora Tacana with whom I lived were not highly invested in
regulating the boundaries of Tacana identity. It is in the insertion of these Tacana into a world system where being indigenous structures access to monetary and natural resources that clearly delineating Tacana identity becomes important. In their daily lives, their identity is much more wrapped up in whether they and those they deal with are good people, rather than whether or not someone is Tacana. In Chapter 7, these multiple and changing definitions of Tacananess are considered in more detail. This chapter, however, illuminates an aspect of who the Tacana are by looking at what makes a good person within their local system of values and practices – an issue at the heart of the most relevant identity in their daily lives.

**A material basis for egalitarianism.**

To be a good person in Santa Rosa, one has to actively and voluntarily participate in an ongoing system of give and take, a system which functions as an effective leveling mechanism. Someone who avoids sharing obligations of this nature is a “bad person,” and one who is forced to participate through involuntary leveling mechanisms such as theft. These mechanisms ensure that either everyone’s condition of life improves, or no one’s does; if someone “gets ahead” in the manner considered normal in the US, this person is labeled “bad” and is an outcast. Thus, egalitarianism is both an important value and a fact of life.

There are three aspects of Tacana life of special importance in supporting egalitarianism: 1) a high degree of mobility, 2) direct access to a primary means of coercion, and 3) direct access to a means of subsistence. As long as they remain forest dwellers, Tacana have relatively equal access to subsistence resources and to a means of coercion (guns). Coupled
with easy mobility, these specific conditions help sustain a strong egalitarian ethic by
reinforcing autonomy and undermining the control of the many by the few.

Tacana are highly mobile. As discussed in the previous chapter, swidden horticultural
practices ensure that entire communities generally move every seven to fifteen years. In
addition, individuals often travel for seasonal labor or to join relatives living in other
communities. Marriage and better economic opportunity are two primary reasons for
leaving a community. However, the most common reason is conflict, and avoidance
through leaving is a primary method of conflict resolution. Indeed, the two cases where
Santa Rosa residents abandoned their compounds during the course of my research were
both associated with conflicts between community members. Escapando (escaping) was a
common way to end marriages, to default on loans, to take a partner one’s family didn’t
approve of, and to appropriate money or property belonging to others. Some individuals
would leave voluntarily because they did not like the way the rest of the community was
pressuring them to act. Others would flee from accusations of witchcraft, a charge linked to
nonconformity with communal behavioral expectations. Community members could be also
banished from the community.

Ease in dealing with conflict and in escaping the imposition of unwanted authority through
avoidance are powerful as leveling mechanisms, as Woodburn notes (1982:436). The penalty
(personal property loss) suffered by Tacana who employ this escape valve is minimal, as the
products of labor left behind by Tacana who change residences are few. Indeed, they can be
readily and directly replaced with additional labor, as everything not taken with them can be
restocked from the forest relatively quickly.
Among these Tacana, mobility and flexibility are not only commonly practiced but are also highly valued. They are seen as part of individual autonomy and independence, as entertainment, and as a straight-forward necessity for survival. Indeed, they contrast their current right to move around, changing residences as they desire, to the rubber-tapping times when the patrón (rubber baron) and his overseer sometimes exerted extensive control over their movements and activities, when they could be eslavos (slaves), depending on the individual personality and practices of their particular patron and overseer.

Besides being highly mobile, the Tacana of the region all have access to a primary means of coercion. This situation helps make egalitarianism possible and likely. Since all males have hunting weapons that can kill people as well as animals, no one has a monopoloy on violence. Among the Tacana, equal access to a means of violent coercion (i.e. guns) encourages a habit of cool-headed handling of situations precisely because it is coupled with strong norms of conflict avoidance.

In spite of harmony-enforcing norms, there are cases when one is pushed too far, and violent behavior results. For example, I was told of one man who had been found drowned, wrapped up in fishing line in a shallow piece of flooded land. In another instance, my going away party was interrupted and then ended prematurely when an angry father fired his gun in response to unwelcome visits to his daughter by a boy from a nearby community. He claimed that he fired into the air, but this was impossible to confirm, and after an unsuccessful search for blood in the forest pathways near his hut, many of us passed a nervous, worried night. Fortunately, the boy returned home the next day, and the issue was
resolved in a meeting between the two families where permission was secured for the boy to visit the girl and her family openly, ending the clandestine encounters.

In Santa Rosa, the authority of the Bolivian state is acknowledged to intervene in cases of murder, but the difficulty in proving fault and the distance to the political center makes such interference highly ineffective except in the most clear-cut cases. Because of the weakness of the state’s direct penetration into the lives of Santa Rosans in this area and the possession of guns by all adult males in the community (and it is not hard for a woman to get access to a gun if she desires), no one has a monopoly on the use of force, and thus force is not a means commonly utilized to impose one’s will upon others. Again, this stands in contrast to the rubber years, when patrones and their overseers could use violence with impunity against their debt-bound peones (peons), but indigenous violence against these ruling elites was met with severe punishment, according to oral accounts collected in the field.

Distributed access to guns as a means of coercion minimizes the ability for one to impose his or her will; easy mobility makes it easy to flee from situations where someone is trying to do so; however, perhaps the most important characteristic of Tacana life that facilitates an egalitarian reality and ethic is that the Tacana have equal access to food and other resources, to their means of subsistence.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, el monte (the wilds) within designated indigenous territories is not owned by individuals, but is held in common and owned collectively by the indigenous groups that occupy them. El monte is there for the use of all, although the Bolivian state has granted pockets of monte to private parties or peasant communities, and
these are considered off-limits. For example, a short distance up the river from Santa Rosa lived a family that held individual title to its property. It was rumored that several of its members would resort to violence to protect their territory.

Another exception to the collective nature of the monte is the control by individual communities of Brazil nut trees in their vicinity. While Santa Rosa did not have control over any Brazil nut trees, I was told that there were communities who did. Portions of the forest which have been improved (chacos, the community proper, personal compounds) are withheld from common use until they are abandoned. In practice, this translated to several hectares (maximum) per person. A large portion of the livelihoods of Santa Rosans and other Tacana came from el monte, and the inability of a few to withhold more forest resources than they and their families could directly collect, and more land than they and their families could directly cultivate, reinforced an equitable distribution of material goods.

It is not only access to the actual resources that are important, however; access to the knowledge and skills to procure them is critical as well. In Santa Rosa, each adult is capable of acquiring the skills to support him or herself. While this is definitely not the ideal, and households with both male and female members are preferred, the fact that the possibility exists is, indeed, a powerful equalizer and liberator. The relative equality of men and women can most likely be attributed, in part, to this possibility of independence. This possibility was not sufficient in and of itself to preserve such equality, however. Indeed, conversion to evangelical Christianity, which carried with it a strong rhetoric of men as the head of the household, appeared to dramatically reduce women’s power over themselves and their
families after conversion as implemented in Santa Rosa. Post conversion, women spoke less in community meetings where decisions were made, their daughters also played less soccer.

Leadership and decision making in Santa Rosa is consistent with an egalitarian ethic. In Santa Rosa and in the other Tacana communities I visited, consensus was the general form of communal decision-making, with voting used occasionally to resolve issues where consensus seemed impossible. Dissent is usually expressed by non-participation. In extreme cases, dissenters retire from the community. A certain amount of non-participation is allowed and expected as within the bounds of autonomous action. Yet those who will not participate on a continual basis are eventually ostracized and eventually can be forcibly ejected from the community. Interestingly, such chronic non-participation is often explained in terms of ethnic or religious choice: “No quiere ser indígena,” (She or he doesn’t want to be indígena), or “Ha vuelto creyente” (He or she has turned evangelist). Such difference is not seen as primordial but rather as a result of individual choice. Ejection from the community is not the result of one person’s will, however, but that of the collectivity, the group.

Non-participation as dissent is consistent with the high value Santa Rosans place upon personal autonomy, which is, in turn, consistent with the three material conditions of mobility, distributed coercive means, and resource availability. The underlying idea that everyone has and should have power over his or her own life was aggressively present in all decision-making. However, in communal meetings and in discussions with Santa Rosans about community affairs, it was clear that both independence and interdependence are highly prized. Self-determination is a right, but cooperation is necessary for comfortable survival.
“Sólo se frega” (Alone, one is ruined), I was told. Santa Rosans aggressively safe-guard autonomy while simultaneously enforcing communal cooperation through social controls such as gossip and shaming. Egalitarianism as a fact of life as well as an enforced value is supported by the material conditions of Santa Rosa life of mobility and ready access to resources and coercive tools; evaluations of “good” and “bad” people are also important components.

Leveling wealth as participation in the good/bad system.

The material conditions described above reinforce an egalitarian ethic and reality. However, differences in wealth and individual power do exist, in spite of the conditions that limit them. Some activities in Santa Rosa encourage an unequal distribution of wealth and generate differentiation and hierarchy. For example, wealthier families have more livestock. This is not only because they can afford to purchase more. A more important reason is that they are well off enough to allow their livestock investments to grow. They are more likely to have enough bullets to increase hunt success, to have canned meat as back-up, and to have enough animals to be able to eat excess male animals instead of those which could be bred. Like those in the U.S. who make high enough salaries to be able to invest, the money of the rich grows, but the money of the poor does not. In this case, animal holdings of the rich multiply, while animal holdings of the poor do not. Poorer families in Santa Rosa often end up having to eat the few animals they have, thus preventing growth of this form of edible wealth. They are also more mobile, as they are more likely to range further to hunt or for work as seasonal laborers. These poorer families are well aware that it is easier to keep a leg up than to get a leg up. They are also highly cognizant of their vulnerability to luck and tragedy. Redistributive practices work to partially redress the unequal distribution of wealth,
and one of the key moments when redistribution of accumulated livestock wealth occurs is during fiestas, discussed further in a later section.

As mentioned above, one common classification of people utilized by Santa Rosans was that of *buena gente* (good people) and *mala gente* (bad people). Good people are those who exhibit the behaviors and ethics deemed appropriate by the classifier. A primary characteristic of a person considered “good” in Santa Rosa is their active participation in redistributing accumulated wealth. This is because, in Santa Rosa, successful accumulation of wealth creates an obligation to share it. Expectations regarding the type, amount, and frequency of redistribution increased with decreased social distance and with higher positions in the social hierarchy. In other words, intimacy as well as wealth and/or status increase redistributive obligations.

It is no surprise that those who accumulate wealth do not tend to want it widely redistributed. Control over people's perceptions of one’s wealth is one important component in controlling the quantity of redistribution. Thus, a side effect of (and testament to) the effectiveness of leveling mechanisms is the widespread practice of concealing wealth. Conspicuous consumption, not surprisingly, is much less common in this region than in many parts of the US, for example. This is because if one flaunts one’s wealth in Santa Rosa or similar communities, one finds it harder to hang on to it. Conspicuous consumption does occur on occasion, however, such as in cases where the rich wear jeans. However, the price paid (both literally and figuratively) for such actions can be high. Requests from kin or friends for loans, sponsorship, or the lending of possessions are hard
to turn down without damage to the relationship. Plus, letting others know what you have dramatically increased the likelihood of losing it to theft.

While a more unequal distribution of wealth occurs in Riberalta than in Santa Rosa, some of the same practices of wealth camouflage occur there as well. According to Rene Boot, a Dutch scientist who lived in Riberalta for years, many Riberalteños with money to invest often invested in real estate outside of Riberalta. According to Boot, there are many potential reasons for this, including a lack of confidence in the economic future of Riberalta (Boot, personal communication). An additional reason might be to limit knowledge of their holdings and thus the potential for highly effective local redistributive mechanisms to redistribute their wealth.

Despite its prevalence, however, wealth concealing is not highly effective, and Santa Rosans and other Tacana in the region can be quite aggressive in enforcing the obligation of the better-off to give. One example of this was during the planning of the town anniversary celebration in 2002. A Santa Rosan man suggested that a letter be posted at the Riberalta port captain’s office requesting contributions by the traveling merchants that visit the community. The general consensus after some discussion was that if the merchants were to refuse to contribute, then they should be detained in the community until they did. While this did not have to happen in this case, it was common in the region for a group to actively and collectively enforce group-determined justice. (Such a group could seem like a mob, depending upon ones’ position in the situation.) The coercive power of the social group can be felt strongly in situations like this. If one turns down what is seen as a legitimate request without a believable and acceptable justification, social relations degenerate and one
can end up ostracized, castigado (punished), or, after a slow degeneration of relations over time, eventually even killed.

Socially-enforced sharing functions as a leveling mechanism to control wealth in Santa Rosa. While foods that are easier to get (for example plantains and forest fruits) are less subject to sharing requirements than foods that are harder to get (for example, meat and fish), none are exempt. Santa Rosans feel an obligation to share food with friends, relatives, and those who have none.

Sharing obligations are most developed where social ties are strongest, but even strangers, just passing through, warrant a minimal level of hospitality. Travelers stopping to prepare meals or rest for the night are welcome to shelter for their bedrolls and mosquito nets, cooking fires, and water if they so request. Plates, buckets, and cooking pans are also commonly loaned in such cases. Further, there is a widely-shared belief that no one should go hungry and if travelers lack food, rice and sweet manioc or plantain are almost always offered, often after some hushed speculation on the part of the hosts regarding whether or not visitors have food or not and thus whether sharing is necessary. With wealth, in this case of staple food supplies, comes this generalized obligation to fellow humans with these minimal requirements. If hosts want to begin to create stronger social ties with the strangers, offerings would be amplified to include meat, chicha, tobacco, or coca, all of which are consumables invested with thick social meanings concerning friendship and reciprocity. These meanings are explored in more detail in the next section.
Looking horizontally, the strongest sharing obligations exist between kin, then friends, and finally to those in need, known or not. Vertically, the poor enforce some redistribution from the wealthy, whether politicians, factory owners, merchants, or anthropologists with whom they interact. Without us, they say, the rich would have nothing, meaning that the wealthy accumulate wealth at the expense of the poor, who are their employees and customers.

Sharing can create, reflect, and reinforce horizontal interpersonal bonds—intimacy. It can also be an enforced mechanism for taking material possessions (money and things) out of the hands of those who have more in order to put them into the hands of those who have less. In these cases, however, a paradox is created since money and objects are exchanged for prestige and respect. While such interchanges contribute to a more egalitarian reality, they simultaneously reinforce hierarchical relationships and provide a subtle challenge to egalitarian values. Interestingly enough, theft, though deviant, succeeds in redistributing material possessions from the rich to the poor without undermining egalitarian values. The majority of major thefts are most likely committed by those who are acquainted with the victims, but who are not extremely close to them, due to the difficulty of hiding the use or sale of stolen items in this primarily face-to-face society. Theft is thus an excellent redistributor of the property of rich people who are not socially obligated to share their wealth through sanctioned means. Further, it is not only the thieves that benefit, since stolen property enters the highly developed, positively sanctioned system of reciprocal sharing obligations, either right away or after being sold at a greatly discounted price.

Besides intentional theft, another common form of involuntary gifting also results in the appropriation of others’ property without their consent: loan default. Like theft, loan
default is ubiquitous in the region. However, unlike theft, loan default is common between those who are personally close, functioning to redistribute the wealth of those to whom one is most intimate.

Among those with temporary and small differences in wealth, voluntary and involuntary gifting redistributes in a small way; but while they have limited redistributive function in terms of amount, they are extremely effective equalizers. Among those with more permanent and larger differences in wealth, these gifting mechanisms redistribute in a larger way; but while they have a notable redistributive function in terms of the amount of property that is passed from rich to poor, they are not effective equalizers because the rich stay rich in spite of their property loss. In other words, gifting most contributes to an egalitarian reality among those with the least difference in wealth. Understanding this is key to understanding why it seems too hard for Santa Rosans and others in the region to “get ahead” in the ways thought to be positive by many of the government and NGO workers who subscribe to an idea of progress tied to western capitalistic notions of accumulation of property.

Meat and inebriants (tobacco, coca, corn beer, and hard liquor) carry a heavy symbolic load in the realm of friendship. When offering these to someone, one was at some level extending the hand of friendship, whether for the first time or to expand and reinforce pre-existing bonds. Meat is highly valued and rarely in excess. Since it is both scarce and highly valued, it is not surprising that its sharing is invested with so much meaning. Meat is a multivocal symbol. Its potential meanings concern status, need, self-sacrifice, wealth,
friendship, kinship, obligation, generosity, and festivity. A series of diverse vignettes serve to illuminate a part of this thickness.

Meat equals wealth – fiestas.

It is time to celebrate the “primer añito” (first birthday) of a Santa Rosa child, and there is much happy talk of how “vamos a comer chancho” (we’re going to eat pork) before the party, hosted by one of the wealthier Santa Rosa families.

Another celebration is planned by a poorer family. They explain that there will be “gallina, no más” (just chicken) since they don’t have a pig to slaughter or the money to buy one from a neighbor. They say this while shaking their heads and expressing regret at the state of affairs.

Pork is the meat of fiestas, and pigs are usually saved for celebrations. (In one case, someone convinced a relative to kill a pig and thus created an impromptu fiesta.) The consumption of pork is one of the most fundamental requirements for a truly successful event. While poultry or hunted game can be substituted, they are regarded as poor substitutes (in a dual sense – paltry and something done by the poor). Not being able to provide guests with pork when hosting an event connotes poverty and can be humiliating. However, the practice is an example of a sort of progressive tax where fiesta hosts who have more, share more.²

² A large anthropological literature exists on fiestas as leveling mechanisms, beginning with the work of Eric Wolf (1959) and Frank Cancian (1965).
Meat equals wealth – progress.

One man talks about the old days when he was a rubber tapper. Back then they had guns but they used gun powder which would get wet and which took a long time to reload. One time he met up with a couple who were deep in the forest collecting rubber. They were all but starving, and all they had to eat, in this dark time, was a tiny “pajarito” (bird) to share between them. Nothing else (no meat), for days at a time. The “partón malo” (bad rubber boss) didn’t give them meat.

Meat, as noted above, is locally synonymous with wealth. When Santa Rosans talk about having more or less meat, they are not simply talking about diet. They are also commenting on their quality of life, about wealth, well being, and health. The man talking about the lack of meat in the past communicates an idea of progress. Back then, he is saying, there was worse technology, worse elites, and worse working conditions. Others, however, see the current times as times of cultural decay and fewer resources.

Sharing meat equals friendship.

An old woman complains that people have forgotten how to share. She and her husband are old. He cannot hunt and they are all alone. “Ellos son mala gente, no traen carne (Those people are bad people, they don’t bring meat).” The other day, she explains, a Santa Rosa woman sent her son with some meat but it was “puro hueso” (just bone). She repeats, “mala gente son” (they are bad people).

An NGO worker, working for an NGO that community members see as helpful, visits and is brought a plate heaped with rice, plantain, and a large hunk of meat.
Meat sharing is both a reflector and a creator of amiable social ties. People share the most with those they consider good people, and not sharing makes someone a bad person. Within the community, sharing meat can be a way of showing respect (to the elderly, for example). It can also be a way to give a return gift to someone who is giving to the community in some way (a teacher or NGO worker, for example). However, hospitality of this sort can also be a manipulative technique to extract resources from those who have greater access. In the case of the woman who felt people had forgotten how to share, the lack of sharing reflected the severance of social ties that was occurring, eventually resulting in the withdrawal of the inhabitants of her entire compound from the community.

These comments on meat sharing are intended to provide a taste of the thickness of meaning surrounding the exchange of food between kin and friend. This generalized reciprocity within the community acts as a leveling mechanism, flowing along the lines of interpersonal solidarity. This solidarity, it is important to remember, is highly equitable among community membership, due to the conditions of mobility and flexibility described above. Once the general sharing breaks down, someone, ultimately, leaves – this person is no longer a good person but has made the transition to being “malo” (bad).

**Being a good person.**

“Tener confianza” (to have trust) with someone implies friendship and mutual obligation, as well as trust in their loyalty. “Tenemos confianza” means “we’re friends,” and since people are not friends with bad people in Santa Rosa, that means the other person is a good person. Part of having confianza is being deeply involved in the system of participation described in
this chapter. Trust relationships are not easily or quickly constructed, and must be cared for in order to keep them strong.

Keith Basso wrote about friendship building among the Western Apache of the US Southwest in metaphorical terms (1979). According to the Apache, newly formed interpersonal relationships are like untanned deer hides; they are stiff and easily cracked, and thus must be treated with respect and formality (1979:68). In time, however, with careful treatment including gentle stretching, hides become soft, supple, strong buckskins, and friendships become stronger and more resilient as well (1979:68). For the Apache, this meant that friendships could become joking relationships, “…testing and affirming solidarity by ostensibly denying it,” and thus “stretching” the hide (1979:69). Impositions and tests that stretched the hide made it stronger and more resilient, but they could go too far and tear it. Tears were easier to mend the softer the buckskin and the stronger the friendship.

Like the Western Apache, Santa Rosans “stretch the hide” of friendship, and like the Western Apache, they run the risk of going too far and “tearing the hide.” Hide stretching could be in the form of jokes (commonly including insulting but apt nicknames such as garapata (tick) and impositions in the form of loans or favors. If the hide is supple and can bear the strain, “permitted disrespect” (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 91) strengthening the social bond and increased confianza. The same applies to impositions which are reframed in terms of the obligations of reciprocity discussed below.

Confianza, which goes hand-in-hand with friendship, is earned through the demonstration of a number of personal characteristics that are, in turn, demonstrated through particular
behaviors. Loyalty is proven, in part, by one’s ability to remain *callado* (closed mouthed) about inside information. Honesty in words and with money is also important. Dependability of performance (reliability) is shown through consistent execution of one's promised actions. Since “forgetting” to do things is a common, socially acceptable explanation for not following through, choosing not to avail oneself of this excuse is an important confianza-builder. Being *tranquilo* (calm) is also a plus. “Tranquilo, tranquilo” (calm down, calm down) and “todo con calma” (everything slowly and calmly) are oft repeated refrains, reflecting a local ethic similar to that of the tortoise in the Western story of the Tortoise and the Hare. In local estimations, someone who is tranquilo is also more likely to be dependable and trustworthy.

The people with whom a person has confianza are an important type of insider. Santa Rosans either have confianza with someone, or they do not. They do not have a little confianza. Those in one’s trust set are *gente buena* (good people). Non-members can be unknowns or *gente mala* (bad people). Relationships of confianza are important for getting things done in an area where impersonal enforcement mechanisms are extremely weak. Stated another way, contracts (whether written or oral) are worth very little. It is in the realm of personal relationships that social control is centered. Those with whom one has confianza are most likely to provide assistance and to be reliable (as well as pleasant) companions in any endeavor.

Confianza, as stated above, is earned slowly and is not granted lightly. Santa Rosans are distrustful of the intentions of those with whom they lack confianza; they are suspicious of strangers and outsiders. Given their (recent) collective history of debt peonage as rubber
collectors, along with the prevalence of theft, secrecy, and occasional violent crime, it is not surprising that one must earn their trust. When one has passed from stranger to friend, one has entered the good/bad universe as a good person, a position gained and maintained by active participation in the sharing system.

**Linking to national and international communities.**

The moral order of Santa Rosa is one in which egalitarian ethics, reciprocal obligations, and material conditions combine to sustain particular ideas of what makes a good person. These ideas influence their reactions to outsiders (including NGO and governmental representatives) attempting to enter and intervene in the community. Santa Rosans refer to a person as *bueno* (good) or *malo* (bad) and refer to a good relationship as one where there is confianza. Ideas of good or bad people help explain conflicting attitudes held by these forest dwellers towards interventions into the community by outsiders who, in the eyes of Santa Rosans, are potentially bad people.

Governmental and aid workers in northern Bolivia often comment on the difficulty of working with indígenas. While some of these difficulties arise from racist attitudes which remain a problem, there is a general understanding that many problems are caused in large part by culture clashes between workers and forest dwellers. People everywhere make sense of new relationships in terms of old ones. Past relationships (collectively remembered as well as personally experienced) and moral orders (which provide interpretations and scripts of behavior) structure present relationships. The actions and reactions of Santa Rosans to external aid, whether governmental, humanitarian, or religious in motivation, must be understood within the moral universe described above.
In the case of Santa Rosa and numerous other communities in the region, representatives of NGOs and the government have a long history of promises with no follow through, of taking without giving. As an anthropologist, I was often chastised by indígenas throughout the region for the actions of academic colleagues (anthropologists and others) who had taken knowledge from locals without ever returning anything (even the results of their studies) that would complete the reciprocity scenario. Another oft told story of how openness and generosity could be disastrous was of how rubber seeds had been freely shared with foreigners, leading to the establishment of rubber plantations elsewhere in the world and the eventual abandonment of the region’s rubber tappers, leaving them in great economic hardship.

From the perspective of government and aid workers, indígenas are often seen as irrationally uninterested in improving their lives, or as manipulative and full of attempts to extract what they could without doing their part to earn what their given. This evaluation is a matter of perspective. In Santa Rosa, it is often the government and aid workers who are seen as manipulative and extractive, as trying to avoid their responsibilities to give back. These impatient outsiders do not understand obligations of mutual aid that contribute to community well being while discouraging the concentration of wealth into the hands of the few. Those who avoid participating in extended sharing relationships (often as much a function of the structure of aid allocation and employee retention as of individual intention) receive the label of “bad person” and are forced to participate involuntarily through theft and default on repayment obligations. Indígenas have learned to expect people to come with offers but fail to deliver and act accordingly. They are looking, however, for longer-term
relationships that entail give and take on both sides, where the hide stretching is a longer, slower process – hard-learned lessons.