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Ernst Halbmayer
University of Marburg

Catherine Alès
CNRS-EHESS

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Indigenous Creolization, Amerindian Hybridity and the Invention of Authenticity

Ernst Halbmayr
University of Marburg

Catherine Alès
CNRS-EHESS

This collection of essays organized by Catherine Alès addresses important issues of the politics of indigenous and non-indigenous identities in Lowland South America through both contemporary ethnography (Alès, Gow, and Halbmayr) and ethnohistory (Harris). They discuss the creolization process with various aspects of specific ethnographic experiences and historical examples to strengthen this initial foray into an ongoing and prevalent process.

There are vast differences in missionary activity, government influence, local intra-indigenous socio-cultural relations and programs of non-governmental development and conservation groups in Lowland South America. While the examples analyzed in the following papers reflect these differences and focus on a limited set of missionary activities (Halbmayer for the Yukpa, Alès for the Yanomami, Harris in Colonial Brazil), state politics (Alès for the Yanomami) and NGO's impacts (Gow among the Piro and Asháninka), each contribution gives a specific insight of what could have more general similarities with others examples in Lowland South America. All the papers show the paradoxes of creolization: transformation and change going hand in hand with the continuous reproduction of indigenous practices and forms of perception. If we take such a diagnosis seriously, contemporary indigenous ways of existence may not be understood by focusing either on change and assimilation or on the continuity of indigenous forms. Something new and innovative is created out of both. In this sense, we apply here the “not much used term creolization in the ethnography of indigenous Amazonian peoples” (Gow).

In Lowland South America, relations between Amerindian groups were and are in themselves often marked by a multiplicity and mixture expressed in multilingualism and multilingual regional systems, interethnic marriages, long distance trade and socio-political formations that integrate people with different languages, language families, and cultures. These range from multiethnic and multilinguistic villages in the Guianas under a Waiwai or Tiriyo macro-identity, to North-West Amazonian relations among Tukano groups that were labeled as linguistic exogamy. It also includes villages formed by different language families in the Upper Xingu integrated in a common socio-cultural frame by a commonly shared identification as human beings across the linguistic differences, common rituals, the specialized exchange of products and services, as well as kinship relations.

Relations in such multi-lingual systems may, however, also rely on hierarchy, as among the Yekwana and the Yanomami, the Tiriyo and the Akuriyo, or the Naduph and the Tukano groups, and regional systems of exchange may be integrated by forms of warfare and predation and not just trade, exchange, and marriage (Lévi-

Strauss 1943). All in all, a supposed Herderian isomorphism between culture, language, and political entities that forms “autochthonous peoples” which guided not just Western imaginations but anthropological classifications of cultures is in many regions of Lowland South America empirically radically altered.

In short, we find what has been called a long lasting Lowland South American hybridity based on an “Openness for the Other” (Levi-Strauss 1943, 1991, Overing 1983/84, Hugh-Jones 1992, Santos-Granero 2009). An openness that relies on the incorporation of the qualities and powers of the Other (Vilaça 2007, Gow 2007, Taylor 2007, Fausto 2007) but also on the ability to control the dangers of unintended transformation. The ability of indigenous cultures to absorb and integrate new forms of social relations and western products into their internal indigenous logics and use them to reproduce their societies as has been shown by a series of authors of different intellectual background (see for example, Albert y Ramos 2006, Conklin 1997, Crocker 1992, Gow 1991, Rappaport 1990, Turner 1993, Sahlins 1999, Wright 1999).

In the face of this important and long lasting Amerindian openness to the other, creolization is not merely as a synonym for social and cultural mixture. It entails a process of internal restructuring, inventiveness, and reflexivity grounded in a well-defined socio-historical context which is characterized by a specific configuration of power relations (Cohen and Toninato 2010, Halbmayr this volume). The context of creolization and its inherent power relations are provided by colonialism, contemporary nation states, and non-state global actors.

Creolization does not just lead to the emergence of Creoles (Halbmayr). The processes of creolization produce both a restructuring of non-indigenous and indigenous groups. People do not just creolize by becoming native to new regions whereby new kinds of people (Schwartz 1999) like Amazonian *riberinhos*, *caboclos*, *cholos*, *cambas* emerge. Creolization as an analytical concept is applied on different ranges from the Caribbean (Khan 2001, Munasinghe 2006) to globalization theory (Hannerz 1986, 2006). Due to its initial focus on Afro-American, Creole, and Mestizo populations, the effects of creolization were generally not applied to indigenous groups or Natives. Nevertheless, as Halbmayr argues, so called Natives creolize by becoming native to formerly unknown contexts and by successfully dealing with new political and social structures and kinds of peoples.

The relevance of creolization lies precisely in the social and historical complexity of what seems, at first glance, so culturally authentic. Gow asks what sorts of linguistic, social, and cultural practices arise when people of markedly different backgrounds in linguistic, social, and cultural terms are suddenly thrown together in a shared enterprise. Such a situation obliges both indigenous Amazonian peoples, and in the case of Gow’s papers, their non-indigenous supporters, to generate a shared and novel language in which to discuss the former.

Harris’ paper deals with the emergence of bridging concepts that allowed mutual understanding between different people from European and Amerindians origins in colonial Amazonia. By analyzing historical documents from the inquisition process in Brazil, he shows that this understanding is based on a creative misunderstanding that produces convergence: “a messy compromise, a haphazard hybrid form” of ideas and images that “cannot be predicted in terms of existing social, political, economic or racial hierarchies.” Looking at processes of creolization, we are confronted with an unpredictable meeting based on mutual misunderstanding.

Such processes, as Alès shows in regard to the creolization of Yanomami names, have a real and practical dimension of encompassment by the dominant Western/Creole society. The attribution of Creole personal and family names by missionaries and administrative state personnel is imposing an onomastic system with structural differences and at the same time in accordance with and facilitating Yanomami’s cultural values based on the taboo of personal names. The names given by foreign people on registration and identity cards are therefore a resource, a pool

of signifiers empty of signified to be used according to Yanomami standards and may be a way to obtain access, rights and benefits from the national society. She points out the misunderstandings resulting from this convergence in the meantime, and underlines that the use of ethno-denominations is just as imposed by outsiders as Creole names and its impact context-dependent.

Also dealing with naming practices, Gow's paper scrutinizes the rather extraordinary dynamics that lead to the use of authentic auto-denominations for indigenous groups. He starts from the proposition that the use of authentic denominations has little to do with how indigenous people actually think about identities, whether their own or those of other peoples. Authentic denomination is a concept, he argues, alien to indigenous groups, whose denominations are rather deictics, to be contextually understood. Gow argues that the authentic auto-denomination emerges out of a series of transactions between NGOs and the indigenous people they work with. This example may also be read as one instant for a creative misunderstanding and messy compromise in the above mentioned sense, marked by the power asymmetry NGO's, international sources of funding, and indigenous political organizations.

The creolized formations produce, maybe simultaneously, permanently 'translated' identities and entities, as well as new concepts and forms of authenticity, ethnic identifiers, and even new forms of essentialism. Creolized indigenous identities are therefore interpreted differently by different observers. The difference between indigenous and non-indigenous groups may be reproduced in specific ways, it may be ignored and submerged in favour of identities perceived as non-indigenous, or newly rearticulated in terms of emergent indigenous identities.

To understand processes of creolization, the essays assembled here avoid focusing just on the external impact and the existing hierarchies of power. The role of anthropologist in creating delimitable, named, indigenous entities is traced by Gow and Halbmayer and all the essays deal with processes central in the socio-cultural reproduction of Lowland South American groups. So, the creolization of naming among the Yanomami is analyzed in the context of death, dying, and warfare by Alès. The indigenous meaning of seemingly authentic names is invigorated by Gow by referring to kinship and relational classifications of the local population. Halbmayer focuses on food sharing and commensality to explain the impact of missionary activities and actual processes among different groups of Yukpa and the surrounding non-Yukpa. And Harris finally is centring on allegations of shape-shifting, shamanic transformations, and of being a werewolf in the colonial context.

All in all, one could summarize the paradoxes of creolization as producing both new, innovative, and permanently translated hybrid socio-cultural forms as well as new forms of 'pure' authenticity. Based on a process of creative misunderstanding, partial mutual encompassments emerge that involve both indigenous and non-indigenous populations alike. Creolization therefore is a two way process that gradually transforms all the parts involved and goes far beyond the formation of Creole and Mestizo populations.

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