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Ceci N'est Pas un Contacte: the Fetishization of Isolated Indigenous People Along the Peru-Brazil Border

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Words matter. Peruvian legislation recognizes two categories of indigenous peoples with little or no interaction with outsiders and the state: “peoples in voluntary isolation” and “peoples in initial contact.” And yet there is no term, process or protocol to describe that moment of transition from one category to another: the process we refer to, for lack of a better term as “contact,” which evokes cinematic images of encounters with alien civilizations.

I visited Peru in March of 2015 in the company of retired FUNAI agent José Carlos Meirelles and Brazilian physician Douglas Rodrigues, both with decades of experience among such peoples. My visit was an attempt to help the Peruvian Culture Ministry better address the precarious situation of isolated indigenous peoples along the Peru-Brazil border. It took years for the Peruvian government to even recognize the fact that isolated indigenous groups still exist in some parts of the Peruvian Amazon. Once such peoples were officially recognized in Peru about a decade ago, the official state policy, promoted by indigenous federations such as the Federacion Nativa de Madre de Dios (FENAMAD), has been “no contact.” Whereas in past years, religious and other organizations have sought to initiate contact with such isolated indigenous peoples, typically resulting in their decimation and cultural assimilation, this more enlightened, recent policy has recognized isolation as a form of cultural self-determination that should be respected and enforced. I first coined the term “voluntary isolation” in an open letter to Mobil Prospecting Peru (Shepard 1996) protesting this company’s seismic exploration in the Rio Piedras known to be inhabited by Mashco-Piro and perhaps other poorly known indigenous groups, referred to at that time with inaccurate and pejorative terms such as “uncontacted,” “Stone Age,” “primitive,” “uncivilized,” or “naked.” The point of the term “voluntary isolation” is to recognize this situation, not as an accident of nature or history—a human group lost in the backwaters of human evolution—but rather as a conscious choice of these indigenous peoples to isolate themselves from outsiders, often due to disastrous prior experiences, as a mode of survival and self-determination (Shepard et al. 2010). The term seemed to catch on, initially through the activism of FENAMAD and the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs in Peru, and ultimately spread to neighboring Amazonian countries like Brazil, Colombia and Paraguay.

What do we do when a group of isolated people, such as the Mashco-Piro along the upper Madre de Dios River, who had previously rejected all attempts at “contact” by missionaries, scientists, government agents and nearby indigenous brethren, have suddenly emerged along river banks, calling to tourist boats and loggers asking for food, clothes, and metal implements? Mashco-Piro bowmen have raided legally recognized native communities to take food and trade goods, sometimes wounding and even killing apparently inoffensive indigenous “brethren” with their arrows (Shepard 2012).

Faced with such difficult challenges, one Peruvian Culture Ministry representative asked the Brazilian specialists, “Don’t we need a new category to refer to these people? ‘People in sporadic contact’ perhaps?” This person, and others we met during this visit of exchange between Peru and Brazil, seemed to be contorting the language to find ways of respecting the inviolable principle of “no contact.” Meirelles responded in his characteristically sardonic manner: “Can a person be considered ‘sporadically pregnant’? No. Either they are, or they aren’t.”

Viewing numerous photographs of Mashco-Piro individuals approaching boats, receiving clothes, metal implements, food, even a Coca Cola bottle, Meirelles commented: “Contact has already happened. You people are in denial.”

Dr. Rodrigues emphasized this point with a photograph showing a naked Mashco-Piro man within touching distance of a Piro interlocutor: “CONTACT = CONTAGION.” Rodrigues showed slides summarizing the drastic toll of “contact” on Brazilian indigenous peoples in the 1960s-1990s, with typical mortality rates for the first decade of contact between 25% and 90%. Recently, Rodrigues has been working closely with FUNAI and has demonstrated mortality rates of near 0% for initial contact episodes with peoples like the Zoé, Korubo and the very recently encountered Txapanawa or “People of the Xinane” (Milanez and Shepard 2014). Rodrigues pointed out that there was no magic or rocket science involved in this drastic reversal of mortality rates for indigenous peoples emerging from isolation: it is just a matter of rapid, adequate medical treatment (isolated peoples suffer from severe respiratory infections in the early phases of contact) and coordinated, differentiated campaigns of vaccination: public health workers typically do not vaccinate adults for measles and other diseases that are typically given only to children. Indigenous peoples during this phase of “initial contact” require a full suite of vaccinations and specialized medical treatment to survive the early onslaught of epidemic diseases to their unprepared immune systems.

Yet, the official Peruvian policy of “no-contact” is reinforced by vehement, idealistic media campaigns by indigenous rights organizations and concerned individuals who post on social media networks – “leave them alone!” While their intentions are of course noble, such a simplistic view of the complex and quickly changing situation tends to romanticize and fetishize the condition of “isolation” as a pristine, natural, unadulterated state of the last autonomous, free peoples of the planet beyond the clutches of capitalism, organized religion and the state. People forget that the very state of “isolation” is most often a historical product, a conscious choice by certain groups of people, in certain moments, to defend themselves from moments of violence and territorial invasion, notably during the Rubber Boom at the turn of the 20th century (Shepard 2014). For this very reason I have resisted the idea that such peoples should be referred to as “uncontacted.”

For the past century, people like the Mashco-Piro and others in remote parts of the Amazon have maintained a staunch attitude of isolation and rejection of all attempts by outsiders to approach them. Until now, this attitude has constituted a clear declaration of the intention to remain isolated that should and must be respected.

But much has changed in the Peruvian Amazon since I wrote that protest letter in 1996 arguing that Mobil Oil, the Peruvian state, missionaries, and neighboring indigenous communities should respect the autonomous choice of isolation. Mobil’s seismic operations revealed the remote and little-known Piedras River to the greedy eyes of loggers, who invaded the region in an unprecedented mahogany boom from 2000 until about 2006. The Inter-Oceanic highway was then opened, connecting Brazil with the Peruvian Amazon and the Pacific coast, further exposing these remote territories, occupied by isolated indigenous peoples, to exploitation by legal, as much as illegal logging and mineral interests.

For twenty years, I and many others have called on the Peruvian state, missionaries, and economic interests to respect the territory, self-determination and voluntary isolation of peoples like the Mashco-Piro (Shepard 2002; Huertas 2002). Still, these calls went largely unheeded. Today, as these final pockets of isolated indigenous peoples are brought ever closer to the circuits of capitalist exploitation, and as isolated peoples themselves seek out and even threaten neighboring peoples to obtain food and coveted trade goods, it seems naïve to insist on an idealistic policy of “no contact” that doesn’t recognize that contact is already taking place, raising the specter of imminent contagion by fatal epidemic diseases like influenza, measles, whooping cough, and others. Especially having witnessed firsthand the devastation of the Nahua (Yora) people population, with almost 50% population mortality in the chaotic, poorly handled first decade of contact from 1985-1995 (Shepard et al. 2010) in this same region, the sense of déjà-vu is ominous: there is no excuse for letting such a tragedy repeat itself.

Over the past year, the Peruvian Culture Ministry has been studying the work of FUNAI’s Department of Isolated Indians to establish a set of indicators, practices and medical procedures to understand, respond to and manage unfolding situations of contact that have occurred in ever greater frequency and urgency especially in the Madre de Dios region. If self-determination is considered the litmus test of indigenous rights, then certainly survival from deadly epidemics needs to figure high on the list of priorities and strategies aimed at protecting vulnerable peoples in situations of isolation and initial contact.

International uproar followed the publication of an editorial letter to *Science* magazine by anthropologists Robert Walker and Kim Hill (2015) suggesting that “controlled contact” might be a long-term benefit to isolated peoples like the Mashco-Piro and others. In August of the same year, a video circulated widely on social media purportedly showing the Peruvian Culture Ministry initiating “forced contact” with Mashco-Piro people; in fact, the video had been confiscated by the Culture Ministry to show the inappropriate, unauthorized and dangerous contacts initiated by Protestant missionaries. The hysteria of the public response to such news stories has gone far beyond the facts at hand.

As Felipe Milanez has written (this forum), “Contact is a myth, it is a colonial myth.” It is a myth that fetishizes as a primordial condition – “uncontacted,” autonomous, free, beyond the state– what is in fact a historically contingent response. The response of isolated peoples is evolving, in some cases rapidly, in a rapidly changing world impacted not only by roads, mining, logging, gas pipelines, and colonization, but also by global warming, environmental change, and changing social relationships with neighboring peoples. It is only by looking beyond these myths and the idealistic, sometimes naïve notions they evoke, that scholars and supporters of indigenous rights and the relevant government institutions can develop policies that defend the long-term rights of survival, territory and self-determination of indigenous peoples, rather than blindly defending their own fantasies about them.

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