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# Review: Of Mixed Blood

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*Of Mixed Blood: Kinship and History in Peruvian Amazonia, by Peter Gow, Clarendon Press, NY (1991).*

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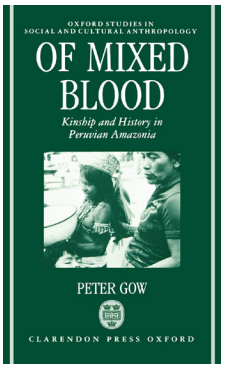


*Of Mixed Blood* (Gow, 1991) was my recurrent reading during the long journeys I made to reach the Yine communities where I did my doctoral dissertation fieldwork in the Southern Peruvian Amazon. In general, Gow's work was an essential reference for my own research. Nevertheless, writing this review was a great challenge for me, considering the magnitude of the book in question and the remarkable reviews that this research has previously provoked (Montoya, 1993; Taylor, 1993; Viveiros de Castro, 1993; Wade, 1993; among others). Here, I am going to review some of the concepts I found in *Of Mixed Blood*, which were an important part of my reflections during my work with the Yine people.

Gow's doctoral fieldwork—which years later would become the book *Of Mixed Blood*—was carried out in the early 1980s in the Peruvian Amazon in Yine (formerly known as Piro) native communities of the Lower Urubamba river region. At the time that Gow did his fieldwork, there was a current in the social sciences that considered part of the Amazonian indigenous populations as 'acculturated'. This current basically posed that, after centuries of contact and oppression, these populations seemed to have suffered the loss of their 'original' cultures and been subjected to Western culture. This narrative was well articulated for the defense of indigenous rights that gained special relevance in the last decades of the 20th century. In fact, indigenous peoples have historically been subjected to ethnocide policies in the Amazon.

Nevertheless, conceiving indigenous populations solely as victims of external pressures risks denying their own historical agency, which—as demonstrated in *Of Mixed Blood*—is highly relevant to indigenous peoples themselves. In this sense, far from using the fashionable labels at the time, Gow focused his ethnography on listening carefully to *what the indigenous peoples had to say about their own history*.

The Yine of Urubamba considered that before the rubber era in the southern Peruvian Amazon (c. 1890 - 1910), "the Piro were divided into various endogamous and mutually hostile groups" (1991: 30). In my fieldwork, carried out almost 40 years after Gow's, an elderly Yine told me this same story of how mixing (*la mezcladera*) began among the Yine. At the time, "(the ancient groups) did not get along. They just fought, but little by little with the time of rubber they already joined. Here comes the mixer and everything." In this sense, the agglomeration of indigenous labor in the rubber era is recognized as the original trigger of the mixed blood between groups. Gow explains that "while the world of the ancient people was almost asocial, with isolated groups of people living in the forest dedicated to drug-taking and fighting, the world created by their enslavement by the rubber bosses was one of expansion and exchange." (Gow, 1991: 65).

The concept of *native people* is central in the work of Peter Gow. In fact, *Of Mixed Blood* begins in its first line defining itself as "an ethnography of the native people of the Bajo Urubamba" (1991: 1). This concept should not be understood as "indigenous people" in the sense

in which it is defined by state agencies and civil organizations, which tend to suggest closed and clearly identifiable cultural groups among others. 'Native people' are the product of various transformations that occurred through overlapping processes of 'mixing' (marriages between people of different groups) and 'becoming civilized' (Gow, 1993: 333). According to Gow, these two processes developed through various consecutive periods beginning in the rubber era.

In the book, we note that in the accounts of ancient times it is especially important for the Yine to highlight that their ancestors did not have the 'civilized' technology and knowledge of interactions with non-indigenous actors. The way of building their homes, hunting, fishing, cultivating the farm, cooking their food, transporting themselves, healing themselves, making tools, etc., is determined by this lack of technology, whose most relevant milestone is shown in the lack of metal tools. 'Being civilized' for the Yine is related to the knowledge that they have obtained in the encounter with non-indigenous populations, through which they have modified the way in which they relate to the forest.

Gow's ethnography states that the 'time of rubber' followed other stages, in which the Yine began to interact with other people and obtain other knowledge. These were called the 'time of the farms', the 'time of the missions' and, finally, 'the time of the school and the native community' (1991: 62-71). The creation of the communities and the withdrawal of the missionaries consolidates the process called 'civilization'. The figure of the 'native communities' freed the indigenous populations from the bosses (*patrones*) to which they had been tied for decades (rubber tappers, missionaries, landowners). In this stage, the Yine acquired 'civilized knowledge', which does not refer only to the use of foreign tools and technologies, but rather knowledge related to schools and the creation of native communities. It is closely linked to their ability to protect themselves from returning to the exploitative conditions to which their ancestors had been subjected.

It is through a whole historical process of mixture and transformations through which the ancient Yine constituted themselves through generations as native people: "kinship relations are created and dissolved in historical time, and historical time draws its meaning and power for native people by being structured by kinship relations" (Gow, 1991: 3). As Gow puts it, the story of the Yine is the story of the creation of native people, and for native people "history is kinship" (Ídem.)

The native people have built an ideal of living well out of mixture and civilization, which can be defined in Yine as *kigler giwekle* ('living well'). Gow (1991) defines the concept of living well among the Yine of Lower Urubamba as follows:

> To eat real food, the products of their gardens and the game of the river and forest. They want to live with their kin, who will remember their hunger and feed them. They want to live in peaceful happy communities, surrounded by caring kin and free from the oppression of the bosses (Gow, 1991: 2).

When studying kinship in Yine daily life, Gow highlights that beyond the consanguineous ties, the spaces of sociality between people in the village are of the utmost importance, especially in the spaces linked to the production and consumption of food and drinks (Gow, 1991). According to Gow, the kinship relations between the Yine of Urubamba were built through the consumption, circulation and production of what they called in the villages 'legitimate food', that is, food locally produced in the communities; a mixture of cultivated foods, such as bananas and cassava, with meat from river and forest animals (Gow, 1991: 124). Concerning this, and taking the opportunity to rescue a sample of Gow's refined narrative style, I would like to quote the following paragraph that exceptionally describes the creation of kinship among the Yine:

> Real food is produced in particular relationships, and its circulation and consumption sets up other relationships. The production of plantains, game, and manioc beer is a definition of gender identity, and the production of real

> food is dependent on the relationship of marriage. The circulation of this food constitutes the relations between kin, as parents feed their children, and as adults respond to the hunger of other kin. The production of food engages people with the forest, making gardens and houses, and this food is sent out to feed others. Native communities focus on the relationship in which food is produced, circulated, and consumed, such that for native people, to live with kin is life itself (Gow, 1991: 119).

According to Gow (1991: 151-161), filiation relations among the Yine of the Urubamba went through a transition process between two 'kinship languages'. In the first instance, the baby is physically related to the parents through pregnancy and lactation, a stage in which what happens to the bodies of the parents is likely to affect their children. Once breastfeeding is over, this bodily connection erodes and the loving relationships established between both parties through feeding and caring for children take precedence as activities that 'build kinship'. In this way, the feeding process is not only related to supplying bodily needs, but rather prioritizes showing affection and acts of love by offering food to children, caring for them and taking care of them. These acts of affection towards children, such as feeding them, hope to create in the child something essential in kinship relationships, which in Yine is called by the term *nshinikanchi*, which has the connotation of 'respect, remember and love' a person (Gow, 1991: 164).

According to Gow (1991) the main value of living well for the Yine of Urubamba in the 1980s was referred to as *gwashata*, which in Yine means 'stay still'. The value of standing still has to do with the formation of villages, civilization and the formation of kinship relationships as they are carried out today. In this way, living well is opposed to the way of life of the ancients, known as 'forest people', who lived prototypically in constant movement.

For example, in the community where I did my fieldwork, Monte Salvado, Madre de Dios, there persists an idea of good living (*kigler giwekle*) related to peaceful life in the villages with relatives and not going to war, as sometimes happens with the isolated people called *Mashco Piro*. The Mashco Piro refer to groups of indigenous people in isolation who speak a variety of *Yineru Tokanu* (Yine language), and who in recent decades have increased their presence in forests near the Yine communities.

On the one hand, the people in Monte Salvado highlight 'living in harmony with the members of the community' (relatives), adding 'and with the Mashco Piro brothers'. However, State services, access to technology and economic income are also relevant, not only as knowledge that allows them to defend themselves against the abuses of whites, but as inherent in themselves and the good life in the villages.

A privileged space to analyze what living well currently implies for the Yine occurred with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020, which forced native communities to carry out strict quarantines and isolate themselves for several months without contact with the cities. In this period, it was possible to perceive the importance of these main 'external' needs of the community, which were part of their idea of a good life. Additionally, the context of danger at the level of degradation of territories that the Yine face today makes them highlight the need to 'protect the forest from dangers', which is a relatively recent concern in this sector of the Amazon.

In *Of Mixed Blood,* the category of 'native people' is opposed to other categories of people such as 'forest people', whose main reference is the 'ancient people' who lived in the forest, and also that of 'civilized people', whose main reference is the 'whites' (or better, 'gringos') who live in the big cities. At this point it is interesting to note that in Gow's ethnography the main 'image of otherness' (1993) of the native people was the image of the ancients, considered 'forest peoples'. However, currently this 'image of otherness' is constituted to a large extent by the Mashco Piro.

The main difference between the categories of 'native people' and those of 'forest people' or 'civilized people' is that, from the point of view of the Yine, the first is built on the basis

of kinship, while the other is built on the basis of its absence. For different reasons, neither the ancients (nor the Mashco Piro), nor the people who live in the cities maintain kinship relationships as the native people in the communities do. None know how to work in agriculture, live in villages, or appreciate the taste of legitimate food. However, far from creating an unbreakable barrier with them, this places them in a promising position for the creation of kinship relationships.

According to Gow, both the 'people of the forest' and the 'whites' are two extremes that the Yine of the Urubamba perceive "as fascinating sources of difference to be potentially incorporated" (Gow, 1991: 276).

> In order for people to live in real villages as civilized people, there had to be the prolonged and complex process of the proper mixing of difference, summed up beautifully in the idiom of mixed people. In order for this process to continue, now differences must be found and mixed in. This accords with the progressivism of the native people of the Bajo Urubamba, and their fascination with White foreigners and wild Indians. (Gow, 1991: 276).

In a recent article in *Tipití*, Gow highlights—admittedly following Lévi-Strauss—how indigenous populations always maintain "at their very heart, an attitude toward their outside, an attitude that is fundamentally constitutive of their inside" (2018: 11). Perhaps this constant interest in procuring a movement of incorporation and preservation of the difference within the group is currently appreciated in the interest of the Yine in relation to the new 'people of the forest', the Mashco Piro, who have begun to appear in their communities' surroundings.

Forty years after the fieldwork that brought *Of Mixed Blood* to life, much has changed in the southern Peruvian Amazon and in the Yine communities, but much has also remained. In any case, *Of Mixed Blood* continues to inspire Amazonian anthropologists through its fascinating ethnographic approach to Yine people.

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