

Myth & History in Amazonian Society

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History in anthropology has been largely ignored by many ethnographers prior to indigenous contact with the colonial powers. This has occurred because of the difficulty of proving whether stories told in these societies are historical facts or myths told by generations of people. It has simply been easier to consider indigenous people's current situations as longstanding and unchanging while disregarding the stories told as simply myths meant to teach lessons. In his 1996 essay, "Images of Nature and Society in Amazonian Ethnology", Eduardo Viveiros de Castro points out that the historical study of many of the people of Amazonia is quickly growing. Since there is very little to no recorded history of the indigenous peoples of Amazonia prior to the arrival of the Europeans, there has been significant growth in the study of oral traditions and histories told by the people themselves. No longer are these tales dismissed as myths, but the relations between these stories and the histories of the peoples of the Amazon is being analysed to come up with a broader sense of history in this area of the world.

In 2002, Steven Rubenstein wrote "Alejandro Tsakimp: a Shuar healer in the margins of history" which was the account of his time with the Shuar and of his experiences with a man named Alejandro. He wrote that in meeting Alejandro, he was forced to reevaluate what he already knew about the Shuar and how he understood others and himself. He discovered that there was no possibility for an unbiased meeting between Euro-Americans and indigenous

peoples anymore due to hundreds of years of interaction and how each side understands the other, their history, and also themselves. Rubenstein also pointed out that more often than not, myths are viewed as expressions of culture and not related to history. He states that it is actually more important to examine what the story of events means to the people and what uses the story can have in everyday life instead of searching for proof that the events actually occurred. He found, with Alejandro's story, that one story may have more than one use: it may answer a direct question, make a moral point, or describe a historical point, for example.

Rubenstein goes on to discuss what exactly "history" can mean when he discusses M. W. Stirling's writings on the Jivaros. Stirling states that the Jivaros "first appear in history" in the middle of the 15th century during the Incan conquest of Quito. Rubenstein examines "history" in the sense that a society can "appear" in it at a certain time, but not before. Obviously, he states, it doesn't mean the same thing as "time" because that would mean that the Jivaros did not exist at all before this occurrence, and if it was meant as recorded history or a history book then the date of appearance would be when the account was published. It seems to Rubenstein that "history" is a place where one might be seen and where one's appearance is an event, such as a war.

▲side from not knowing whether a story is a true account of a society's history, there are other problems with myths. The stories themselves are frozen in time and told in ways that give no sign of when they may have actually occurred. They also deny a history or a future of a people, and give no account of how things came to be in a society or why they may or may not stay the same. Myths also suggest certain behaviours for a society; if one does not act in accordance to these expectations, then they no longer fit within that society. While myths provide a sense of meaning and moral order to a society, they also trap the people in to a cookie cutter shape of what they are expected to be.

Rubenstein also discusses the dangers of essentialism or the definition of a group by a small set of permanent characteristics that also ignores the circumstances under which these identities came to be. Denying the history of a culture is likely to lead to the essentialization of that society.

In his 2001 essay, "▲n ▲amazonian Myth and its History," Peter Gow addresses myth and historical change in ▲amazonia. He begins his essay by introducing two prominent anthropologists in ▲amazonian studies. Bronisław Malinowski developed new methods for gathering information through hands-on fieldwork and analysing data in order to understand the daily life of ▲amazonian peoples. Claude Lévi-Strauss brought the significance of historical studies in ▲amazonian anthropology to light with his studies of indigenous mythology. While other anthropologists argue that Lévi-Strauss ignored history in

his writings, Gow fiercely defends him and says that the problem is with the Marxist approaches to anthropology. He argues that these capitalist approaches only include post-European contact years and deny the history of the Amazonian peoples prior to this.

Gow goes on to discuss his own development as an ethnographer, and admits his own mistakes in the early years of his studies. When he first started out as an ethnographer, he agreed with the Marxist/capitalist approaches to anthropology and also assumed that there was one single common history among all human kind. Shortly after his first contact with the Piro, he realized his mistake. When the Piro told the stories of the "ancient people", he found them intriguing but disregarded their relevance in everyday Piro life. The "ancient people" were the Piro who lived prior to the arrival of the Europeans or "rubber bosses". When the Piro spoke of their ancestors, they put great emphasis on the temporal and cultural gaps between them and the present-day Piro. The "ancient people" were savage, brutish, warlike, uncivilized, ignorant and powerful Shamans who spoke no Spanish, and present-day Piro make it clear that they are no longer like their ancestors. When the "rubber bosses" arrived and enslaved the Piro, instead of viewing this as a catastrophic event in their history, the Piro had a surprisingly optimistic view of it. Through all of the suffering caused by slavery, violent and abusive bosses, complete disregard for Piro values and ideals by Catholic and Protestant missionaries, and degrading

school systems, the Piro viewed their situation as one of progression and a process of learning. They were less concerned with the brutality of their “bosses” but instead concentrated on how this altered the structure of their society. During their oppression and enslavement, the Piro began to intermarry and developed kinship ties which became extremely important to them. Gow realized that the Piro found nothing to be more important than living surrounded by generous kinspeople, and that is why they managed to look past the brutality they suffered and view it as ultimately better for them in the end.

Gow came to realize the importance of relativism. He realized that in order to understand the Piro, he would need to be able to view them from their own point of view and understand how they look at themselves. Gow questioned how the Piro managed to reinvent themselves when dominated by the Europeans instead of simply giving up and being absorbed or killed off by the Europeans. He realized that the Piro view their state of being as one of inherent transformation.

Now, instead of ignoring the “ancient people’s stories”, Gow interpreted them as an essential part of Piro history. He realized that since the stories were repeatedly, they must have importance in everyday life. The ability to connect myth with historical methodology would become an important one. Gow asserted that to include history in anthropological accounts, they would need to begin with ethnographies and first-hand

studies. He recognized the drawback of ethnographies: they are drawn from short-term observations that could turn out to be studies of temporary states in complex histories. Also, since most of the historical data recorded about Amazonian societies was written from a European point of view, there are biases and exclusions that may contaminate present-day or future studies.

Up until recently, there was very little historical data about Amazonian societies, and even today, in my own opinion, there is a less than satisfactory amount of research being done. Gow and Rubenstein realized and admitted the faults in their own practices after being immersed in Amazonian societies and coming to understand them on a deeper level. They also both recognized the importance of uncovering the histories of the indigenous people of the Amazon. Denying the histories of these societies prior to the arrival of the Europeans is not only insulting towards them, but it is also utterly ridiculous.

References

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