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COMMENTARY AND DEBATE

On Whitten's "Interculturality and the Indigenization of Modernity"

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I find it difficult to comment on Norman Whitten's paper usefully, because I have trouble understanding on what grounds the author finds it necessary to criticize my own work. Whitten takes me to task—along with Philippe Descola and the late Thierry Saignes for supposedly representing the Jivaroan peoples as "pristine savages" and the Canelos Quichua as "hybrid," "acculturated," or "unauthentic." These sins of "epistemic distortion" are claimed to be rooted in my structuralist proclivities.

I will not attempt to correct Professor Whitten's misreading of Lévi-Strauss's work (I had assumed, wrongly as it turns out, that Pete Gow's *An Amazonian Myth and its History* (2001) had finally set the record straight for English-speaking readers on the issue of Lévi-Straussian structuralism's supposedly a- or anti-historical stance), but I am perplexed by the reasons advanced by the author to justify his critique of my contributions on various historical issues. As evidence of my guilty fondness for pure (and purely Amazonian) savages, Whitten—following Uzendoski—has me arguing that "Amazonian Quichua speakers are 'assimilated'—*manso*, weak—(this incidentally is a mistranslation by Uzendoski: *manso* means tame, domesticated, not weak)—and 'generic' natives with 'linear and periodized historical ideologies very different from those of the 'traditional' groups of the region." The pile-up of quotation marks in this sentence should be enough to indicate that I am using the terms *manso*, *auca*, traditional, and so forth as folk categories and reported speech, and not as scientific descriptive labels.

The classification of Indian groups as "*auca*" or "*manso*" had wide currency in the upper Amazon throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and

early twentieth century. It is a fact that while many groups identified as Jivaroan were considered *auca* during that period, many Quichua speakers were held to be “tame” and Christianized. It is of course to this local system of classification that I was referring, since, as Whitten himself recognizes, this manner of labeling indigenous groups has had wide-ranging and lasting effects on the patterns of relation between the populations of the area. It is also a fact that the discursive regime of historicity closely associated to Jivaroan adscriptive identity is quite unlike the one developed in Quichua-speaking groups, the characteristics of which have been very well set out by Whitten himself in his 1986 book, as well as by Muratorio, Reeve, Hudelson and others. Quite simply, when engaging in Jivaroan forms of telling history, people do not refer to linear, periodized historical schemes as do Quichua speakers—witness Whitten’s use in this very paper of Quichua expressions such as *callarirucunguna*, “Beginning Times,” “Times of destruction,” etc. Such “periods” are not evoked in Jivaroan narratives (on the contrast between ‘Jivaroan’ and Quichua styles of historicity, see Taylor 1997 and 2007).

I do not by any means consider Jivaroan culture as “pristine;” to the contrary, I have taken pains to show that its apparent “traditionality” (from a Western, anthropological perspective) is a product of post-Columbian historical interaction with both indigenous and non-indigenous neighboring cultural formations. Self-essentialization takes different forms in the area under discussion, and that practiced by many Achuar, Shuar, Awajun, Wampis and Kanduash is different from that adopted by Quichua speakers, precisely because it does not play on the capacity to manage and produce interculturality. It is perfectly true that many Achuar move in and out of Quichua identities; but some of them, some of the time, also play a different game, one stressing the distinctiveness of a *shuar* identity based on willingness to engage in certain patterns of agonistic relations. I fail to see why pointing out such differences is tantamount to treating the Quichua as “acculturated”—a term I never use without implicit quotation marks—and why using the term “hybrid” as short hand to designate the process of formation of a distinctive group claiming identity as Runa should be considered derogatory. Who is falling victim to the fallacy of cultural “authenticity” here? As to my purported insistence on the purely Amazonian nature of the Jivaroan groups, I fail to understand the criticism. I devoted many pages of the 1986 book written with Saignes and Renard-Casevitz to reviewing and bolstering the evidence on the Andean Jivaro known as the Palta, and wrote both an article (1991) and a lengthy introductory essay to the volume of historical documents edited with C.

Landazuri (1994). The latter not only discusses the new information presented on this issue by French and Peruvian scholars (Hocquenghem 1989, 1998), but also expands on their hypotheses regarding the Andean—as well as coastal—phase of proto-Jivaroan groups.

Finally, I have repeatedly stated that the northern upper Amazon (specifically the area comprising Jivaroan and Quichua-speaking groups and also formerly Zaparoans) should be viewed as an integrated regional system: the history and ethnogenesis of the various groups making up the population of the zone only make sense if they are viewed in relation to each other, and considered as parts of an embracing dynamic regional system. However, and this is where Whitten and I probably disagree, as Lévi-Strauss was already pointing out in 1943, integrated systems can rest on the cultivation of difference, just as they can rest on other mechanisms such as ritual, economic or sociological complementarities. Jivaroan and Quichua-speaking groups certainly belong to the same global space, and both are equally affected by and reactive to dominant national society and the State. However, there are more than one way of indigenizing modernity or imagining and producing alternative modernities; the ways adopted by the Shuar—or the Huaorani—and the Canelos-Puyo-Curaray Runa are simply not the same.

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