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‘One Piro man I knew well’: A brief commentary on *An Amazonian Myth and its History*

An Amazonian Myth and its History, by Peter Gow. *Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Leif Grünewald

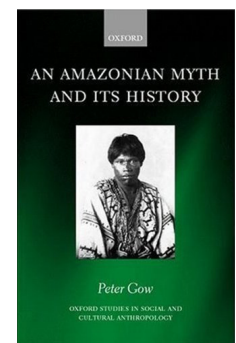
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In Claude Lévi-Strauss’ classical definition from the foundational article of 1955 (Lévi Strauss, 1963), a myth is characterized as the part of language where “the formula *traduttore, traditore* reaches its lowest truth-value”. Unlike poetry, which is described as a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions, mythical substance does not lie either in its style, or in its syntax, but precisely in the story it tells. As Lévi-Strauss argued, even supposing we are completely ignorant of the language or the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth, as language functions in it on an especially high level, where meaning succeeds at withdrawing from the linguistic terrain on which it usually keeps on rolling.

This is not the case for Peter Gow’s magisterial *An Amazonian Myth and its History* (2001). Gow is not talking about that, but about something slightly different. Just as the notion of ‘myth’ undergoes an audacious terminological innovation in Pete’s book—highly provisional and employed only to guide the analysis of a specific phenomenon under consideration—it refers at the same time to the concrete telling of any given ‘myth’ and to the known sum of its versions, as told by any given people. What unites the different ‘versions’ of a ‘myth’? As Gow terms it, the sense for a given people at a given time that different mythic stories are the same story and a legitimate reality for them.

If such is the case for the idea of ‘myth’, Gow starts from a story told by a Piro man he knew well, Artemio Fasabi, in the context of a conversation they held on the evening of the 15 January 1982, as a key point of his account. Artemio’s story of a ‘man who went down the Earth’ told by Piro people, offers us a remarkable image of the Piro lived world and of social life in general in a place like the Piro village of Santa Clara, as Pete found it in the 1980s. It can be seen as a system in a state of transformation and it figures as a majorly important station on the route to a legitimate description of a social reality in Amazonia.

I believe one certainly has many reasons to fall in love with this book—and please do, for *An Amazonian Myth and its History* is a very important must-read. For me, what is utterly enchanting is that it exposes a series of foregroundings and backgroundings between the idea of myth and the idea of what Amazonian sociality is. This is evident as each comes in and out of analytical focus and illuminates what might possibly occupy the place of ‘history’ from the point of view of the Bajo Urubamba Piro people through its circularity¹ of myth and sociality in their lived world. On these grounds, the ‘Amazonian myth’ operates throughout the book as a fantastic analytical tool, as both an object and a method of analysis, as a conceptual as well as perceptual tool, systematized in both its data and its possible mind’s eye.



1. Taylor Nelms’s master’s thesis, *The Social/Relation* (2008), was a great source of inspiration here.

Of course, Pete never said any such thing for he always insisted, since the first time we met in the summer of 2009, that it is always important to begin with as concrete a datum as possible. In fact, I can even picture him arguing, while rolling another cigarette: ‘Leif, even if it might be true, for me it is just a given...’

At the time, I had just started my master’s degree and had only a rough idea of who Pete was. During the following years, I bought an old and dirty second-hand hardback copy of *An Amazonian Myth and its History* and carried it everywhere I went. Even at the time of my fieldwork, I took it in my backpack wrapped in a plastic bag, and read it every time I felt lonely or bored. It was as if some kind of conspiratorial comrade was helping me grasp the new world I was experiencing at the time. In a certain way, I could say that having met Pete and reading *An Amazonian Myth and Its History* made me realize that, at the end of day, I wanted to become an ethnologist and engage in fieldwork in Lowland South America. With a bit of luck I could perhaps aspire to become 1% as brilliant as I always thought Pete was.

Over the years, I read the book several times over, and every time I did, I felt that I had a different sense of what it was really about. However, I recently began to ponder Gow’s analysis of the idea of an ‘Amazonian myth’ as two conceptual orders circling one another after rereading Corsín Jiménez & Willerslev (2007) and putting some thought into the logic of what they have termed ‘reversibility’, namely, the idea that every visible practice carries with it an invisible counterpart that can always cross over and become the other. As such, each finds an articulation within the other’s outermost perimeter and each of which can be occupied in order to cast light upon an indigenous concept of history. It’s what makes Gow’s book so powerful.

Let’s start with a very important question, why do Piro tell each other myths and why do they listen to them? It is noteworthy that for Piro people, myths are *tsurunnini ginkakle*, ‘ancient people’s stories’, and are customarily told by old folks to younger Piro people during moments of rest in domestic spaces. Artemio Fasabi’s story about ‘a man who went down the earth’, which opens the book, as well as Piro mythology, is interrelated with the idea of *vivir bien*, ‘living well’. This is, in particular, regarding the relationship between co-resident grandparents (who know myths well...) and grandchildren (who do not know myths at all...). There are no precise limits to what counts or not as a ‘myth’ for the Piro. Nor is there a definite canon of such stories. Old Piro folk tell them to the young ones simply because they are interesting and want to share stories about the *tsurunni*, the ‘ancient people’, from whom they claim to have heard them before. Like present-time Piro people, the *tsurunni* are considered ‘humans’, but they are described as very different to the current Piro. Living in geographically isolated groups, the *tsurunni* refused to intermarry and fought constantly. They lived in the forest, used stone tools, wore home-spun cotton clothes, and all of them spoke a very different kind of Piro language. Their world ended in the 1880s, in the times of rubber, when they were enslaved by white bosses due to their intense desire for the powerful objects owned by those whites. Enslaved by white bosses, the *tsurunni* came to intermarry with different groups of peoples—which has ensued in the lives of contemporary Piro people, in the villages they inhabit.

All that remains of the *tsurunni* is what the living Piro know about them, including their language, the stories about them, and the stories ancient people are said to have told. While the worlds described in the ancient people’s stories are much more radically alien than that of the stories ‘about ancient people’—as in, in those worlds humans married with animals, turned into animals, travelled to the underworld and the sky, etc.)—ancient people’s stories are also dubious by virtue of the careful refusal to claim any knowable witness to the events narrated in them. Hence, for Piro people, a ‘myth’ refers to a set of agents and events for whom no known or knowable witness is posited, which exists only as a story told over gene-

rations, as *tsnnnini ginkakle*, an ‘ancient people’s story,’ as Gow has argued in chapter 3 of *An Amazonian Myth and its History*,

Both historical and mythic narratives have primary sources. As Piro people age and become the oldest living and active authorities on the ways of the ancient people, they become ‘mythopoeic’ by telling stories about ‘ancient people’ with only their own and the *tsurrunni*’s authority in mind. As a result, the stories of these old Piro people become richer and more complex, with more details and connections added. As a result, as they age, they tell myths in an increasingly complex manner, spontaneously transforming versions they heard long ago with their own prior narrations, and thus engaging the process of mythopoeisis, which is experienced both as a change in myth, as the narrator changes with age, and as greater fidelity to an earlier version. As a result, while ‘ancient people’s stories’ have a kind of pure narrativity that allows them to generate connections between the known and the otherwise unknowable, as Gow has shown, they also confront Piro people (as storytellers and listeners) with alternative worlds that are both alien and familiar.

This remark highlights an important aspect of the previously discussed intricate link between the concepts of ‘myth’ and ‘Amazonia.’ When Pete landed in the Peruvian Amazonia’s Bajo Urubamba River, the Piro people he met in the community of Santa Clara recalled the period beginning in the late 1940s as the ‘liberation from slavery,’ because it was then that Piro people stopped living on their bosses’ *haciendas*. They then relocated to new settlements centered on schools built by SIL missionaries. In the 1980s, living in villages was important to the idea of ‘civilization,’ and schools defined ‘real villages,’ and hence the prospect of ‘living well.’ Simultaneously, the problem of transformations in Piro people’s lives over the century beginning in the 1880s, turned out to be less of a problem in the continuity of the Piro lived world and more of a problem in the way social anthropologists visiting Amazonia habitually think about the region’s indigenous peoples.

A certain unstudied way of thinking about indigenous Amazonian peoples assumes that their worldviews are inherently fragile when confronted with historical change. Such ideas, as Gow argued, would not survive contact with the harsh realities of the world as it is. This leads outside observers and analysts to look for evidence of change and to attribute to all changes that they find a foreboding historical significance that indigenous Amazonian peoples are unlikely to have. We don’t bother looking into their historical trajectories, or even asking serious questions about their real-world implications, because we believe their ideas are so fragile. As a result, we miss out on how such ideas might actually inform us about how indigenous Amazonian people live their lives, as well as the potentially profound continuities hidden within possible transformations.

The Piro communities Gow met in the early 1980s closely match Lévi-Strauss’ definition of a ‘cold society’ in their desire to maintain egalitarian relations and a high degree of unanimity in their values. Other anthropologists have often interpreted Lévi-Strauss’ distinction between cold and hot societies as the author’s refusal to attribute a history to certain types of people. This is obviously false, as Lévi-Strauss makes clear that all societies have histories, and his distinction refers to the specific mode in which various societies imagine themselves in relation to the past. But, as Gow points out, another, perhaps more important point has been lost in this debate: the extremely strong negative connotation that Lévi-Strauss assigns to ‘hot societies’ with their primary dynamic being the generation of extreme social inequalities. As Gow explains through the idea of an ‘Amazonian myth,’ Piro people have been engaged with various types of people who are clearly from ‘hot societies,’ people who have inserted Piro people into a variety of social hierarchies. These individuals see their own activities as historically significant, dedicated to the progressive transformation of the world and the emergence of new values.

Of course, the transformation sought, and the values generated, differ greatly as Gow passes from one category of people to another, but these differences cannot obscure the underlying commonality of the 'heat' with which they are attributed, an attribute to be passed from themselves to Piro people. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the Piro people have come to adopt a variant of such images of the past, and that they, too, recount their past in progressive ways, as when they told Pete in the 1980s that they had become 'civilized'.

As I see it, I argue that Gow's use of the central ideas of 'myth' and 'Amazonia', and the various connections between them, often in terms of the kinds of relationships the Piro engage in with different people, comprise fertile ground for the elucidation of each other as well as the open spaces that order the book's analytical work towards 'history'. If you ask me again, I'll point out that within 'myth' and 'Amazonia', there is a constant oscillation between them as figure and ground, as one is cleared away to make room for the other, even if the implicit one never completely vanishes and lingers as a shadow. And yet, if you keep asking me, I'd like to draw attention to the fact that as we move between 'mythical Amazonia' and 'Amazonian myth', we experience a strange sensation of losing boundaries as we try to find our way through a landscape that has multiplied to accommodate an extra potential perspective. In this manner, an 'Amazonian myth' operates by extension as well as by oscillation, so that each is a tool for the other's analytical appearance. As a conjunction of two autopoietic systems (a mythopoetic system combined with a kind of 'sociopoietic' one) identified by the idea of the capacity of an 'Amazonian myth' to organize and reproduce its potentialities where alterity is processed and encompassed by an ever-expanding appropriatory system.

In an amazing manner, this seems to me to really resonate with Viveiros de Castro's (2001) reflection on indigenous Amazonian sociologies, in which he has sought to explore the differential locations of the given and the made, in search of a 'Grand Unified Theory' for the region. Attempting to elaborate a GUT theory for Amazonia, Viveiros de Castro begins with the following question: what if we take seriously the logical priority of the Other over the Self in indigenous Amazonian societies? By taking this question as a kind of platform, Viveiros de Castro argues that if the Other is logically prior to and constitutive of the Self, then the Other is congruous to the given and the Self is consistent with what is made. More importantly, thinking in terms of kinship, this agrees both with the idea that consanguinity is made while affinity is given and that it is potential affinity which precedes and constitutes consanguinity.

In fact, Viveiros de Castro proceeds by demonstrating how his Grand Unified Theory can be applied to a series of ethnographic descriptions of indigenous Amazonian societies, including Pete's *Of Mixed Blood* (1991). His approach accounts for the Piro starting from a state of pure potential affinity and for the unfolding of history understood as the very process of kinship, as if Piro people moved from mythically given affinity to historically constructed consanguinity by recursively micro-oscillating between identity and alterity, which constitutes the life cycle.

What particularly piques my interest is the notion of an 'Amazonian myth' understood as the union of two autopoietic systems, as it sheds light on the constructive movement of 'history' from pure potential affinity to the process of kinship as a constitutive element of the Piro lived world, continuously expanding and allowing it to make connections it could not make before. While both 'myth' and 'Amazonia' are components of the Piro lived world, when taken as instruments, they each realize capacities for the other, serving as a kind of backdrop from which the other becomes visible. 'Myth' and 'Amazonia' both appear in Pete's work as analogous but not identical analytical entities. In other words, as Strathern (2004) argued about other entities, they are 'compatible' but not 'comparable', so that the emergence of one is the very limit of the other.

Following the effects of the book's oscillations between 'myth' and 'Amazonia', I believe we are confronted with a very unusual form of historical continuity. While the Piro people were long thought to be a 'traditionally acculturated' society in which 'culture' did not matter, Pete's *An Amazonian Myth and its History* reveals that what is at stake in the Piro lived world is not their 'culture' (or the possible 'lack' of it), but the way Piro people experience their social history.

By way of conclusion, in the last two paragraphs of the book, where he discusses his late *compadre's* (Artemio) story about that man who went under the Earth and became a white-lipped peccary, Pete states that Artemio's story reminded him of an evening in his own childhood when his dad, James, taught him how to navigate from the Great Bear to the Pole Star. Pete then concluded: 'this use of our senses, so easily lost in a world of strong streetlights and strong egos, is restored to me now by a Piro myth.' Through the operation of the idea of an 'Amazonian myth' and the 'historical' effects it engenders in the Piro lived world, this powerful book produces a similar effect on us. By pointing away from ourselves towards the Bajo Urubamba, to the lives of Piro people, to what interests them, and to their attention on the things around them, reading this book is itself an experience for our senses, leading us to a new understanding of Amazonian indigenous peoples' lives.

I mentioned at the beginning of this review, the Lévi-Straussian idea of myth as a part of language where "the formula *traduttore, traditore* reaches its lowest truth-value", as its substance does not lie either in its style, or in its syntax, but precisely in the story it tells. At this point, I would like to add that perhaps Pete's book is, in some way, mythical. By telling stories about the way in the Piro people attribute to all kinds of beings social values and sets of actions they themselves despise and fear in a transformational world in order to thrive, Pete himself works as a translator picturing an Amerindian lived world of such beauty and variety, where the stories, the Piro people, and the relations they potentially engage in are ceaselessly changing. As the great shaman in the Piro story of the mother of the white-lipped peccaries, who went down under the Earth following the tracks of the white-lipped peccaries, thanks to Pete and this book, we can happily find ourselves in this Piroan 'forest' populated with tasty and abundant 'food' for our thought.

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