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Peter Gow

Department of Social Anthropology, University of St. Andrews, Pgg2@st-andrews.ac.uk

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“Purús Song”: Nationalization and Tribalization in Southwestern Amazonia

PETER GOW

Department of Social Anthropology, University of St. Andrews
Pgg2@st-andrews.ac.uk

Before I went to do field work among the Piro and Asháninka people of the Bajo Urubamba, some wise soul gave me some pithy advice about how to do ethnography: take with you an ethnography you admire and just try to imitate it. I took *The Piaroa*, by Joanna Overing Kaplan, a book I had read and admired before she became the supervisor of my doctoral work. Heading to the field, I even bought a second copy, suspecting that my treasured first copy might not survive the process of fieldwork. As it happened, the book never made it to the Bajo Urubamba River, because I gave it away to a very kind Peruvian anthropologist. I gave that book to this man because it was the only object that I then possessed valuable enough to properly express my profound gratitude to him. This meant that I ended up in the field with Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, and Jean Baudrillard’s *The Mirror of Production*, and with only my vivid memories of *The Piaroa*. I set about doing ethnography among the Piro and Asháninka people with that book as my spiritual guide, even if it could no longer be my day-to-day instruction manual of how to do it.

One image from that book has always stayed with me. Characteristically of Overing’s work, that image is a Piaroa one. She quotes one informant as follows on the powers of *ruwang*, Piaroa shamans:

“A very powerful thinker can see all the world as one place. But this is bad for him, and it only leads to problems when he has such power because he *sees too much*. He may see that a *chisapo* (brother-in-law) in the next *Itso’de* (settlement) is angry. And when he sees this he thinks that his *chisapo* is angry with him, though probably he is not. He very likely will retaliate then for no good reason at all. The great *Ruwang* must develop controlled ability to have visions of other places and of the future, and the controlled ability to transform himself through his thoughts. It must be like a small house within his thoughts, bound and tight. But too often people want stronger powers than this” (1975:63; emphasis in the original).

This statement is haunting in its distinctive Amazonian take on knowledge. Contrary to the English idiom that a little knowledge is a

dangerous thing, this Piaroa speaker implies the opposite: too much knowledge is dangerous. This is the challenge posed to academic anthropology by the thought worlds of indigenous Amazonian peoples. Professionally committed to generating more and more knowledge about these peoples, we act directly counter to their own politics of knowledge. When my informants reply to my questions, as they often do, with “I do not know!” my general disappointment at my fruitless line of questioning is accompanied by a more specific political disappointment about why I cannot make the same honest reply to most questions from colleagues and students. Why do we always have to know everything?

Here I want to explore an indigenous Amazonian politics of knowledge from one of what would seem be its least promising facets, that is, the systematic erasure of memories of a series of past events affecting Piro people living on the Purús river in the first decade of the twentieth century. In this case, the erasure of these past events is so advanced that, from ethnographic evidence collected from 1980 onwards, it would be hard to even suspect them. However, the documentary archive records them in considerable detail, for these events mattered much to the nation-states of Peru and Brazil, and much was done to commemorate certain aspects of them. What Piro people have effectively erased, the institution of two nation-states have accumulated and preserved. It is these contrasting politics of knowledge, which I here term “tribalizations” and “nationalizations,” that I address in this essay. The key contrast is beautifully encapsulated in the Piaroa man’s comment: “It must be like a small house within his thoughts, bound and tight. But too often people want stronger powers than this.”

THE PURÚS RIVER

The most productive period of my original fieldwork was when I lived as a guest in the house of the Yeye Clotilde Gordón and Don Mauricio Fasabi. I listened to them talking to each other and to myself on an everyday basis. I was just there, a young man who responded to their remarkable willingness to allow me into their lives with my insistent questions. They told me that Clotilde’s father Maximiliano Gordón had lived on the Purús River, far to the east, along with most other Urubamba Piro people. Clotilde told me that her father had gone there with his boss *Shargi*. The historical archive records this latter man’s name as Carlos Scharff, and that many Piro people moved from the Urubamba to the Purús as debt slaves of rubber bosses like Scharff who were seeking to exploit the rich

stands of the rubber-producing *caucho* (Lat. *Castilloa elastica*) of the latter river. These Piro people returned from the Purús following the collapse of rubber prices in 1912. In 1980, none of my informants were old enough to remember living there, although they told me that their older dead relatives had lived and worked rubber there. Because it was outside of living memory, Piro people had little to say about it.

In many ways, the Piro lived world corresponds closely to Lévi-Strauss's concept of the cold society (1966), for the Piro people have effectively evacuated their accounts of the recent prelived memory past—the past that is beyond lived memory—by reducing it to a relatively stereotypical sequence that I have discussed in detail elsewhere (1991, 2001). Unlike many Westerners, Piro people do not memorialize the past. Following Lévi-Strauss and Overing, I tend to think of this as a positive feature of the lived world of the Piro. Piro people are unburdened by the need to create museums or archives. They show a willingness to let bygones be bygones that is personally congenial to me. Questions about the past to Piro people, which in my experience of my own lived world rapidly lead to trouble, are treated as either issues of lived memory or as issues of cosmogony. Piro people, so to speak, do not "do history." Attempts to get them to do so are met with evasion. Who did what to whom and when—the essence of our take on history—seems to be offensive to them. Indeed, Piro people's understanding of conflict is linked to the question of history, of origins. In their reaction to a dispute between children, their interest is not in justice in our sense, who is right and who is wrong, but in "Who started it?" Once a child has suffered an equal number of blows as another child has landed, the fight is over, and forgotten.

POROSO SHIKALE, "PURÚS SONG"

There is one Piro account of their time on the Purús river. It is a song about life on the Purús, *Poroso shikale* ("Purús Song"). This song was sung for me by a Piro woman called Teresa in Sepahua in 1988, and was recorded and translated by my late *compadre* Pablo Rodríguez Manchinari. Its words are as follows:

*Gike nikekowakni, poroso, poroso,
Gike nikekowakni, poroso, poroso.
Gachawripjixipje nika koraka,
Korakale, koraka,
Korakale, koraka,
Porotojijje nika koraka,*

*Korakale, koraka,
Korakale, koraka,
Gike nikedowakni, poroso, poroso,
Wane rawanatana porosole, poroso.*

Pablo Rodriguez translated this song into Spanish for me, and my English translation is as follows:

They do not eat well there, the Purús River, the Purús River,
They do not eat well there, the Purús River, the Purús River.
He eats just chicken's feet, the boss,
The poor little boss, the boss,
The poor little boss, the boss.
He eats just beans, the boss, the poor little boss,
The poor little boss, the boss,
The poor little boss, the boss.
They do not eat well there, the Purús River, the Purús River.
When they lived on the poor little Purús River, the Purús River.

Although sung by a woman, "Purús Song" seems to belong to a rather enigmatic genre called in Piro *jeji shikale* ("men's songs"). I say enigmatic because I have never heard a Piro man sing such a song, apart from a young man in Les Blank's film, *The Burden of Dreams*, about the making of Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo* (see Blank and Bogan 1984:41–42). "Men's songs" seem to have disappeared as an activity of Piro men. My knowledge of the genre comes from what women have performed of it for me, or told me about it.

In conversation, Joanna Overing recently described our task as combining the best of American cultural anthropology with the best of European social anthropology. The cultural anthropologists, she told me, are great at analyzing what people say. However, she suggested, we also need to look at the relation between who is talking and who is listening, which is what the social anthropologists do so well. "Purús Song," like its genre, is a historical enigma and presents a serious challenge to this project. I have no idea who composed this song nor why, and it is unlikely that we will ever know. Furthermore, because "men's songs" are no longer performed by men, the dynamics of this genre are hard to analyze: who is singing the song, about whom, and to whom? As such, Purús Song poses an almost classical case of the methodological problems of historical anthropology. As a Piro perspective on an important phase in the recent historical experiences of Piro people, this song is as precious as it is enigmatic. Lacking all of the precision of written eyewitness accounts,

and coming from a genre that is effectively defunct, it nonetheless presents us with a kind of eyewitness testimony to remote events.

What can we do with this song as a historical document? First, it does seem to provide a history in a Piro sense. While *suxo shikale* ("women's songs"), quote mythic beings, and *kagonchi shikale* ("shaman's songs"), quote eternal supernatural beings, two of the three examples I have of "men's songs" refer to experiences that are seen by Piro people as being characteristic of their recent history, that is, they are concerned with relations with white bosses. Further, all Piro discourse that is sung is marked by slid subject position. The singer is never the original speaker/singer of the words (see Gow 2001; also see Viveiros de Castro 1986 and Seeger 1987). "Purús Song" is therefore probably not an eyewitness account. It is much more likely to be a sung quotation of another man's eyewitness account.

Minimally, the song calls attention to two sets of people who ate badly, as the general suffering of a collective "they" is juxtaposed with the specific suffering of the "poor little boss," who has only chicken's feet and beans to eat. "Poor little boss" is a very ironic sentiment, since boss/worker relations are, for Piro people, characterized by a woeful absence of sympathy. If the "poor little boss" is eating so badly, then his workers must be eating much worse. This is what makes me suspect that the singer is quoting another man, who has expressed this absurd sympathy for both the "poor little boss" and for the "poor little Purús river," rather than for the Piro people who have suffered much worse. Piro people are appropriate and meaningful objects of a Piro man's compassion (Gow 1991), while bosses and rivers are not. As is made explicit in other "men's songs," the absurdity of the sentiment expressed in the song leads me to suspect that the original speaker was drunk and sentimental. Given the nature of male-on-male relations, the speaker was almost certainly a sexual rival of the composer, and it is likely that the song was specifically composed to ridicule him.

Furthermore, chicken's feet and beans are not *nikchi potu* ("real food") as far as Piro people are concerned, but *kajitu nika* ("white people's food") food that Piro people do not like eating (Gow 1991). The song therefore expresses the heightened suffering of Piro people, who have been forced to eat "white people's food," though not enough of it, and hence the increased absurdity of the original speaker's wasted sympathy for the boss.

The "here" of the song is clearly not the Purús, but rather the Urubamba. The song also connects this suffering to being "far away" (Piro: *wajra, gi gorwuko*). Teresa had sung this song in the context of a journey that was about songs. While I had initiated this journey up the Urubamba River in an attempt to study Piro visual art, Pablo had decided that what we were doing was recording "women's songs." Piro visual art is a distinctively

female domain. Knowledge about it is not shared with men, or at least not easily. "Women's songs," by contrast, actively target men, and are hence a legitimate port of entry for men into what Piro women know. It seems likely that Teresa was stimulated to sing this song precisely because Pablo, her young kinsman, was *wajra*, "far away" from home. Two days after recording this song, he spontaneously commented: "Today, I feel far away from my house. Yesterday in Sepahua, I did not feel that I was far away because I was with close kinspeople. But now I feel far away." Pablo said this to me—a man who manifestly was very "far away" from home.

In addition, *Poroso*, the word for the Purús River in the song, is not a Piro toponym. The Piro called this river, which they knew well, *Kokga*, "Coca River," a form that entered Spanish and Portuguese as Cujar, the current term for the headwaters of the Purús. "Purús" itself is a Portuguese toponym, and *Poroso shikale* suggests that the composer of this song was making specific reference to this river as experienced by Brazilian people.

ANOTHER MEAL ON THE PURÚS

The question then becomes, what was a meal on the Purús during this period like? Fortunately, we have an eyewitness account in the documentary archive that comes from the pen of Euclides da Cunha. Da Cunha is one of the great modern writers of Brazil, author of the seminal *Os sertões*, a work that is essentially a genealogy of Brazil as a modern nation. It recounts the history of a doomed revolutionary movement in Bahia, led by Antonio o Conselheiro (Anthony the Councillor) against the establishment of Brazil as a republican nation-state. Da Cunha also wrote a very short piece called "Sucedeu em Curanjá," which is much more intimately connected to my theme here. Da Cunha was in the area as the leader of the "Mixed Peruvian-Brazilian Commissions for the Exploration of the Upper Purús," whose Peruvian leader was Captain of the Corvette Don Pedro Buenaño. His piece goes like this, in my own poor translation:

It happened in Curanjá on the 3rd of July.

The principal people of the place offered a banquet to us (to the Peruvian chief and to me). I accepted it with pleasure: I still in the illusion of a sympathy that would soon disappear. I went to the location (a commercial house of C. Scharff given over to the management of his bookkeeper, the German Alf. Schutz)—and was immediately taken aback by the profusion of Peruvian flags in marked contrast to the absence of ours—although it was extremely easy for the hosts of the party to acquire it in their own encampment.

Noting this fact, I thought of leaving and waited for the first opportunity to do so, without ostentation or scandal, when I observed, among the branches

that decorated the *paxiuba* (palmbark) walls of the festive hall, some palm leaves whose very intense yellow inner surfaces contrasted with the green of the rest of the foliage. It was a solution to the constrained attitude that had been imposed on me by ... the spectacular patriotism of those people. In fact, just after being seated at the table, I seized the first word, without waiting for the opportune moment for toasts, and in a rapid salutation I thanked them for their invitation—and this for two reasons.

Firstly—as an American—feeling myself happy with all the manifestations of cordiality between men of two almost brother races, perhaps destined to intimate alliances in the future to react to the imperialism of the great nations: in the second place—as a Brazilian—profoundly moved by the “intelligent gentleness” and splendid gallantry with which they had placed in that hall the flag of our land (the hosts’ fright was complete!). I explained it then saying that instead of looking for the flag of my country from the mercenary breast of a factory they had searched for it in the majestic breast of the forests, taking it from precisely that tree which among all others symbolizes rectitude and height. And I finished: “Because, my dear Peruvian sirs, my land is as straight and tall as the palms ...

I cannot describe ... the effect of these words, nor the embarrassment with which the Peruvian chief and the others complimented me declaring, “that I had understood very well their thoughts ...” (1995:583).

This event occurred in 1905. Obviously, central to this piece is the contestation of where Curanja was—whether in Brazil or in Peru at that point.

Da Cunha’s piece comes from his nonofficial report on the journey, and I read it in his *Obra Completa*. Da Cunha’s account of this dinner is therefore not simply an account, but rather a writer’s account. He has taken contingent experiential detail and happenstance, and freighted them with meaning. What is impressive in this short piece of writing is the manner in which Da Cunha is able to raise so many of the large issues of his time and place in so few words: race, land, country, nation, nationalism, Pan-Americanism, internationalism, imperialism, anti-imperialism, and so on. All of these big ideas are made to happen in Curanjá, a place of little apparent importance and of which most people have never heard. Da Cunha’s piece is a poetic condensation of very large, complex ideas into an account of a fairly trivial event in a place of little apparent significance. Directed at a literary audience in Rio de Janeiro, it is an example of Da Cunha’s sensibility, and takes an event in a distant place that the audience do not really care about and will certainly never visit, and reframes it in terms that the reading audience can potentially experience as exemplary. Had you been there, these words call to the reader, I hope you would have reacted in the same way. It might be argued that “It happened in Curanjá” appears to have nothing in common with “Purús Song,” other than the

mere unity of place and time. They come from different cultural contexts, are not demonstrably in dialogue with each other, and my juxtaposition of them here is open to all the valid criticisms of postmodern “collage.” The connection inheres in me, and is an artefact of my life and of my interests, and is not a real connection out there in the world. This is possibly true, but the unity of time and place speaks, I think, to real and meaningful connections and disconnections, and to their ongoing consequences in different lived worlds. Different lived worlds is an operational definition of what we call “cultures” (Gow 2001). While anthropologists have had a great deal to say about social change and cultural contacts (connections), they have had much less to say about their aftermath (disconnections), the motivated erasure of certain social relations in ongoing social life.

If we study them closely, I think that “Purús Song” and “It happened in Curanjá” have a great deal in common. Both refer to spatiotemporally distantiated events that are being brought into the here and now as imbued with meaning. In both, the Purús River is held to be distal, far away, from the point of view of the hearer and reader, but in both the events are imaged as of immediate relevance to the present and future. Similarly, both hinge on the meaning of food and generosity with food. In the one, food is insufficiently abundant and of the wrong sort, while in the other, abundant and appropriate food, and generosity with it, is associated with a lack of generosity on another level—too many Peruvian flags and too few Brazilian flags.

The two pieces differ in an important way, however. “Purús Song” makes no obvious appeal to nationalism, while “It happened in Curanjá” is an almost hallucinatory hymn to a sort of nationalism that we now find disturbing. We now recognize the nation to be a specific kind of humanly constructed artefact, and baulk at the suggestion that local vegetation could, in any way, pronounce that place to be in the territory of one nation as opposed to the territory of another. The disturbing nationalism of Da Cunha’s piece is obviously an artefact of the fact that he was in Curanja as part of a commission to find out where places like this were, whether in Brazil or Peru.

FIGHTING

Da Cunha had been sent to the Purús as leader of the Brazilian part of the Mixed Peruvian-Brazilian Commissions for the Exploration of the Upper Purús. This commission was sent by the joint agreement of the Peruvian and Brazilian governments, and was part of the very prolonged

attempts to establish finally the borders between Peru and Brazil that effectively stretched back to the Line of the Treaty of Tordesillas/Todesilhas of 1494. However, the proximate cause was fighting between Peruvian and Brazilian rubber bosses and workers in 1903 and 1904.

Hildebrando Fuentes, then Prefect of the Department of Loreto, quotes the eyewitness account of this fighting by the rubber boss Virgilio Salazar (1906:165–69). The following is my summary of that account, and I make no claims at all for its comprehensibility. Salazar puts the trouble down to the attempts by the Brazilian authorities to impose a tax on Peruvian rubber bosses for working rubber in Brazilian territory, even although the Peruvians were working above the mouth of the Chandless River, which was provisionally and mutually agreed to be the dividing line between the two national territories. On September 25, 1903 the police captain of Chandless, Don Jorge Barreto, his lieutenant Don César Cosío, and nine soldiers were surrounded by 200 Brazilian soldiers and armed rubber workers, under the command of Colonel Ferreira Araujo and his compatriot José Cardoso da Rosa. After two days of siege, the invaders sent a message that the Peruvians should surrender and lower the Peruvian flag. Four Peruvian rubber bosses told Barreto to retreat, and he went down to Manaus. Lieutenant Cosío was ordered to go up the Chandless River with four soldiers, who were then all killed by Captain Emiliano "Marca-Fogo," at the orders of Cardoso da Rosa. The Brazilian troops then went up the Chandless and captured Eliseo Vasquez, Virgilio Salazar, and Carlos Scharff in his camp Unión. This camp was completely sacked and Scharff was sent under armed guard to Manaus. The Brazilians then dug themselves in, above Chandless in Fortaleza.

Scharff was freed in Manaus, and then went to Iquitos to appeal to Colonel Portillo, Prefect of Loreto, for help. Colonel Portillo sent Lopez Saavedra as the new police captain, along with Lieutenants Valdivia and Giorzo and thirty men of the military garrison of Loreto, who were joined by 200 rubber bosses and their workers. They established themselves in Curanja, and Engineer Von Hassel was sent to Chandless to tell Colonel Araujo and Cardoso da Rosa to leave immediately. Von Hassel was imprisoned. A rescue party was sent, consisting of Federico Lafuente, Florencio Ruiz, and Carlos Zeballos and six *bogas* (canoe polers). These men were also imprisoned. Meanwhile there was a dispute in Curanja because the rubber bosses and workers insisted on being led by Scharff in any fighting, not by Police Captain Lopez Saavedra. The latter refused this, and most of the company dispersed, leaving only sixty-seven men under Lopez Saavedra's command. Lopez Saavedra moved his men down to Santa Rosa, midway between Curanja and Chandless, and placed thirty

on the right bank and thirty-seven on the left bank.

On the thirtieth of March 1904, 270 Brazilians turned up in the steamboats 'Acreana' and 'Mercedes', stolen respectively from Julio Arana and Carlos Scharff, and they took the right bank garrison prisoners. The left bank force was then attacked, but they resisted so ferociously that fifty-eight Brazilians died, and the rest retreated. The Peruvian forces then retreated in turn, and the next day the Brazilians attacked the empty camp, and then:

To avenge themselves for this defeat and this shame the Brazilians made victims of Lafuente, Ruiz, Zeballos and the six polers who they had kept in captivity since they arrived at the mouth of the Chandless to parley. These resolute and valiant citizens were each crucified on a wooden cross and after this was bathed in kerosene, the bodies were placed on 2000 pieces of firewood, which were then set fire to in their furious cowardice (Fuentes 1906:169).

Fuentes continues:

The tomb of these unfortunate victims was later justly honoured by the Captain of the Corvette, Don Pedro Buenaño, leader of the Peruvian scientific commission to the Purús (1906:169).

Buenaño was the fellow guest with Da Cunha at the dinner offered by Scharff and described in "It happened in Curanjá," and these antecedents go some way to explaining the heightened nationalism of that event.

NATIONALIZATIONS

Salazar's account above suggests, on the face of it, a simple conflict between citizens of two nation-states. Da Cunha also presents a basically similar account of this conflict in *O Rio Purús* (1995:753–810), although with the predictable shift in nationalist moral valence. Salazar argues that the war was caused by the Brazilians insisting on treating rubber produced by Peruvians in the Upper Purús as rubber gathered on Brazilian soil, and hence subject to a special tax. Clearly, this rubber was being produced in Peru by Peruvians, and hence exempt from this tax, and so state functionaries like Colonel Portillo had to respond to appeals to national integrity. Da Cunha presents it as an invasion of Brazilian national territory by Peruvians that had to be repelled.

However, the story is rather more complicated, and is really a drama internal to a family business empire, as described by Valdez-Lozano

(1944). Carlos Scharff was not unknown to José Cardoso da Rosa, for the former was an ex-foreman of Carlos Fermín Fitzcarrald, and the latter was the stepfather of Fitzcarrald's widow Aurora Velazco. Fitzcarrald had died in 1897, and while his widow and her stepfather maintained financial control over his rubber gathering empire, operational control had passed to his brother Delfín, who had opened up the rich rubber fields of the Upper Purús River. On his return from the first trip to the Purús, he was killed by Amahuaca people in the portage back onto the Sepahua. Effective operational control then passed to Scharff.

It seems that Cardoso de Rosa suspected Scharff of chicanery, given that gathered wild rubber was *habilitado/aviado* ("owed"), since it had notionally been produced to cancel a previously incurred debt. Cardoso de Rosa saw this rubber as his rubber, since its collection had been financed by him, or at least by his stepdaughter. Scharff, by contrast, was treating the rubber as his own, which he was free to sell to whomsoever he pleased. Scharff was within his rights here. While he probably accepted that he owed *some* rubber to Fitzcarrald's widow, it was not certain that he owed *this* rubber to her, rather than some *other* rubber he would produce later. Rather than sending the rubber back over to the Sepahua and hence down to Iquitos on the Peruvian Amazon, Scharff was attempting to sell it down the Purús directly to Manaus on the Brazilian Amazon. In terms of tax revenue, therefore, Cardoso de Rosa apparently was acting in the national interests of Peru, while Scharff was acting in the national interests of Brazil.

What is interesting about this case was the ease with which these people were able to mobilize the forces of nation-states, politicians, and soldiers for their own ends, and the ease with which the internal wrangling of a single company could be represented as a dispute between national interests and national citizens. In fact, it is a moot point as to what extent any of the nonofficial participants in these events cared about their affiliation with nation-states. José Cardoso da Rosa was from Brazil, certainly, but he was married to the widow of a Peruvian army officer and was resident in Iquitos. His stepdaughter Aurora Velasco demonstrated the profundity of her allegiance to Peru by migrating to Paris with her four children on the death of her husband. Her husband Carlos Fermín Fitzcarrald, a Peruvian national hero, once told Aurora's brother that he was Argentinean, and is variously recorded as being Irish or American in the locally pejorative sense of *gringo*, from the United States of America (Reyna 1942). Carlos Scharff, the Peruvian boss at the heart of the war, is often described as "German" in the accounts, and was probably born, or at least raised, in Brazil. Nationalization seems to have been a resource for

people like Cardoso da Rosa and Scharff, something that could be called into to play. For them, nations were most decidedly not the “imagined communities” of Benedict Anderson, contexts in which to act, but rather instruments that could be brought into play in pursuit of very different ends.

It would be difficult to solve this fight on the Purús River in the Piro manner. “Who started it?”—the Piro question asked of any dispute in search of a peaceful resolution—is here the key point of the dispute. The answer to the question, “Who started it?” quickly shifts from Scharff or Cardoso da Rosa to “the Peruvians” or “the Brazilians,” in an impressive piece of dispute escalation.

NAMES

In Salazar’s account, as cited by Fuentes, there is an interesting economy of names, making it unclear who is and who is not named. Peruvian state functionaries are named along with specification of military rank or political office, e.g., Police Captain Barreto, Engineer Von Hassel, et cetera. Rubber bosses are named with the respectful “Don,” e.g., Don Carlos Scharff, et cetera. Other men, presumably less important, are named but receive no “Don,” while others are unnamed and simply identified by profession and number, e.g., “thirty soldiers” or “six polers.” Salazar here follows standard onomastic practice for his social class, naming higher status people as initiating and controlling agents of lower level anonymous masses of workers who follow their orders. He may well have known the names of some or all of the thirty soldiers or six polers, but Salazar clearly did not see such names as important enough to detail to Fuentes, or if he did, Fuentes did not bother to commit them to writing.

Obviously, Fuentes’ account of Salazar’s account would quickly become unwieldy if every participant in every event had to be named. However, in an important sense, a “historical account” is the production of a condensed narrative of a series of highly complex events by the foregrounding of key agents and the “backgrounding” of others. As Lévi-Strauss pointed out, history is always a simplification of the past, and what is interesting for anthropologists is who is made anonymous and generic (1966). As the historian Carlo Ginzburg put it: “Who built Thebes of the seven gates?” Bertolt Brecht’s “literate worker” was already asking this. The sources tell us nothing about these anonymous masons, but the question retains all its significance (1992:xiii). Ginzburg here identifies the key problem for studies like the present one, namely that all historical analyses falter on the

fact of the archive because the archive was written by and for certain elites, and concretely reproduces their interests.

That said, if the archive is never going to tell us what the thirty soldiers or six polers thought about events, we can still, I think, extract interesting data from it for anthropological purposes. For example, there is a deceptively simple connection in Salazar's account between named people and named places. For example, Don Carlos Scharff is specified as Peruvian, that is, a unique named person is placed in a class that derives its meaning from a unique named nation, Peru. Contrast this with the following, where Salazar, cited by Fuentes, names a series of workers: "Peruvian workers Amadeo Ruiz (*sapino*) Elías Flores (id.) Eleuterio Barbarán (*moyobambino*) Gregorio Talese (*iquiteño*) and Eustaquio Ramírez (*tarapotino*)" (1906:167). These unique named persons without the respectful "Don" are linked to classes of attachment to place below the level of the nation, like Saposoa, Moyobamba, Iquitos, and Tarapoto. The six polers are also just that. They are unnamed and unlinked to unique nations or even to places.

Salazar here follows a classificatory schema of *raza* ("race"). Those who are onomastically emplaced by nation alone are *blancos* ("white people"). Those who are onomastically emplaced by reference to towns such as Saposoa are *mestizos* ("mixed blood people"), or *mozos* ("workers"). And those who are not onomastically emplaced at all are necessarily members of the third category, *indios*, ("Indians"). This triadic racial schema was central to the social relations of the rubber industry, as I have discussed elsewhere (1991). I want to note that the reason that the six polers are not onomastically emplaced is because Salazar took for granted that they were where they belonged, that is, they were in their own territory. They were, in short, Piro people.

This is an important point, because even if Peruvian rubber bosses were concerned to define specific places such as Curanja as "Peruvian," they never attempted to claim ownership of territory. At most, they claimed ownership of specific posts and houses. Implicitly, they always accepted the territorial priority of local "Indian" people. This was in marked contrast to Brazil where, due to the different mode of rubber production, rubber bosses did seek control of indigenous territories as personal property (see discussion of Da Cunha's account in Gow 1991). There is an important reason for this beyond the technicalities of rubber production. Any Peruvian boss's claim to *blanco* status depended on disconnection from places, because connection to place in Peru meant being *mozo* or *indio*. That is why Fitzcarrald, born and raised in Ancash, claimed variously to be Argentinean, Irish, or American—anything but a man just from Ancash, *de Ancash no más*. This exemplary Peruvian hero, known for his

rabid patriotism and his opening up of Peruvian Amazonia for the nation, also had to be demonstrably non-Peruvian.

HEROIC AND COMMONPLACE STORIES

One of the most famous of Fitzcarrald's acts, and the source of his heroic status as a great Peruvian, was his discovery of the *Istmo de Fitzcarrald*, the portage between the Mishahua and Manú rivers, which linked the Ucayali and Madre de Dios river systems. This linkage allowed export of rubber from the latter area via Iquitos, thus bypassing the major rapids on the Madera/Madeira. This is one of a series of acts that characterize the history of Southwestern Amazonia as a series of heroic discoveries. The discovery of the Upper Purús is more ambiguous, for it is variably attributed to Delfin Fitzcarrald (Carlos Fermín's brother); to Leopoldo Collazos (Fitzcarrald's foreman); to Manuel Urbano (a trader from Manacapuru on the Amazon near Manaus); or to William Chandless (an Englishman sent by the Royal Geographical Society to survey the rivers of this part of Amazonia). Given that Chandless reached the uppermost reaches of the Purús in an expedition (1864–1865), and published a scientific report on this in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, priority tends to go to him, with due acknowledgment of Urbano's prior expedition. To Delfin Fitzcarrald and Leopoldo Collazos falls the disputed priority of discovering the portage between the Sepahua and Cujar, respectively in the Urubamba and Purús valleys (see Da Cunha 1995:753–810 and Faura-Geig 1964).

These discoveries can, however, be read in a completely different way. What Carlos Fermín Fitzcarrald "discovered" was simply the Piro portage point between the Mishahua and Manú rivers. The same is true for Delfin Fitzcarrald's or Leopoldo Collazos' "discovery" of the portage between the Sepahua and Cujar. These were standard routes used by Piro people moving between river systems, and are regularly mentioned in the earlier literature. Piro-speaking peoples in the Ucayali-Urubamba, Manú, Piedras, Purús, and Yuruá/Juruá valleys engaged in a very complex long distance trading system over a vast area of Southwestern Amazonia and the northern and southern Peruvian Andes that is well-attested for the mid-nineteenth century and was certainly very much older (see Gow 1991). What the "discoveries" related in the histories actually relate is the increasingly direct articulation of this trading system with the burgeoning rubber extraction industry in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Consider the word "Curanjá" itself. This word, stripped of its spurious

accent, comes from the Piro *kolamaga* ("Green Scum River") but is recorded in the literature in hispanicized/Iusianized forms as "Curamaha" and "Curanja/Curanha," because Piro speakers habitually elide vowels in front of suffixes like—*ga* ("liquid, flow, river"). Indeed, the Upper Purús, as with the neighboring areas, is today full of places with Piro toponyms, reflecting the manner in which it was Piro people who introduced rubber bosses to their trade network.

This Piro origin of the discovery can be given stronger form, for the expansion of the rubber extraction industry unquestionably reflected dynamic transformations in that trading system itself. This can be tracked in terms of metal goods (Piro: *yowuma*) in the system. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there seem to have been two major sources for metal goods for this system: the Franciscan mission system centered on Sarayacu on the Lower Ucayali River, and the annual trade fair at El Encuentro on the Upper Urubamba River (see discussion in Gow 1991). It is possible that the Piro-speaking Kuniba people on the Juruá were obtaining such goods by trading downriver to the Amazon mainstream, but it is clear that the Piro-speaking Manitinieri had not been trading directly along the Purús until the arrival of Manuel Urbano, possibly due to the presence of the Mura people on the lower reaches. The major dynamic of the trade lay to the west, and particularly to the trade routes focussed on Sarayacu, which was in turn tied to the commerce along the Amazon between Belem do Pará and Moyobamba in the Huallaga valley on the edge of the Andes.

While we know quite a lot about the exterior aspects of this trade system from the documentary archive, we know much less about its interior dynamics. It seems that trading was crucial to political competition among Piro chiefs, who would use the relative velocities of their trading transactions to increase their *pogirchi* ("fame, influence") and their networks of followers. One thing that is clear, however, is that Piro-speaking people experienced themselves as chronically undersupplied with metal goods, presumably because such goods were being constantly pumped into areas remote from their points of entry into the system.

A key shift in this trade system was the installation of Brazilian traders in the Cocama community of Nauta, at the confluence of the Marañon and Ucayali rivers, sometime in the 1830s. Urubamba Piro people rapidly seized this trading opportunity, and in 1854, told the French traveller Paul Marcoy that Nauta was in Brazil (1875:I, 508). Unlike the Franciscan priests, these Brazilian travellers were purely interested in profit and thus were much more willing to increase the velocity of trade goods. The American naval captain and spy Herndon (1991:250) records that Don Bernadino Cauper, a Portuguese trader of Nauta, was already

representing this trade as *aviamento/habilitación* ("fitting out") rather than as independent trading. However, this is probably not how Piro people saw it.

As the rubber extraction industry expanded, rubber bosses moved up the Ucayali River and towards the Urubamba, the home territory of the Piro people. There they established specific alliances with Piro chiefs, whose followers became their work force. There is no reason to believe that Piro people experienced this process as anything other than highly desirable. Travelers from that time often record their wealth in trade goods and their willingness to travel to distant *caucho* areas, which they presumably experienced as a continuation of older trading expeditions, with the advantage that the trade goods were now arriving by steamboat. Hence, depending upon your point of view, all such knowledge about trading, laboring, and traveling might either undermine our Western theories about origins and the heroic role attributed to "discoverers," or they might simply serve to identify new heroes.

CHANDLESS' ACCOUNT

The English geographer William Chandless, who either was or was not the first nonindigenous person to reach the upper Purús (1864–1865), describes an aspect of this complex trade system of Piro speaking peoples, and its articulation with the developing rubber extraction industry. At the mouth of the Aracá river (renamed the Chandless in his honor, and location of the trouble discussed above), the expedition met the Manetenerys. Chandless wrote:

Even one knowing of the existence of these Indians, and knowing of their comparative civilization, cannot but be struck, after travelling for many weeks among naked and suspicious savages, with Indians still further in the interior, and cut off from their natural channel of communication with the outer world; yet who wear clothes, and plant cotton and spin and weave it, both for their own use and for trade, and who show not the least fear but the greatest joy at the sight of strangers—unfortunately, it must be added, who meet the stranger with offers of children for sale, and with other offers such as travellers report to be made by the Polynesians (1866:101).

He goes on to explain that:

It is probable that the Manetenerys have for many years traded on the Juruá, and perhaps direct with white men, to whom, however, they may be

known by a different name; and the upper part of the tribe have, or have had, communication with the Ucayali. They always address one by the Portuguese "patricio" (countryman); they know, however, the Spanish words "muchacho" and "muchacha," and call a knife "cuchero" (cuchillo). Of the "lingoa geral" I heard but one word, "pina" (fishing hook), and that but once. Though eager for all articles of iron, they have a fair supply of them, and know perfectly the different values of a Portuguese and an American axe; they know also the value of their own cotton-cloth, and will not, as a rule, sell it except for iron—an axe, or knife, or a pair of scissors, according to the size of the piece: very rarely for a looking-glass (1866:101).

The Manitereri were clearly also trading downriver along the Purús, for they spoke at least one word of Lingoa Geral along with some Portuguese. Manuel Urbano, a trader from Manacapuru on the Amazon mainstream, who was Chandless's guide and predecessor as explorer of the Purús, had obtained a young Manitereri woman who taught him the Manitereri language and who was clearly trading with these people already.

Further upriver, Chandless met the Canamary people, who told him that they really belonged on the Curumaha (Curanja) River, and were certainly resident there. Chandless travelled further up the Purús from the mouth of the Curanja, and found another village of indigenous people who he described as:

... different from those we had yet seen, although alike in dress, &c. They called themselves Catianás; but this seems to be merely a corruption of "Castillano." They are certainly not Canamarys, and evidently do not think it a compliment to be considered such; nor do they seem to be Manetenerys, though as ill bred and importunate, and given to thieving ... The Canamary chief told us they were not natives of the Purús, but had come from a river to the east (1866:107).

These people were manifestly Urubamba Piro people.

Chandless is describing a set of indigenous peoples in complex relations with each other and with other indigenous and nonindigenous people further afield. These peoples were ordered by differentiations and relations and were part of the complex trade network discussed before. Interestingly, these people reacted to Chandless with hints of the nation-state. The Manetenerys hailed him in Portuguese as a "fellow countryman," while the Urubamba people stated that they were *Castellanos* ("Castilians"). That, at least, is how Chandless saw it. I suspect that actually the Manetenerys were joyful that they now had direct access to wealth from Portuguese speakers downriver, while the Urubamba people were annoyed that their trade monopoly in the Purús area of wealth that originated from Spanish

speakers had been breached. Nation-states were, so to speak, already operating on the Purús long before any agent of a nation-state actually arrived there.

There is more to consider, however. Arguably, by using the Portuguese and Spanish languages as symbols of their already existing differences from each other, the Piro and Manitinieri people were already “nationalizing” the Purús, by simply orienting themselves to two different sets of trade partners. They were not doing this for the nation-states of Peru and Brazil, and certainly not as Peruvian or Brazilian citizens, but rather by virtue of their own ongoing internal differentiations from each other. What I suggest is that phenomena that we tend to interpret as “modern”—the products of “hot societies” such as the modern nation-states of Peru and Brazil—are actually something very different. They are, in fact, “tribal” phenomena—the products of “cold societies” such as the Piro and the Manitinieri people. An event sequence initiated by indigenous Amazonian people expands outwards and becomes transformed into effects linked to nation-states, which are then viewed as their causes. This is what I mean by nationalization—the ongoing eclipsing of the actions of nonnational social relations and their representation as effects of national social relations.

There are two points to make here. First, the nationalization of the past is a virtually inevitable product of how we come to know about it through the archive. Da Cunha could perhaps imagine a future Pan-American anti-imperialism, but he could only do it through the Brazilianization of the palm trees that grew in Curanja, which later became part of Peru. The past of Southwestern Amazonia comes to us almost exclusively from an archive that is constructed in explicitly nationalist terms. It is infernally difficult to think beyond that framing of the past to the simple realization that in 1865 Curanja was, quite literally, nowhere, insofar as no document had yet been produced that could retrospectively tell us where it was. We have no testimony from the indigenous people I have identified as key agents in this history. For example, in Buenaño’s report of the “Mixed Commission,” there is a photograph of Scharff’s house, where that dinner took place (see Figure 1). In the foreground there is a large group of Piro people. If, as suggested above, the anonymous six polers immolated in Santa Rosa were Piro men, these people in the photograph were their relatives and presumably had strong opinions about these murders. But we know nothing about those opinions or of their consequences. It is not simply that they were systematically erased from the documentation, but that their own descendants had forgotten them, or had chosen not to tell me or anyone else about them.



Figure 1: Piro workers at Carlos Scharff's house in Curanja, 1905
[Anonymous 1906: between pages 58 and 59]

TRANSPORT, MEDIA, AND NATIONALIZATION

Benedict Anderson (1991) argued for the centrality of print media in the genesis and maintenance of the nation-state, in the manner in which local languages—newly reified in writing—gave readers a sense of an imagined community. For example, reading the Bible in German gave the reader imaginary access to a community that was greater than the village, town, or city in which that reader lived, yet smaller and more intimate, more human, than the shared humanity that the Bible proposes. For Anderson, print media are potent due to their transportability and their proliferation. A printed Bible in German can, at relatively low cost, be transported pretty much anywhere, connecting distant locales that would prove prohibitively expensive if bodies had to be transported instead. The very reproducibility of print media and the fact that reproduction costs drop dramatically with print, allow media to proliferate in an exponential rise in apparent personal social relations. It is a very seductive vision, with hot metal as the origin of all the pleasures and terrors of nationalism.

I have the almost visceral sense that Anderson is wrong. I am confirmed in this suspicion by Anderson's remarkably frank admission in the revised edition of *Imagined Communities*, that Brazil constitutes an exception to

his general theory. Brazil is remarkable, I agree, but any general theory of nationalism that considers Brazil an ignorable exception has something very seriously wrong with it. Against Anderson, I suggest that print media are central to nation-states because of the way that they can concretely transport and proliferate specific local class interests. Print media allow a dinner in Curanja, itself no big deal to those not present and not invited, to move to Rio de Janeiro, to there record the exemplary offense against the Peruvian nation by a Brazilian national. But Da Cunha's piece also potentially proliferates his fervent patriotic offense into the separate personal worlds of his readers among the reading classes of that locale, and hence out into a wider social world defined as "Brazilian." It is a nationalization.

A good example of this is that the frontier between Peru and Brazil is not really in the Purús area. It is primarily in a series of inscribed documents in Rio de Janeiro and in Lima (and elsewhere), that is, in metropolitan centers of calculation, to use Latour's apt expression (1988). To be realized in the Purús, the frontier has to be transported from these maps, written descriptions and so forth as orders to soldiers, police and border guards who have to be sent to live in specific posts there to realize the location of the frontier as a physical reality. But, they are not necessarily taken very seriously by local people. In 1987, I was travelling down the Purús River in what is now Brazil. An old rubber tapper told me about the border dispute between Peru and Brazil, "The War of Santa Rosa" as he called it, which he had witnessed on that river as a boy. He told me the war had cost twenty-one lives. Concluding his story, he reflected on what he saw as the pointless loss of this human life, and said: *"A verdade é que esa terra nem é o Perú nem o Brazil. E a terra deles, é dos índios"* ("The truth is that this land is neither Peru nor Brazil. This is their country, it is the land of the indigenous people"). Similarly, Pancho, a local Cashinahua leader, told me that when he crossed the frontier and the soldiers asked for his documents, he replied, *"Esa é a minha terra, não a sua, e não preciso de pedir permiso prá viajar nela!"* ("This is my land, not your land, and I do not need to ask for permission to travel in it"). He continued, saying that the soldiers accepted his argument.

"PURÚS SONG" REVISITED

"Purús Song," by contrast, expresses a longing for what I want to call a "tribalization," that is, a desire to live social relations at a certain ("tribal") scale (Gow 2001). It takes a series of lived experiences of suffering and

transforms them into a sociable drinking song. Specific experiences of anger, violence, revenge, and grief are evacuated of their specific emotional content for specific people, and are generalized as an absurd song about an absurd emotion. The suffering that the song details is located far away, over there on the Purús river, not here where we are getting drunk and making merry. The painful experiences of those Piro people who went through those events have been surpassed, and are now remembered only in a humorous song. Events and their attendant emotions, now no longer ongoing, are being actively overcome and rendered forgettable.

I think that there is still more to this process of tribalization, for it also seems to have expanded into the very genre in which it occurred. As noted, Piro men no longer sing *jeji shikale* ("men's songs"). The corresponding active genres of "shaman's songs" and "women's songs" help us here. When a shaman sings *kagonchi shikale* ("shaman's songs"), he very strongly specifies himself as a shaman with the capacity of a transformed human, a human who is now a supernatural being. When women sing *suxo shikale* ("women's songs"), they strongly specify themselves as Piro women, speakers of *yiner-tokanu* ("human language"), and as sexually active lovers of men and potential or actual mothers of Piro children. Similarly, if Piro men sang *jeji shikale* ("men's songs"), they would strongly specify themselves as Piro men, that is, as aggressive, confrontational, and vindictive in their relations with other Piro men. If, as argued above, "men's songs" were composed to quote and ridicule other Piro men as men, it would seem that Piro men came to dislike doing this. The genre was, so to speak, too dangerously historical for Piro men, calling up the past in the form of unfinished cycles of male rivalry. No longer being actively composed, these songs survive only in the sung discourse of old women.

I refer to "men's songs," and their disappearance as a genre, as "tribalizations" because both the songs, and their disappearance, take the potentially dangerous ongoing ramifications of the past and neutralize them. They smooth out the ramifications of events from the past, ramifications that threaten to proliferate into present social relations and destroy them. Proliferating ramifications heat things up and present Piro people with an image of themselves as a "hot society." In order to retain the desired scale of their social relations, Piro people have to get rid of history and even of the means of forgetting it made possible in song.

Overing's *The Piaroa*, as with so much of her work, is about the positive of what initially strikes us as absence. In that book, she shows that symmetric alliance among the Piaroa does not link groups constituted by other principles such as descent, but rather is the fundamental constitutive principle of the local groups themselves. The "absence" of descent groups

in everyday Piaroa life is not a negative, another of the multitude of things that most people have but which Piaroa and other indigenous Amazonian peoples lack. She shows that it is a positive thing—an aesthetic and political choice—to live socially in this manner. The Piaroa are well aware that other choices are possible—and were, or are, enacted by others (the gods in mythic times, white people, indigenous neighbors, the dead, et cetera)—but they (the Piaroa) live differently. Much had been written by anthropologists about bilateral cross-cousin marriage as a variant of human kinship, but Overing was certainly the first to show that it could articulate a coherent political philosophy. In doing so, she opened a totally new way of thinking about indigenous Amazonian societies.

Tribalizations are commitments to a certain scale. As Overing's Piaroa informant noted: "A very powerful thinker can see all the world as one place ... " This ability is, of course, elaborated further in the quotation as what we might think of as the disease known as paranoia. Reading Da Cunha's "It happened in Curanjá," as he describes that one dinner with ever escalating potentials for discord and offense, and then sees the very trees as speaking of their love of a homeland that bureaucratic diplomacy would subsequently deny them, we see that the author is clearly paranoid by the Piaroa definition. It has taken the long work of anthropology, including Overing's prolonged and profound reflections on the Piaroa, to discover what Da Cunha could not know. It appears to me that wise political advice could have been had from those "savages" who surrounded that house as he sat down to dine.

NOTES

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294 *Peter Gow*

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