

Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 3

June 2008

On Whitten's "Interculturality and the Indigenization of Modernity"

Tristan Platt

University of St Andrews, tp@st-andrews.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Platt, Tristan (2008). "On Whitten's "Interculturality and the Indigenization of Modernity"," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol6/iss1/3>

This Article with Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

COMMENTARY AND DEBATE: On Whitten's "Interculturality and the Indigenization of Modernity"

TRISTAN PLATT
University of St Andrews
tp@st-andrews.ac.uk

I had imagined Norman Whitten's article to be a contribution to overcoming the persistent academic essentialization of "Amazon" versus "Andean" civilizations (derived from colonial stereotyping and Steward's "culture-areas"); and to be sure his projection of the Canelos Quichua is rich with frontier-crossings. Moreover, read from the Queshuaymara southlands of Charcas (where I work), this article reverberates with unexploited comparative possibilities. But the piece is weakened by the rhetoric of inadequately theorized "indigeneity." Amidst some conceptual confusion (e.g. ethnogenesis as a-culturation) and even Aunt Sallies (did anyone deny the "braidedness" of the Jivaro and the Canelos Quichua?), Whitten invites us to rediscover in Canelos the "deep metaphors" of "indigenusness itself," and warns us against transforming these "systems of signs and symbols" into "a western mode" (he makes much use of Sullivan [1988]). He opposes "indigenous hermeneutics" to "the Western hermetics [sic] of unified developmentalism and systemic binaries of savage and semi-civilized" (see below). He appeals to "ethnogenetic interculturality" to explain why Canelos Quichua are "indigenous modernizers" (like so many others since the sixteenth century), but does not define his terms, except to emphasize the unified integrity of once multiple but now (apparently) solidary Canelos.

The text moves between polemics, political correctness and advocacy, interspersed with some suggestive ideas. Whitten has made important contributions since 1968 to our knowledge of Ecuadorean forest *runas*. At the same time, he insists on the right of the Canelos Quichua to "self-essentialism" as against (historical) "hybridity" without explaining why these are supposed to be incompatible. In swashbuckling style, he lashes out against conceptual (and even moral) defects attributed to colleagues.

In the end, indigenous modernity seems to consist of the runas' "coeval juxtaposition" of themselves with the "dominant system" (p. 24), and their (apparent) rejection of the capitalist market (cf. p. 13). We also hear that, during the 1992 march, they wound up to the highlands like an anaconda to "penetrate" the highland nation, promising a "dangerous rebirth." The Indian movement is even said to have the same relationship to the Nation as the Moon's sister to her brother-lover: on identifying him, catastrophe is unleashed. But Whitten also says the march was to "avoid catastrophe," and reminds us of the belief in the re-assembly of the snake's cut-up head and body, or "Tupaj Amarun" as a promise of renewal (*pachakuti*); although, for all his invocation of the domestic fertility of the anaconda-penis, it is not clear what shape that millennial renewal might take, beyond the rebirth of a "healthy future."

"Tupaj Amarun" is clearly a transformation of other renewal ideas, such as the Tupaq Katari reassembly tradition down south (Thompson 2002), raising questions of North-South comparison that are submerged by his emphasis on the primarily East-West axis of his Ecuadorean forest people. Such an axis can also be found in southern pie-de-monte groups, such as the Chimane (Daillant 2003), sometimes even extending to the Pacific coast (cf. Smith 2006, on the Amuesha); and both Inca and non-Inca highland groups also use the East-West orientation (e.g. the Aymara "path of the dead" across the cordillera to the red-pepperfields of Arica and Tacna). But the North-South axis is not simply an Inca overlay, as Whitten suggests. It can also be found in pre-Inca linguistic and social movements, such as the southwards march of Aymara from the Peruvian central sierra (Cerrón-Palomino 2000) or pilgrimages to cult centres such as Chavín, Tiwanaku or Copacabana (Bouysse-Cassagne 1988; Burger 1992; Albaracín-Jordán 1996), as well as in maritime movements on the Pacific coast, which may have reached as far as Mexico (Marcos 2002). Whitten himself suggests that Canelos Quichua is a peripheral Quechua coming north-west from San Martín, Perú (with Mannheim 1991). A lot more linguistic and archaeological work is needed for these crosscutting flows to be identified and disentangled.

There is confusion between native and analysts' models, perhaps the price of the author's polemical style. He denounces the use by ethnographers of the contrast between tame (*manso*) and wild (*bravo*) Indians, for example. But these are colonial categories, which refer to different histories and groups, and their use (even without inverted commas) simply reflects a sourced historical perspective; moreover, the tame/wild opposition is also Amerindian (see for instance the *uywal/kburu* antinomy in Macha, Platt *in press*). For Whitten, however, all indigenous groups should be

presented in terms that reflect their essential, "long-durational" integrity. Their historical roots may be multiple (he dedicates a section for the Canelos Quichua), but these are overcome in the ethnogenetic unity of their "melding." The result is the dualistic set-up between anti-capitalist "indigenes" and capitalist Western nation, as mentioned above; and this obscures the complex relationships between "indigenes" (e.g. with the Jívaro), as well as their other dialogues with mestizos and créoles (though we do hear briefly of the "time of Alfaro").

Inter-indigenous relationships crystallize in the tension between Jívaro and Canelos Quichua ideas of time, barely mentioned by Whitten, although Anne-Christine Taylor (2007) has argued that each has a different but complementary "régime of historicity," the first rooted in bravado declarations by "big men" of present and future triumphs, the second in the deep-historical tripartite scheme wellknown (with variations) in other regions (and sometimes influenced by the Joachimite schema of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, beloved of the Franciscans and others). Taylor further argues that Jivaroans can transform into historical Quichuas, at the risk of illness—and then back again, as it were to recover their health. For Whitten it is the tripartite scheme that enables his indigenes to modernize. One wonders how those with other "régimes of historicity" perform in this scheme since, for Whitten, historicity itself is only possible when "high salience is given to past events and people in indigenous discourse" (p. 22)—which threatens to leave the Jívaro without any "régime of historicity" at all.

The text promises, then, to subvert the Andes-Amazon "binary opposition," but falls short on several fronts. The possibility of finding a vantage point from which we might see beyond the opposition, or see it as part of a wider, continental system, is not addressed, any more than the "system of historicities" to which Quichua and Jívaro belong (see Taylor's comment). Whitten leaves the last word in the mouths of Quichua "spokespeople for those in the maw of Western modernity." Yet he also mentions themes that invite comparative discussion by both highland and lowland spokespeople and scholars: the effect of the flood of tears and the rising of the Sun, as founders of new human civilizations; the recognition of the homes of the pre-diluvial ancestors; the washing downriver of the old people, like the Chullpas of the South (Wachtel 1990), and the Chunchos of Quispecanhis (Sendon, in press); the fall from the sky of Jilucu Squash Woman to splat the earth with her faecal clay, just as the seeds of Andean agriculture burst from the belly of the similarly splatted fox; the insistence on female pottery as equivalent to male shamanism (what links exist between pottery and kneading in Canelos, and midwifery and spinning

life as female equivalents of shamanism in the Southern highlands, Platt 2001); the Sun's smudging of the Moon's face with ash in the Inca tradition (Sarmiento de Gamboa 1943[1572], ch.7), which transforms the daubing with genipa of the Moon's face in Canelos and elsewhere; the multiple forms of tripartite time and the return of the past....

Finally, Whitten writes of "Western assumptions of structure standing apart from history and events" (p. 23-24). This is of course a travesty: many European thinkers (including Lévi-Strauss) have paid much attention to the relation between "history, structure and events." Whitten wants to recover other forms of political action and agency in his account of the anaconda's march to Quito: his aim is to get other people to listen to the Indians "in their own terms." But the recovery of some sort of agency does not mean that people stop "cultivating their differences" in changing historical contexts. Perhaps the question is not whether people have a *right* to self-essentialize themselves in time, as Whitten (quoting Marshall Sahlins) insists, but why, historically, some people do (such as the English, or the Canelos *Quichua*), while others apparently don't (such as the Roma/gypsies, and the Jívaro).

REFERENCES CITED

- Albarracín-Jordán, Juan
 1996 *Tiwanaku: Arqueología Regional y Dinámica Segmentaria*. La Paz: Plural Editores.
- Bouysse-Cassagne, Thérèse
 1988 *Lluvias y Cenizas: Dos Pachacuti en la Historia*. La Paz: HISBOL.
- Burger, Richard L.
 1992 *Chavin and the Origins of Andean Civilization*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Cerrón-Palomino, Rodolfo
 2000 "El Origen Centroandino del Aimara." In *Huari y Tiwanaku: Modelos vs. Evidencias*. Peter Kaulicke and William H. Isbell, editors. Lima: Boletín de Arqueología PUCP No 4.
- Daillant, Isabelle
 2003 *Sens Dessus Dessous: Organisation Sociale et Spatiale des Chimane d'Amazonie Bolivienne*. Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie.
- Mannheim, Bruce
 1991 *The Language of the Inka since the European Invasion*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Marcos, Jorge G.
 2002 "Mullo y Pututo para el Gran Caimán: Un Modelo para el Intercambio entre Mesoamérica y Andinoamérica." *Gaceta*

Arqueológica Andina No 26. Lima: Instituto Andino de Estudios Arqueológicos.

Platt, Tristan

2001 "El Feto Agresivo. Parto, Formación de la Persona y Mitohistoria en los Andes." *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* LVIII-2. Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos.

2009 (In press). "From the Island's Point of View: Warfare and Transformation in an Andean Vertical Archipelago." *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 95(I).

Sarmiento de Gamboa, Pedro

1943 [1572] *Historia de los Incas*. Buenos Aires: Ángel Rosenblat, Emecé Editores.

Sendon, Pablo.

2009 (In press). "Los Ayllus de la Porción Oriental del Departamento del Cuzco." *Boletín del Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos*. Lima-Paris.

Smith, Richard Chase

2006 "Where our Ancestors Once Trod: Amuesha Territoriality and Sacred Landscape in the Andean Amazon of Central Peru." In *Être Indien dans les Amériques: Spoliations et Résistance—Mobilisations Ethniques et Politiques du Multiculturalisme*. Christian Gros and Marie-Claude Stigler, editors, pp. 69–84. Paris: Institut des Amériques, IHEAL-CREDAL. Université Paris III.

Sullivan, Laurence

1988 *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions*. New York: Macmillan.

Taylor, Anne-Christine

2007 "Sick of History: Contrasting Regimes of Historicity in the Upper Amazon." In *Time and Memory in Indigenous Amazonia*. Carlos Fausto and Michael Heckenberger, editors, pp. 133–168. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Thompson, Sinclair

2002 *We Alone Shall Rule: Native Andean Politics in the Age of Insurgency*. Madison: Wisconsin University Press.

Wachtel, Nathan

1990 *Le Retour des Ancêtres*. Paris: Gallimard.