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## Introduction: What Constitutes a Human Body in Native Amazonia?

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## Introduction: What Constitutes a Human Body in Native Amazonia?

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Amazonian anthropologists have long been aware of the centrality of the body in the societies they study. To name but a few, Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro (1979), Turner (1995) and Taylor (1996) have all demonstrated that persons are produced, social groups made, and differences created through the body. Some authors (e.g., Erikson 1996) have noted the sociological relevance of bodily surfaces, especially the skin, which gets painted, perforated, tattooed and decorated in almost as many ways as there are Amazonian cultures—or encounters between Amazonian and national cultures. Similarly, studies focused on the introduction of health and education programs in lowland South America have exemplified the centrality of the human body in native conceptions of health, well-being and sociocultural change (e.g., Conklin 1996, 2001; McCallum 1996, 2001; Rival 1997, 2002b; Kelly 2003). That Amazonian sociality cannot be fully understood without reference to corporeality is therefore a well-established fact. The typically Amazonian notion of “substance sharing,” for instance, illustrates perfectly the intertwining of personhood and embodied relatedness in native thought systems. Furthermore, a number of authors (e.g., Rival 2002a, 2007) inspired by Viveiros de Castro’s theory of perspectivism or by Bakhtin’s notion of dialogical construction of personhood have started to explore the uncertain and transitory nature of the Amazonian human person, shown to be caught up in a continuous process of “Other-becoming” (see Vilaça 2005; Rival 2005).

With a rich corpus of ethnographies demonstrating, on the one hand, the high value placed by Amazonians in the production of persons (rather than objects), and, on the other, what looks like the inherent capacity of bodies to transform into other kinds of bodies, we have today reached greater understanding of the intimate link between identity, difference, and corporeality. The human body and the identities that are attached to it are formed (one could almost say “grown”) progressively, through ritualized changes of name, status and appearance. However, humanization, or embodied humanness, is never acquired once and for all. Impermanence—

the cosmos' absolute ruler—can, in one instant, reduce to nothing the repeated labor of care and love that turns a human body into a real human person.

We also understand more clearly the controlling aspects of shamanic and other ritual actions. As the human body is highly susceptible to change and transformation, controlling what comes into and out of it, especially food and food-related substances, is of central importance. This explains why the focus of research has, in recent years, moved away from an examination of kinship, relatedness, and sociality in terms of the active fabrication of bodies, in order to pay closer attention to the transformational aspects of the body, as well as to the practices and techniques involved in controlling bodily transformations.

Both Minna Opas and Istvan Praet address the issue of bodily transformation and “Other-becoming” in relation to the dynamic interaction between fabrication and destruction of human bodies. In societies as distinct as the Yine (Opas), and the Chachi (Praet), a human person is defined in relation to what it means to be a nonhuman person. It is in death, which irremediably involves the destruction of the human body, that the two contrastive states of being (human versus nonhuman) become particularly salient. Opas' and Praet's accounts richly illustrate the fact that nonhuman persons are in many ways similar to human ones, and that they have the same bodily and societal needs. For the Yine (also known as the Piro), nonhumans seek to relate to humans, like humans would, through sex and food. By losing control over who one desires sexually and whom one receives food from, one may transform into a nonhuman person and die. The Chachi are equally concerned with the demands for closeness, love, and care that come from the recently departed. Death must lead to a complete metamorphosis of the deceased into a nonhuman person, with whom nothing should be exchanged. In his fascinating description of the funerary games that are played during the wake, Praet shows how utterly physical and material the body is for the Chachi. To be alive is to have a body. An identity is always a corporeal identity, and embodiment, which represents the materialization of an identity, is what differentiates the living from the dead. The Chachi funerary games, during which various animal and plant bodies are invested in turn, fully exploit the shamanic capacity to become something other than oneself. As those who were socially and emotionally close to the deceased remain by the coffin and grieve, more distant villagers spend the night embodying a range of nonhuman subjective states. Their temporary and (disturbingly) playful metamorphosis, or “shape-shifting,” as the author chooses to call it, facilitates the definite transformation of the deceased into an “Other,” that

is, an unrelated nonhuman person. Unlike the shaman during a curing session, these “shape-shifters” do not explore various possible states of being or absorb alternate points of view in an attempt to increase their power to act. Rather, they seek to dematerialize the physical presence of the one who once lived, and used to be human. Not everyone will agree with Praet’s literal understanding of ghost shapes. Critics may argue that Chachi game participants do not really transform themselves into Jaguar, Policeman, Horse, or Chicken, but, rather, absorb key qualities and behavioral traits proper to these animals and alien humans. However, and as Praet contends, we may have been too quick in analyzing the Amazonian transformational body in terms of abstract, linguistic identity shifts. To imitate a form of comportment, don a mask, or play at being someone else than oneself are complex and subtle actions, with overlapping experiential contents. We are far from having exhausted the meanings of transformation in Amazonian cultures.

With his ethnohistorical examination of “torture” in three Amerindian societies practicing slavery at the time of contact, i.e., the Kalinago (lesser Antilles), the Conibo (Eastern Peru) and the Guaicurú (Gran Chaco), Fernando Santos-Granero offers a very different, yet complementary, view on native Amazonian conceptions of the body. Following Pierre Clastres, the author defines torture as the ritual infliction of severe bodily pain. The ordeal is not aimed at causing physical suffering *per se*, but, rather, a courageous reaction to it. By undergoing torture without betraying pain, the initiate demonstrates both his moral worth and his readiness for a new, more mature, social status. Therefore, the use of physical pain during initiation further illustrates the fact that Amerindians use the human body not only to convey social and cosmological meanings, but also, and more importantly, as the primary means for the inscription of social knowledge. However, unlike Clastres who stressed the role of torture in imparting tribal membership and political equality, Santos-Granero shows how it was used to create supralocal authority and social stratification. In the three polities he has studied, the bodies of war captives are marked, not as “one of us,” but as alien. As such, they become the materialization of a change of status from free to captive—from human to less-than-human, and from equal to inferior subordinate. This leads the author to conclude that “Amerindian ritual torture should not be regarded only as an inclusionary mechanism at the service of social integration and egalitarianism, but also as an exclusionary means at the service of social marginalization and stratification” (*intra* p. 147).

Viatori’s discussion of Zápara body politics equally points to the importance of paying equal attention to asymmetric and hierarchical forces

and egalitarian structures. Zápara people, who until very recently did not assert their separate cultural or political identity, but lived undifferentiated among their Kichwa relatives, have used contrastive bodily strategies to essentialize their collective identity. During the first phase of their ethnogenesis project, they chose language as the prime embodied marker of difference. This proved inconvenient for two main reasons. First, no more than a few old Zápara could be counted as native speakers of the Zápara language, which remained a second or third language for the great majority of people. Second, the growing ethnic organization divided up in two rival wings, both competing for the status of “real Zápara,” a status which neither could prove on the ground of language proficiency, but which each could claim in terms of the amount of “pure” Zápara blood running inside their bodies. This case study illuminates the difficulties met by the ethnographer who analyzes the shifting meanings of the Amazonian body. Zápara people are well aware of their past and present ethnic transformation, which they express through bodily idioms in response to the power of western biological discourses, while attempting to retain their own Amazonian understandings of kinship, consanguinity, affinity, and mixed-blood ancestry.

This special issue has obviously not exhausted the theme of the human body in Amazonia. This was neither its purpose nor its function. Given its prominence in Amazonian thought and knowledge systems, the body will likely be approached and considered under many more angles in future issues of this journal. Although the authors included here have not explored systematically the gendered body, or the relationship between the body and the soul, it is clear that these two questions are central in the four contributions included here. These questions certainly deserve far more attention, and I hope that more authors will take them up in the years to come. The contrast between ordinary and ritualistic uses of the body, as well as Amazonian theories of human physical difference also need to be documented more thoroughly and more systematically. Of course, “body,” “mind,” and “soul” are each complex, abstract notions with a long history in western philosophy. What are the precise, exact indigenous notions that we loosely translate as ‘body,’ ‘mind’ and ‘soul’? New ethnographic data are urgently needed on Amerindian lexical terms, and on the semantic relations between them. To what extent can we speak of an Amazonian philosophy of the body, and how far can we compare it with conceptualizations found in other parts of the Americas? What can Amazonian anthropology contribute to a general anthropological theory of human nature? It is hoped that this special issue will be read as having contributed a few small steps on the long path towards answering these big questions.

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