Facing the State, Facing the World: Amazonia's Native Leaders and the New Politics of Identity


Citer ce document / Cite this document:


http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/hom_0439-4216_1993_num_33_126_369642
I

Even by the liberal standards of New York City, Davi Kopenawa Yanomami was an unusual visitor. An envoy of Brazil’s Yanomami Indians, he came to New York in 1991 to tell the United Nations about the conditions under which his people were living, and dying, as thousands of gold miners poured into the Brazilian jungle.1 News accounts of his visit juxtaposed his image as a representative of “the last primitive tribe of the Amazon” with the subways, concrete towers, and homeless people of the metropolis. Davi Kopenawa Yanomami carried himself with the dignity that Amazonian peoples summon in challenging circumstances, his remarkable poise betrayed only by an occasional uneasy movement of the eyes.

More recently, Pangra Kaiapo and Tu’ire Kaiapo, two representatives of the Kayapó of Brazil, held an audience in Philadelphia spellbound as they described their struggle to block a major dam project that would have submerged their village on the Xingu River under an artificial lake. A front-page
article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of 7 March 1992 noted that one of the motives of their visit was to inspect a museum exhibit of South American featherwork displayed on “life-size figures of humans with painted bodies and beautiful headdresses”.

It is tempting to see these encounters as the completion of a cycle of intercultural exploration chronicled by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*. Lévi-Strauss embarked upon a journey to find the savage and ultimately discovered his own society. Now savages make similar journeys in search of us, hoping to reimagine a place for themselves in a forest world engulfed by nation-states that have long claimed Amazonia but never fully possessed it.

Conversation between South America’s native peoples and the rest of the world is not, however, an invention of the twentieth century. As early as the 1500s, French and Portuguese traders brought Brazilian Indians to Europe, where they broke bread with aristocrats. In the seventeenth century the Dutch promoted an extreme version of what would now be called student exchange: they sent twenty-five Indians from Pernambuco to the Netherlands and shipped a similar number of Dutch boys to Brazil, with the hope that each group would become fluent in the other’s language (Hemming 1978: 288). From elsewhere in the continent, Indian views of the Conquest and its aftermath were conveyed to European audiences by the works of El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and Huaman Poma.

In this essay I will consider some of the effects that the conversation, now nearly 500 years old, between Amazonian Indians and the West has had on the dynamics of leadership in Amazonian polities. Anthropological views of Amazonian leadership have shifted substantially in the years since Lévi-Strauss traveled to the Nambiquara seeking the origins of chiefly authority. Although one can still admire Lévi-Strauss’s bemused remark that chiefs exist “because there are [. . .] men who, unlike their companions, love importance for its own sake” (1961: 310), it is by now clear that the forms of tribal leadership, and the very nature of “tribe” itself, have been shaped by the circumstances of contact with the West. The dialogue between native populations and outsiders has created novel sources of power and authority, fomented new contradictions and struggles within indigenous society. And the impact has not been entirely in one direction, for (especially in the twentieth century) the appearance of articulate indigenous spokespersons has transformed political discourse in the Amazonian nations and, beyond them, in the developed countries of the North, some of whose citizens see Amazonian peoples as providing a compelling alternative to spiritual and ecological malaise at home.

II

One day in 1977, Eladio Jiukám, the headman of the Aguaruna village in which I then resided, called for the men of the village to join him in constructing
The New Politics of Identity

a new schoolhouse. As the morning mist lifted from the soccer field in front of the old school, we met in Eladio's house to drink manioc beer. The turnout for such events was unpredictable, but Eladio usually counted on the help of his sons and sons-in-law, whose families were the core households of the community. On this day, however, all the ablebodied presented themselves. After a pleasant half-hour of drinking and the inevitable round of jokes and teasing, Eladio took up his machete and strode to the door. "I go to work," he said to the men, adding sociably, "Continue drinking." Outside the door he called, "I'm going." His departure produced no prompt response. The drinking and joking continued apace. Minutes later, Eladio's brother stood and casually took his leave: "I go to work. Continue drinking." Each man savored a last bowl of beer served by Eladio's wife and, picking up his machete, ambled out to the construction site for the day's labors.

Eladio's oblique style of command typifies what has long been characterized as "traditional" leadership in Amazonia. Many Amazonian peoples are so reluctant to surrender political power, so protective of individual autonomy, that Pierre Clastres has been moved to declare that among them "the holders of what elsewhere would be called power are actually without power [...] [in] a domain beyond coercion and violence, beyond hierarchical subordination" (Clastres 1987: 11-12). On the basis of more systematic surveys of Amazonian ethnography and archaeology, scholars have thoroughly discredited the romantic clarity of this formulation. Yet like the author of many an inspired oversimplification, Clastres has fixed on an important fact, for even in Amazonian societies with recognizable chiefs there is remarkably little physical coercion brought to bear in the practice of leadership. If force is not commonly an element of leadership in Amazonia, on what does it rest?

Attempts by anthropologists to answer this question, at once so simple and so complex, frequently run afoul of circular reasoning. Analysts who draw on Weber hold that power must be understood in terms of authority and legitimacy. Other argue that authority comes from, or is a reflection of, the ability to persuade others, often through the strategic use of formal rhetoric. It is but a small step from this observation to the assertion, pace Foucault, that the root of power is knowledge; knowing begets persuasion. Because knowledge is itself socially constituted, one completes the circle to confront yet again the original question: why are people willing to part with some of their autonomy by entrusting others with the authority to lead?

Perhaps we can escape this circularity by returning to the obvious. Peter J. Wilson (1988) notes that at its root leadership consists of the ability to inspire cooperation. Cooperative labor is the starting point in a cycle of power that both defines a leader and, paradoxically, empowers his followers by mobilizing them to pool their forces in new ways (Wilson 1988: 121-122). This has, in specific places and times, led to a formalization of the relationship so that leaders achieve substantial coercive power over their followers. But in Amazonia the situation is typically subject to frequent renegotiation. Rather than leading
through implied or real coercion, Amazonian headmen guide their supporters toward collective action through persuasive language and example, both based on recognized authority. This authority is both ascribed and achieved—ascribed because leaders must have a strong group of kin who can form the core of their following, achieved because leaders must be models of competence, generosity, and tact. The Nambiquara chief exemplifies this model of leadership, for he “works harder than anyone else and then gets blamed when things go wrong” (Price 1981: 697).

The symbolic template of Nambiquara authority is the older sibling/younger sibling relationship (ibid.: 703). For the Tupian Kagwahiv, in contrast, the template is the relationship between father-in-law and son-in-law (Kracke 1978: 72). Authority based on kinship and marriage alliance lays the foundation for influence that expands outward to include other domestic units; in Wilson’s terminology, domestic authority becomes public authority, which explains why polygyny is at once the principal perquisite of leadership and, according to some analysts, the primary means by which leaders intensify household production to the high level needed to sustain the conspicuous hospitality expected of them. The essentially autarkic quality of domestic production in post-Conquest Amazonia, however, guarantees that political power is fragile and circumscribed in scope. In the heat of millenarian enthusiasm, Amazonian peoples have sometimes experimented with the institutionalization of political hierarchy (Brown 1991: 402-403). But under ordinary circumstances, an excessive taste for power in an Amazonian leader is likely to elicit ridicule, indifference, or evasive non-compliance from fellow tribesmen.

This benign and admittedly normative picture of Amazonian leadership is contradicted by another kind of headman who appears in Amazonian ethnographies, paired with the judicious Nambiquara headman like a dark twin. He is the chief of war, the imperious commander who arises during times of conflict. Among the Machiguenga of Peru, for instance, the category of headman called itinking, who is noted for tact and a judicious temperament, contrasts with the despotic gantatsirira, who prior to the imposition of Peruvian civil control expanded his following through threats of violence directed toward anyone who challenged his wishes (Rosengren 1987). In 1900, Colonel Pedro Portillo visited the encampment of a native autocrat named Venancio, who ruled over the Asháninka of the Río Tambo from a village called Washington. “Washington is like a military plaza [. . .] of five hundred inhabitants, all subject to Venancio”, he reported (Portillo 1901: 40).

Here the problem of history intrudes, for many of the Amazonian leaders of this sort about whom we have any knowledge are creatures of the frontier, the turbulent domain on the margins of state expansion. The cruel Machiguenga gantatsirira—who had his counterpart among the neighboring Asháninka, among the native groups of the Putumayo (Taussig 1987), and elsewhere in western Amazonia—was, to a considerable extent, produced by the Rubber Boom’s insatiable demand for native labor. He built his power on the support of
plantation owners and missionaries, while taking advantage of local instabilities caused by the introduction of new instruments of war (notably firearms) and by the disruption of longstanding trade networks by white settlement. Frontier conflict might express itself as intertribal raiding, as it did among the Cocamilla of the Rio Huallaga. Although described by Spanish observers of the early contact period as a peaceful people, by the seventeenth century the Cocamilla were carrying out large-scale war expeditions to the Rio Pastaza, taking heads and capturing steel tools from native groups there (Stocks 1981: 46). Organized violence might also be directed at the colonizer. Two eighteenth-century chieftains, the Carib cacique Taricura and the Manau chief Ajuricaba, exemplify the powerful native leaders who emerged to direct vigorous Indian resistance to Europeans. Less famous, perhaps, but more important in the broad canvas of Amazonian history are the countless native middlemen spawned by the colonial encounter. It is now a commonplace to observe that Europeans expected to find chiefs wherever they went and that, as often as not, this expectation had a self-fulfilling quality.

III

An analytical problem in any assessment of the impact of the state on native polities is the question of how the state itself is conceptualized (Brown & Fernandez 1992: 176-177). When we use such terms as "cultural hegemony" "the dominant national culture", etc., we embrace the state's reifying rhetoric, in effect accepting the existence of a Peruvian or Bolivian or Venezuelan nation-state as an ontological reality. The striking thing about the experience of many Amazonian peoples, however, is the fragmentary nature of the state as they have actually experienced it over time. Aside from the relatively rare instances when a single government entity mediates native contacts with outsiders (e.g., Brazilian Indian communities near FUNAI posts), Amazonian Indians have, until recently at least, encountered the state as individual people (government officials, soldiers, missionaries, traders, anthropologists, miners, settlers) in pursuit of diverse and even mutually contradictory agendas. In the case of missions run by North American and European religious denominations, these "agents of state expansion" may not even be citizens of the state in question. The Amazonian nations are characterized by a high degree of centralization and a low level of local control, especially in remote hinterlands. What government officials prescribe in distant capitals often bears little resemblance to reality in the bush, especially in areas controlled by powerful ranchers, insurgent groups, or producers of cocaine.

This complex political topography has altered the conditions under which native leadership takes form and given it more varied contours than it possessed in the colonial period. As Indians come into the orbit of alien institutions, their leaders are called upon to master the skills of intercultural relations: bilingualism,
behavioral flexibility, and literacy. The headman who possesses undisputed knowledge of his own culture is pushed aside by the chameleon-like leader who can successfully walk in two worlds.6 An ethnographic example of this process is provided by William Vickers (1989), who describes the rise and fall of a bilingual Secoya teacher named Celestino. Trained by missionary-linguists of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Celestino’s influence among the Secoya came from his salaried employment and his ability to defend Indian rights in confrontations with colonists and representatives of the Ecuadorian government. Eventually the pressure of this role and a waning consensus about his legitimacy as a spokesman led Celestino to flee the region. Leaders such as Celestino, Vickers (1989: 59) points out, “are often younger men or marginal adults whose ‘authority’ derives from a distant and poorly understood state apparatus rather than the traditional and accepted sources of wisdom and influence”.

Emergent forms of native leadership illustrate a key feature of modernity: the disembedding of social systems.7 The headman whose authority is founded on a multi-faceted network of kin relations, often buttressed by ritual knowledge, is eclipsed by leaders drawing upon more focussed expertise: the bilingual schoolteacher, the elected presidente who brokers relations with civil authorities, the Christian pastor, the health worker, or the manager of a community cooperative. As they are exposed to the national society, Indians experiment with the thoroughly disembedded bureaucratic structures that represent the ne plus ultra of Latin American civic life. In 1988 I visited small Guaymi communities in Panama in which it seemed that every adult had a formal bureaucratic title, ranging from treasurer and secretary to president of the health committee. J.-P. Chaumeil (1990: 103) notes a similar process in one of Peru’s large Indian federations, where there has been an extravagant proliferation of “ministerial” positions. The appearance of written codes of law in native communities—a development that has received inadequate attention from anthropologists—expresses the extent to which Amazonian peoples are struggling with their own ideas of how to modernize their societies.

Yet even as they undertake these experiments, leaders return to the idioms of traditional authority. Schoolteachers form polygynous marriages and use their modest salaries to win supporters through conspicuous generosity. The very people who reject the allegedly old-fashioned leadership style of senior men are drawn inexorably back to its patterns; the most successful new leaders master arts of persuasion appropriate both to native society and to the nation-states in which they reside, taking up one and dropping the other like a change of clothing.9

IV

No discussion of leadership in a tribal setting would be complete without reflection on the links between spiritual and political authority. To frame the
question more specifically for the Amazonian context, what is the intersection of the roles of headman and shaman? The picture in Amazonian societies is decidedly mixed, ranging from cases in which shamans are nearly always political leaders (and vice versa) to settings in which shamans work at the outer boundaries of daily politics, though their pronouncements may from time to time move to the center stage of public life. Somewhere in between is an arrangement by which headman and shaman work in what J.-P. Chaumeil (1987: 52) refers to as a "complicity" of roles.10

Fernando Santos Granero has tried to impose order on this bewildering variation by arguing that Amazonian leadership is inevitably linked to the "mystical means of production"—that is, control of "life-giving knowledge, ceremonial techniques and ritual paraphernalia" (Santos Granero 1986: 658). In some societies such power is monopolized by shamans, in others by leaders of a more conventionally political sort. Although insightful, his argument begs the question of why this variation exists in the first place, nor does it explain why women often possess significant life-giving ritual knowledge yet are consistently excluded from formal leadership in the Amazonian societies known to ethnographers.

Whatever the political interconnections of shamanism and leadership prior to European contact, the encounter with the West has precipitated significant changes. Where missionaries and civil authorities influence native life, they are reluctant to accept the authority of shamans, even those collectively recognized as political leaders. In her memoir of life among the Asháninka of Peru, a North American evangelical missionary recalls that she asked God "not to permit the cruel man who was the self-appointed witch doctor [. . .] ever to come to the [mission] station, for I felt then that I wanted neither to help nor teach him" (Stull 1951: 98), sentiments shared by many others in her position. (Exceptions are made, of course, for the shaman who shows an inclination to convert, in which case he becomes a shining example of the Indians' inexorable march to redemption.) Shamans surely play a sub rosa part in the formulation of indigenous responses to challenge from outside the community. Nevertheless, cases in which shamans take a prominent, public role in shaping community responses to political crisis, such as Whitten (1985: 117-118) reports for the Canelos Quichua, seem to be the exception rather than the rule in Amazonian ethnography, mostly owing to pressures from outside the indigenous world.

Whether blunt or oblique, the colonizer's assault on traditional spirituality has reawakened underlying millenarian and nativist traditions in many parts of lowland South America. Millenarian movements tend to produce charismatic leaders whose powers far transcend the more circumscribed influence of headmen. An illuminating instance is provided by the Ramkokamekra (Canela) messianic movement of 1963, during which a prophetess usurped the influence of community leaders and was carried about on a litter by her followers (Crocker 1967). With few exceptions, however, these movements have been violently suppressed by colonial authorities who, rightly or wrongly, see them as promoting resistance to civil control.11
Elsewhere in the Third World, millenarianism has sometimes fostered broad regional or national alliances of native peoples by breaking down ethnic boundaries and local religious traditions in favor of interethnic commonalities. The post-Conquest record in Amazonia, however, offers few examples of durable intertribal alliances created by episodes of millenarian enthusiasm. A notable exception is a group of interrelated religious movements known variously as Hallelujah, Areruya, Chochimu, and San Miguel, which have gained many adherents among the Carib-speaking Indians settled near the shared borders of Guyana, Venezuela, and Brazil. The Hallelujah movement, now a stable part of Carib religious expression, was inspired in the mid-19th century by the teachings of a Makusi prophet who had come under the sway of British missionaries. Although the movement is strongly Christian in character, it is also marked by nativist reaffirmation of many Carib values. The followers of Hallelujah and its offshoots are luckier than their counterparts elsewhere in lowland South America: they were able to incubate the religion for more than a century without substantial interference from outsiders, producing what Audrey Butt Colson calls an “indigenous church”. At the same time, Hallelujah has become the catalyst for the creation of regional networks that encourage intertribal cohesiveness and which have, in Colson’s words, “cushioned the impact of an increasing clash of different structures” (Butt Colson 1985: 142).

The Brotherhood of the Cross (Hermandad de la Cruz or Orden Cruzada in Spanish, Irmandade da Santa Cruz in Portuguese), an ascetic and millenarian form of Catholicism that has attracted thousands of Indian followers in eastern Peru and western Brazil, represents a more ambiguous case, with a trajectory that is still uncertain. Demoralized Indians, especially the Tikuna, have rallied to the Brotherhood of the Cross and thus managed to improve the quality of their lives and their prospects for survival as a people. Yet despite the clear continuity of certain aspects of the movement with the millenarian traditions of its Indian followers, the religion’s thrust is so Biblical in its reorganization of daily life that it is difficult to find in it a significant nativist core.

These two movements—one with Protestant roots, the other more closely identified with Catholicism—illustrate the capacity of Christianity to produce churches that are to some degree indigenized. If the path of evangelical churches in other parts of the world (Africa in particular) is any indication, within a decade or two anthropologists will be puzzling over an explosive appearance of Christian sects controlled by Indians, with potentially far-reaching effects on the ways Amazonian peoples deal with each other and with the surrounding national society.

Much has been made of the divisive effect that Christian missionaries have had on native communities by fomenting factional struggles between Christians and pagans, or between Catholic and Protestant converts. Without denying the many troubling issues connected with missionary work, I would like to call attention to some of its important, and arguably beneficial, effects on Indian political perspectives and strategies. Missions have encouraged bilingualism
and literacy among peoples who might otherwise have been left to resist mutely the pillaging of their lands. Involvement with foreign missionaries has fostered in Indians a cosmopolitanism that often exceeds that of the ostensibly more worldly members of the national society. It has exposed Indians to alternative agendas that may differ strikingly from those of their national governments, which are prone to advancing monolithic ideas of the Indians’ own future as citizens. To an extent not yet adequately appreciated, Protestant conversion may have led Indians to mark themselves as different from, and morally superior to, the largely Roman Catholic majority population. In a recent analysis of the connections between tribalism and missionary work in Southern Africa, Leroy Vail makes some observations that apply as well to the unfolding of Amazonian ethnicity: “Missionaries themselves were often instrumental in providing the cultural symbols that could be organized into a cultural identity, especially a written language and a researched written history [. . .] Thus, mission education socialized the young into accepting tribal membership [. . .] which they saw as giving an automatic, ascriptive cultural unity to ‘their’ people as they confronted the challenge of colonialism and the impact of industrialization” (Vail 1989: 11-12). Of course, the “tribalism” that emerges from the mission experience may be an empty shell: a strong sense of ethnic identity unaccompanied by a corresponding mastery of the linguistic and subsistence skills formerly associated with adult life as a Piaroa, a Shuar, etc. Experience in other parts of the world—and here I think especially of North America’s native population—shows that ethnic identity can survive changes of language, dress, and religion, but this may be small consolation for those of us who lament the loss of the unique understandings and modes of action, developed in situ for centuries, that for the ethnographer define a specific culture.

Despite the ambivalent feelings that many Amazonian peoples have about missionaries, Catholic and Protestant denominations represent transnational organizations with which Indians have formed alliances and developed strategies to thwart the secular agendas of states. In the twentieth century, the Salesian order helped to establish the Shuar Federation, which has effectively slowed colonization of Shuar lands by non-Indians (Salazar 1981: 593-594). Again, this is not to deny that missionaries have often worked in tandem with host governments or that they represent, in the words of Anne Christine Taylor (1981: 647), “the articulating mechanisms” between Indians and “the dominant mode of production of the national society”.16 I wish only to point out that an analysis limited exclusively to the destructive effect of missionization misses some important resources that missions and their international networks have offered to native leadership. Today we see Indians leaders appropriating the missionary’s civilizing ambition, as well as his rhetoric, as they marshal support for land rights, bilingual education, and political self-determination.
The flowering of Indian federations since the late 1960s is the most striking change in the circumstances of Amazonian leadership since first contact. A recent study reported thirty such federations in Peru alone, and similar organizations are proliferating elsewhere in the region. Local and regional federations have, with varying degrees of success, forged links to umbrella organizations of international scope, the ultimate goal being the creation of an alliance of all the New World’s native peoples or even of “tribal peoples” worldwide.

The strategy of undertaking political organization on the basis of ethnicity is, as Richard Chase Smith (1985: 17) notes, unusual in Latin America and reflects the specific circumstances of intercultural contact in Amazonia, an area that has been “peripheral to or outside of the integrative horizons which have swept the Andean region over the past several millennia”. Although Smith is surely correct in his assessment of the role that intact languages and cultural patterns play in providing a framework for self-definition, I would argue that the emergence of tribal ethnicity is the result of factors more complex than marginalization from historical developments in the Andes. It is now clear that “tribes”—bounded social units with a supposedly primordial identity based on language, custom, and genealogy—are to a considerable extent creations of the states that surround them rather than social categories meaningful to Indians themselves. When the main concern of the dominant society was control of Indian labor, the natives’ tribal affiliation was of only slight interest; it was enough to know that natives were generic chunchos or indios. With the advance of missionary work, bilingual education, and land-tenure struggles, however, tribal boundaries and affiliations emerged as powerful political categories. “Tribe” became a way that native peoples could frame their identities and demands without being assimilated into existing advocacy institutions (national political parties, labor unions, peasant organizations, etc.) that historically have treated Indians in a paternalistic manner, if they noticed them at all.

These developments have been paralleled by the growth, especially in the developed countries of the North, of intense public interest in the welfare of indigenous peoples—or at least in those who meet certain criteria of authenticity. Among the things that make tribal people appealing are their supposed marginalization from history, the integration of the spiritual and the practical in their daily experience, their respect for the land, and the elegant simplicity of their technology. The rhetoric of ethnic assertion is now a well-established part of political life in the North, and for advocacy groups in Canada, France, Denmark, or the United States it seems a “natural” way for minority populations to enter the arena of political contention while undertaking their own economic development. This interest, and the economic assistance associated with it, has encouraged Indians to position themselves in the political arena as Indians.
The New Politics of Identity

rather than, say, as peasants or plantation workers, though they may from
time to time find it expedient to ally themselves with non-Indian groups when
facing common challenges.

The emergence of Amazonian ethnic politics took the leaders of Amazoni-
an states by surprise, accustomed as they were to political discourse framed
by issues of class and party rather than in terms of ethnic identity per se. The
Latin American left, despite its populist orientation, has been particularly slow
to come to terms with ethnic concerns, which in orthodox Marxist thought are
dismissed as one of the more pernicious forms of false consciousness. Conserva-
tives are willing to accept Indian identity as such (indeed, indio has been a
recognized racial category for centuries), but they may dismiss claims based
on Indianness as trivial in the context of the political demands of the non-
Indian majority. Other problems arise in countries such as Bolivia, which by
virtue of its self-proclaimed Indian identity finds itself legally prevented from
recognizing one group of Indians as having rights different from another.

Although Indians have presented themselves as candidates for local office,
sometimes successfully winning seats in national legislatures, these campaigns
have been intended more to focus national attention on native concerns than
to enter the give-and-take of parliamentary politics; indeed, the skill exhibited
by native spokesmen in bypassing conventional channels of patronage has
produced a form of politics entirely new to the region. Some Indian organiz-
ations have been spectacularly successful in bringing their demands to the
attention of national and international audiences through the strategic use of
mass media. The Brazilian Kayapó, for instance, staged a public meeting in
Altamira in 1989 that was, according to Terence Turner, “planned with a view
to its appearance on film and video media”. The Kayapó “shrewdly realized
that the production of a huge and gaudy confrontational event would draw
large numbers of journalists and documentary-makers”, the presence of which
“would be their best guarantee that the Brazilian government would feel
compelled to send its representatives to the meeting” (Turner 1991: 36). The
Kayapó now manage their own video production facilities.

The new identity politics of Amazonia has produced high-profile Indian
media figures whose presence is as sought after in Paris, Stockholm, and Wash-
ington as it is in the capital cities of the countries of which they are citizens—
perhaps more so. They bring the situation of Amazonian peoples to the
attention of a world audience and, through this audience, to foreign aid agencies
and multilateral lending organizations that wield power over indebted Amaz-
onian nations.

Prominent native spokesmen face sharp contradictions in their leadership
roles, however. As representatives of a way of life that has become one of
the romantic icons of our time, they capture the attention of Western audiences
drawn to the leaders’ “authenticity”. Yet their long absences from commun-
ity life and the intercultural skills acquired on their travels soon raise questions
about their influence at home. A foreign visitor to Indian communities may
find himself importuned by residents questioning the legitimacy of their own leaders, who are rumored to spend all their time in the capital or to be amassing large fortunes diverted from international aid intended for local development. (The tradition of criticizing tendencies toward self-aggrandizement dies hard in egalitarian Amazonia.)

Although instances of improper use of funds are not unknown, the economic situation of federation leaders is in fact more likely to be precarious, since the communities that make up Indian federations rarely have surplus cash to support the travel and lodging needs of their leaders. Federations often depend on foreign assistance to carry on their activities. If an international funding agency should deem a native leader corrupted or inauthentic, his or her fall from grace is swift. Resources are redirected to new and more “representative” organizations, leading to schisms and secessions, claims and counterclaims. This diverts energies from the pressing issues of institution-building and gratifies the prejudices of those who hold that Indians are “politically immature”. Despite their tumultuous history, however, Indian federations have established themselves as an enduring feature of the Amazon’s political landscape.

VI

Parallel to the proliferation of Indian federations has been the growth of an ideological program of native self-vindication called “Indianism” (*indianismo* or *indianidad*). In contrast to indigenism (*indigenismo*), now dismissed by Indians as an assimilationist program invented by white intellectuals, Indianism presents itself as an indigenous social alternative that is “collective and communal [. . .] [and] that develops its science and technology following the laws of nature” (Palomino Flores 1986a: 53). This vision of a nativist ecotopia includes a reinterpretation of Indian history certain to make anthropologists queasy. For instance, some Indianists reject conventional scholarly wisdom about the stratified nature of the Inca empire. They assert instead that Inca civilization was marked by pluralism and egalitarianism. Imperialism and colonialism, they argue, are inventions of the West that have never had a place in Indian history. The most startling facet of Indianism’s project is the proposed repatriation of the *mestizo* people of the Americas back into the Indian world. This is part of the broad goal of Indianization, intended to counter the deindianization promoted by Western contact (Bonfil Batalla 1979: 47). Some advocates of Indianism envision the creation—or, properly speaking, the restoration—of a hemispheric Indian religion that would allow Native Americans to reestablish intertribal spiritual ties shattered by conquest (Palomino Flores 1986b).

Indianism, only the barest outlines of which I have been able to sketch here, calls to mind the negritude movement of the 1930s and 40s, which was a critical moment in the creation of a distinctively black artistic and political voice.
Like négritude, Indianism is at bottom essentialist: it posits an “Indian way of being” that transcends the cultural particularities which ethnographers hold so dear. It claims a new view of history, even a redefinition of history itself. And in common with négritude, it draws heavily on Western categories (notably, the term “Indian” itself) to frame its critique of the West. A striking feature of Indianism is its implicit use of functionalist anthropology to fashion a vision of Indian civilization as an ordered, harmonious whole in which economics, social organization, and religion fit together seamlessly. The reflexivity by which the movement allows its adherents to make self-conscious statements about “what it means to be an Indian” is a product of the Western categories of modernity they explicitly reject. And like négritude, Indianism is a movement of displaced native intellectuals, conducted in the language of the dominant society and far removed from the specific cultural meanings of functioning native communities.

The analogy to négritude is not perfect. Negritude, more than Indianism, was concerned with the racial markers of blackness, whereas Indianism is less concerned with race than with ethnicity. Indianism has yet to produce a distinctive literary genre; it lacks its Senghor, its Césaire. Although explicitly communitarian, it rejects socialism as another imported ideology of domination. Within the Indianist movement, Marxism has been superseded by the discourse of environmentalism—an anticapitalist rhetoric, to be sure, but one with different valences than the socialism it repudiates.

Indianism has its strongest following among Andean and Central American Indians who have suffered the disorienting impact of European settlement for half a millennium; it is also congenial to those North American Indians now caught up in an accelerating process of ethnic homogenization fostered by intertribal boarding schools and marriages, as well as by the exigencies of political organization at the national level. If Indianism seems unlikely to gain a strong foothold among Amazonian peoples whose specific cultures are still more or less intact, we should not underestimate the hold that it has on the imagination of whites in the Northern countries, who project upon Indians their dream of a society that is spiritually and ecologically balanced. Inevitably, some native leaders respond to the opportunities afforded by this dream. Jean Jackson already sees significant ideological changes taking place among the Tukanoan Indians of Colombia, who are “learning how to be proper Indians from non-Tukanoan Indian images and values” (Jackson 1991: 147). Jackson’s observation raises the bleak possibility that outsiders’ infatuation with Indians might do more harm than centuries of hostility by replacing the distinctive timbre of each Amazonian society with a pan-Indian monotone. The aid that outsiders provide to Indians struggling against the state will thus come at a high price.
Not long ago it was possible to study Amazonian communities as reasonably discrete units, as social worlds numbering less than five- or six-score people who enacted social life—with all its tensions between private and public, freedom and coercion—on a scale that revealed much that is hidden in more populous societies. The search was for what Thomas Gregor (1977: 361) calls the “setting, staging, and script for the drama of ordinary community life”. We recognized, of course, that the outside world intruded upon this dramaturgical microcosm, or perhaps even created it through, say, a demographic crisis precipitated by the arrival of a Western epidemic disease; but for the purposes of understanding the minute details of social experience we deemed it permissible to bracket the question of external influences. Hence the fundamental questions posed by Lévi-Strauss as he contemplated the meaning of leadership among the Nambiquara, a group who lived in a state that for him resembled the dawn of human experience.

Once the social reality of small-scale communities in Amazonia came to be seen as a response to global processes, the microsociological approach to native society began to look, at best, like a form of naiveté; at worst, it was a sinister denial of Western power. Amazonia is part of a world system of resource extraction that penetrates to the smallest village, to the most bedraggled group of hunters in the sertão. Consequently, leadership had to be reconceived as a response to the regional and global forces bearing down on Amazonian peoples.

Although I have adopted this global perspective in the preceding discussion of the changing face of Amazonian leadership, let me close by proposing that it may be time to go local again, to return to the fine-grained ethnography that used to be anthropology’s stock-in-trade. The institutional analyses now prominent in anthropology, with their reliance on concepts such as hegemony, marginalization, and resistance, admittedly have their uses. But in their tendency to stifle the raw feel of social experience, these abstractions fail to “present the sociological mind with bodied stuff on which to feed”, to borrow a phrase from Clifford Geertz (1973: 23). The effect is to distance us and thereby to limit our ability to probe more deeply into the meanings of power. The politics of village and native federation must still answer to the questions Lévi-Strauss posed as he reflected on his observations among the Nambiquara: how do Amazonian peoples think about, experience, and achieve authority? In what ways is power created, used, negotiated, and thwarted by individuals in their daily lives? How will increasingly self-conscious “tribes” sustain a distinctive sense of moral community? What personal and collective strategies will Indians devise to reconcile a tradition of personal autonomy with the pressures leading them toward regional and international alliances? Peoples who have long been unresponsive to the blandishments of their leaders must decide whether to become part of a collective process and, if so, under what terms. As Amazonia’s new
leaders maneuver in the hall of mirrors created by Western images and native counterimages, they will bring their persuasive powers back to villages, to households, to individuals, where new criteria for political legitimacy will be hammered out through trial and, no doubt, through error. It is through scrupulous attention to the small and fleeting skirmishes of everyday politics that anthropologists will find raw material for a deeper understanding of indigenous strategies for facing the world beyond the Amazon rainforest.

Williams College, Williamstown, Mass., USA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the colleagues, unfortunately too numerous to name here, who responded to my request for information on political developments in various parts of contemporary Amazonia. Portions of this analysis were developed while I was a resident scholar at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and my work benefitted from the financial support of the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation in 1990. David B. Edwards, Jean E. Jackson, Kenneth M. Kensinger, Molly H. Mullin, Steven Rubenstein, and David Stoll were kind enough to comment on an earlier draft of this essay; their critical contribution does not necessarily imply agreement with my assertions, however.

NOTES

1. A brief assessment of the Yanomami situation as of mid-1990 can be found in AÇÃO PELA CIDADANIA 1990. See also YANOMAMI 1991.

2. Here I leave aside the markedly different political realities of the great riverine societies that disappeared soon after European contact—societies characterized by pronounced social ranking and the concentration of political power in the hands of a small, possibly theocratic, elite. See, for example, ROOSEVELT 1987 and WHITEHEAD 1989. For a persuasive critique of the image of Amazonian “leaders without power”, see DESCOLA 1988.

3. In all the romantic discussion of the absence of physical coercion in Amazonia, it is surprising that so little attention has been brought to relations between men and women, where the use of physical force is common.

4. This is not the place to list all the many fine ethnographies and analytical works that address issues of leadership in Amazonia. An admirably succinct summary of the literature on Amazonian leadership can, however, be found in ROSENGREN 1987: 6-19. Other works that have shaped my thinking on this subject are KRACKE 1978 and PRICE 1981. For a comparative discussion of the role of ceremonial dialogues in moving people to action, see URBAN 1991.

5. Details of the life of Taricura are found in WHITEHEAD 1988: 111-119. Information on the Manau chief Ajuricaba is provided by HEMMING 1978: 441-443.

6. Andrew Gray (1986: 108) makes a distinction between “community leaders” and “boundary leaders”, the latter being persons who because of marginalization from traditional village life “can negotiate with non-indigenous groups and act as a sort of go-between”.

7. I borrow this term from GIDDENS (1990: 21), who uses it in the broadest possible sense to denote “the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space”.
8. See, for example, Brown 1984: 119-120 for discussion of experiments with written laws among the Aguaruna of eastern Peru.

9. The ethnographies of Norman E. Whitten, Jr., especially Sicanga Runa (1985), are notable for their sensitivity to the protean flexibility of Quichua Indian leaders vis-à-vis new cultural and political demands. See also Hendricks 1988.

10. See Descola 1988 for an analysis of the political power of shamanas and its relevance to an assessment of P. Clastres’s assertions about the powerlessness of Amazonian chiefs.


15. A comprehensive analysis of the implications of Protestant conversion and the indigenization of evangelical sects in Latin America is found in Stoll 1990.

16. While taking a fundamentally critical perspective on missionary work among the Ecuadorian Achuar, Taylor (1981: 650-651) calls attention to the ways that Achuar leaders exploit the missionary presence for their own political purposes and manipulate the competition between missionary organizations to extract as much financial support as possible. She also observes that evangelical Christianity can be a “countermodel to, or an instrument of protest against, dominant national and nationalist structures” (ibid.: 669) even while, on another level, it advances a profoundly alien mode of production. See also Urban 1985 for a brief description of the support provided by missionaries for pro-Indian organizations in Brazil.


18. For a lengthy consideration of this issue, see Ferguson & Whitehead 1992.

19. Mistrust of the political agendas of non-Indians seems to be the principal reason for scant Indian involvement in leftist movement of national liberation in the Amazonian countries, though the reluctance of Marxist thought to find a proper place for Indians is another important factor. Brown & Fernandez 1991 present an extended analysis of an exceptional case in which the Asháninka and Nomatsiguenga of Peru allied themselves with a Marxist guerrilla organization, though for reasons that had little to do with Marx.


22. For a discussion of the links between anthropology and negritude, see Mudimbe 1988.

23. Berkhofer 1978 traces the impact of the shifting representations of Indians in the United States, focussing particular attention on how the economic and political power of white society may subtly lead Indians to reshape their self-identity to conform to whites’ romantic images of them.

REFERENCES CITED

Ação Pela Cidadania

Agüero, Oscar

Berdichewsky, Bernardo
BERKHOFER, Robert F.  

BONFIL BATALLA, Guillermo  

BROWN, Michael F.  
1984 *Una Paz incierta: Historia y cultura de las comunidades Aguarunas frente al impacto de la Carretera Marginal.* Lima, Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica.


BROWN, Michael F. & Eduardo FERNÁNDEZ  


BUTT, Audrey J.  

BUTT COLSON, Audrey J.  


CHAUMEIL, Jean-Pierre  


CLASTRES, Pierre  

CROCKER, William H.  

DESCOLA, Philippe  

FERGUSON, R. Brian & Neil L. WHITEHEAD  

GEERTZ, Clifford  

GIDDENS, Anthony  

GRAY, Andrew  
GREGOR, Thomas

HEMMING, John

HENDRICKS, Janet Wall

JACKSON, Jean E.

KRAKE, Waud

LÉVI-Strauss, Claude

MUDIMBE, V. Y.

ORO, Ari Pedro
1989 *Na Amazônia um messias de índios e brancos*. Petrópolis, Vozes & EDIPUCRS.

PALOMINO FLORES, Salvador

PEREIRA DE QUEIROZ, María Isaura

PORTILLO, Coronel Pedro
1901 *Las Montañas de Ayacucho y los ríos Apurímac, Mantaro, Ene, Perené, Tambo y Alto Ucayali*. Lima, Imprenta del Estado.

PRICE, David

REED, Richard

REGAN, Jaime

ROOSEVELT, Anna C.

ROSENGREN, Dan
The New Politics of Identity

SALAZAR, Ernesto

SANTOS GRANERO, Fernando

SMITH, Richard Chase

STOCKS, Anthony Wayne

STOLL, David

STULL, Ruth

TAUSSIG, Michael

TAYLOR, Anne Christine

THOMAS, David J.

TURNER, Terence

URBAN, Greg
1991 A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture: Native South American Myths and Rituals. Austin, University of Texas Press.

VAIJJ, Leroy

VARESE, Stefano

VICKERS, William T.
RÉSUMÉ


RESUMEN

Michael F. Brown, Cara al Estado, frente al mundo: los dirigentes indígenas amazónicos y las nuevas políticas de identidad. — El contacto de las sociedades europeas ha modificado las formas del poder político en las sociedades amazónicas. Tras un breve repaso de las bases sociológicas y los rasgos dominantes del poder en Amazonia, el autor examina la función del colonialismo en la ruptura de los lazos entre el poder religioso y político, y señala los aspectos alineantes de los nuevos papeles políticos que en Amazonia se perfilan. Paralelamente estudia la proliferación de federaciones indígenas y el resurgimiento de la « indiandía », una ideología pan-india que se ofrece como una nueva alternativa a la civilización occidental. En la indiandía como en el juego político de las federaciones, los Indios de Amazonia se apropiaron y modificaron a su favor las imágenes occidentales del « tribalismo » según un proceso dialéctico lleno de riesgos para la integridad cultural de las sociedades indígenas.