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Ambiguous Environments [1]

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The title of my talk can be understood in a number of ways quite simply because the environment is ambiguous in a number of ways. I am going to start off talking about one of the ways that is not the main theme of this talk. It is often claimed that all anthropological generalizations are either trite or untrue. It is the former, I think, to say that all peoples have a degree of ambivalence about aspects of their environment and some of the objects in it. Our divided attitude to the motorcar is perhaps a prime example; an incredibly convenient means of transport that has revolutionized life and at the same time is the killer of people and the polluter of the atmosphere. The focus of such ambivalent attitudes to objects is clearly culturally specific. Among many native groups of Amazonia it is manufactured goods that hold this position. For example, the Wakuénai of the upper Rio Negro consider metal objects, because of the heat required in their manufacture, to be intrinsically hot and, unless suitable precautions are taken, this can be transferred to infants in the form of fever (Hill 1993:104-105). Nor do I think it is difficult to understand why. The attractiveness of items such as metal cutting tools has to be offset against the disease and consequent death transmitted along with them.

What the Indians fear in their environments may or may not coincide with our concerns. Here are some examples I noted among the Trio of Suriname, some of which are not difficult to appreciate, some of which differ from the perceptions of other native groups, and some of which seem unlikely to form any genuine threat. The fear of being benighted, unprepared, in the forest is something easily understood for its straightforward physical discomfort and fear of wild animals to which one may also have to add that of mystical dangers as well. On the other hand I never heard the Trio worry about snakes although they are recognized as a danger and cases of snake bite and death from them are not that uncommon. The snake seems to occupy a similar position in the environment to the motorcar in ours. We know that it kills but I rarely hear anyone express anxiety about it; motorcars represent an acceptable risk. The Trio are little concerned about being bitten by piranha (those scourges of the more lurid travel books) and they claim no fear of being attacked by large herds of peccary, a threat often reported from elsewhere. On the other hand, when in the forest, especially when camping

overnight and a storm arises, they worry greatly about being crushed by a falling tree which seems in actuarial terms a rather improbable accident.

It is not, however, at this practical and mundane level that I want to talk about the environment of the native Amazonians but rather about more fundamental ambiguities intrinsic to it. It may be argued that from the Amerindians' point of view there is nothing ambiguous about their environment and by so describing it I am imposing my own misunderstanding. In a sense this is right, and for the Amerindian all parts of the environment form a single entity, but at the same time, I will argue, there are for Amerindians basic ambiguities in their view of the environment. To do this I must look at the nature of the environment. It must be stressed from the outset that I am not equating the environment with nature and the physical world but with a much larger and all-embracing universe, the cosmos. This jump from environment to cosmos is no sleight of hand because if we take environment to mean the conditions and influences under which people live, then in Lowland South America it must include the perceived and the conceived, the seen and the imagined.

To generalize and simplify, the cosmos of most native peoples of the Tropical Forest may be represented as a sphere, with the subject at the center. You may find it easier to imagine it as a world formed along two axes. A vertical axis which joins the earth to the sky and the underworld, and a horizontal axis at the terrestrial level. The subject is located at the conjunction of the two axes.

At the horizontal level the world is not uncommonly conceived as a series of concentric spheres which are populated by a range of beings: human, animal and others. Let me for a moment concentrate on the horizontal or terrestrial axis at it is the one that most closely coincides, interacts and forms part of the physical environment. An ideal model of this world is formed by concentric circles, each circle occupied by or associated with some stereotyped person or creature. Thus the Jê-speaking Suyá recognize six concentric zones from the "center of the plaza" to the "distant forest", each associated with a particular type of person or activity, ranging from men to monsters (Seeger 1981:68-70).

However models such as this are just that and in practice and on the ground the facts of geography and the events of history distort the symmetry of its pattern. A river which provides an easy route may extend one sphere a long way in a certain direction whereas the presence of hostile neighbors may compress it in another. However the classification of the world in this way between near and far is not simply an empty and sterile exercise like the mediaeval cartographer's loathing for empty spaces. The monsters and unknown people inhabiting the furthest space have a part to play in the life of those at the center. In order to illustrate this I want to turn to the 1985 work of Bruce Albert on the Yanomami. I am doing this not only because it is an excellent example of the case I want to

make but also because it still remains in the form of a doctoral thesis and it is not as well known as it deserves to be.

Another good reason for taking this example is because the Yanomami have been at the center of a long drawn out battle between two schools of American anthropology, both of which seem to believe that answers are to be found in the collection of ever more detailed statistical data.

The Yanomami of Brazil, in a way similar to the Suyá, have a concentrically constructed world. The concentric zones are inhabited respectively by coresidents, friends and allies, enemies, potential enemies and unknown people. Albert has shown that these groups are distinguished not only by particular configurations of exchanges and conflicts but also by the different types of mystical attack, and he has managed to quantify the different results that are conceived to emanate from them. He takes the analysis further by showing how enemies, possible enemies and unknown peoples are tied into a system of reciprocal predation, mystical or actual, which is expressed through the notion of symbolic exo-cannibalism. The putrefaction and decay of a corpse exposed in or near its own village are seen as the consumption of the flesh by the predator. Thus the first stage of the funerary ceremony, the exposure of the corpse, is linked with the wider set of concentric relations. The second stage consists of the cremation of the remains and the actual endo-cannibalistic consumption of the ashes of the bones mixed in drink. This ceremony involves members of the inner concentric zones, coresidents and friends and allies. Notions of revenge (magical or actual) involve the whole cosmos in a system of reciprocal predation.

There are several points that arise from this particular case study. First, the Yanomami have received as much attention as any people of the South American Lowlands by anthropologists of environmental determinist and socio-biological persuasions. One side claimed that warfare was selected by these people because it successfully regulated the balance between population and crucial ecological variables, in particular the protein supply. The other side argued that the Yanomami's behavior was to be understood in terms of the maximization of inclusive fitness. The ferocity with which the debate was waged was enough to make the stereotypical "fierce" Yanomami look pacifist. Only, however, in the most cursory way did any of the anthropologists engaged take into account the cosmological ideas within which Albert has shown the Yanomami to operate. A failure that seems to me on a par with an economist trying to explain the workings of a market economy without being aware of the principles of supply and demand. A second point is that while part of the Yanomami environment is unknown it still has an influence on the ordering of everyday practical pursuits. Third, it is clear that for the Yanomami the environment is ambivalent. Affines may become

enemies and enemies may become friends and affines. The relationships of inside to outside are in a constantly shifting pattern but remain reliant on one another.

This is an example of an ambivalent aspect of the native Amazonian's environment that has been drawn attention to on various occasions. It is the creative complementarity of what I shall call in shorthand, the like and the other. However, the original stark terms of concentric dualism where the former is associated with the inside, consanguinity, familiarity and safety, and the latter with the outside, affinity, the unknown and danger, is becoming more nuanced. Descola (1992) has recently drawn attention to the contrast between the Tukanoan Desana's relationship of reciprocity with the other and the Achuar's relationship of predation with the other. Even so these different ways of treating the other both rest on the same principle; creativity or social and cosmic reproduction depends on the intermixture of like and other.

Now let us turn to another ambiguity in the Amerindian's environment: parallel with the visible world there is an invisible environment that is just as real, if not more so. There are difficulties in dealing with this world in general terms as there is considerable variation from one account to another. This is not too surprising. It is more than likely that conceptions and perceptions of this invisible reality vary from one group to another. Informants' accounts of this world are likely to be inconsistent just because of the unseen nature of what they are describing. The language used by different ethnographers is likely to vary as a result of their understanding of what they are told but cannot see. Finally our own language is not well equipped for describing the phenomenon. In fact the trouble starts with that word and unless one is careful one finds oneself embroiled in an argument about the natives' inability to distinguish between the phenomenal and the noumenal. I do not think that this distinction is relevant for most peoples of Lowland South America. I would argue that the invisible aspects of the world are as much part of the phenomenal world as the visible part. If a particular person has had no direct experience of it, it does not deny it. Experience of it requires specific competence, an ability to see. I have difficulty in hearing high notes, but just because I cannot hear them it does not mean either that they do not exist or that others cannot hear them.

To some extent the invisible world is a sort of counterpart to the visible world; in other words the beings and objects of the visible world have counterparts in the invisible world. There are also creatures that belong exclusively to the invisible world; that is they have no visible world counterpart although this does not mean that they may not become visible from time to time, normally in monstrous form. Furthermore, unlike the unknown and unseen aspects of the visible world, this invisible world is not at a distance but immediate and encompassing. Finally it impinges on every facet of life. The explanation of what happens in the visible world is contingent on the invisible world where the

principles of cause and effect operate. I will return to this shortly, but first I want to explore further the ambiguous nature of the visible and invisible worlds.

I have used plural there because there is evidence to suggest that the Amerindians do see their world as in some sense divided. I do not mean by this that they do not see their world as unified, merely that there is more than one aspect that makes up the whole. We have already seen the vital distinction which exists between the like and the other. There is also a clear understanding of the difference between the visible and invisible aspects of the world. A good example of this is the expression used by the Trio to describe where the shaman's soul (for want of another word) goes when he is in a trance. It is said that he has gone "on the other side". For the Achuar the worlds are distinguished by whether dialogue between beings exists. The animal with which one has been conversing in a dream does not disappear on waking but becomes incomprehensible because of the change in the level of reality (Descola 1994:100).

Another feature is that the native Amazonian inhabits a highly transformational world. Things are not always what they seem to be for there is no necessary stability of form. For the Trio, the caterpillar is the symbol of transformation. They treat these creatures in a very circumspect manner. It is true that contact with many species of caterpillars leaves a most unpleasant hurt so that the Trio's behavior might be understood as a purely practical precaution. But their reaction to these creatures is clearly different from that to other animals which are capable of giving far more serious, even fatal, injuries. It is much more one of awe or dread, in the biblical sense that encompasses the notion of reverence. It is the lifecycle of this creature that impresses. But this is only a single example of the power of the invisible world to present itself in all sorts of guises. When a man meets a jaguar in the forest whether it is really a jaguar or a spirit dressed up in jaguar's clothes is something that the outcome of the encounter or the behavior of the animal alone will reveal.

Spirits too are ambiguous and the Trio term for spirit reveals this connotation. The term for spirit is *wiripě* and a commonly used word is *wiripěme* (literally "spirit being"). Whereas the missionaries, perhaps for obvious reasons, have taken the word to mean "bad" there is abundant evidence that "ambiguous" would be a more accurate rendering. Trio spirits are generically neither good nor bad. The outcome of an encounter with a spirit is always uncertain. Spirits may help or harm, and it is just this quality that also characterizes the shaman. Shamanic power can be used to kill or cure and this is no surprise since the power is drawn from the invisible world. The essential shamanic quality is to see. For the shaman, the invisible world is visible. I think the title, *Voir, Savior, Pouvoir* of Jean-Pierre Chaumeil's book on Yagua shamanism sums this up perfectly. From sight comes knowledge and from knowledge power, and that power is among other things transformational. One example of this will have to suffice; the Piaroa

consider jungle animals as of “the same kind” as themselves and their consumption akin to endo-cannibalism and incest. This is overcome by the shaman who, in his nightly chants, performs a crucial act in the preparation of food, a sort of parallel cuisine, whereby he transforms inedible meat into edible vegetable, matter of a different kind and thus, like affines, consumable (Overing 1998:93-94).

I now want to turn to some of the implications of what I have been saying about the Native Amazonian environment for what might look like more practical and everyday concerns. Too much of the developmental and ecological work carried out in Lowland South America has concentrated almost exclusively on the physical, visible and measurable environment. This is not too surprising since little will have prepared those involved for the pervasive influence of the immaterial world. Their theories and models are not designed to incorporate the reality of the Native Amazonians’ world and accordingly they inevitably distort what they are designed to explain. Even if aware of the invisible world they may judge it safely ignored as a mystical gloss that is of no concern to those interested in the “real” world. Whereas it would be equally wrong to claim that accounts of the visible world are simply coded ecological knowledge, myths and shamanism are often constructed round an understanding of the principles and process of the physical world that are not entirely incompatible with our own. The shamanic worldview is a cultural elaboration but that does not mean that it is wrong. In other words what is missing from many analyses is the spiritual, invisible, unquantifiable facets of the world which the native peoples of the region inhabit. It is about this aspect of the environment that I wish to talk now in order to provide some counterweight to the emphasis on the former.

As an example of what I mean I would like to refer to an article by Henning Siverts from 1991 about technology and knowledge among the Jívaro, more specifically known as the Aguaruna of Peru. Siverts does note that women take pride in their knowledge and ownership of a range of different varieties of their staple crop, sweet manioc, but leaves it at that. While one has no reason to criticize the work as far as it goes, it does not go far enough and so ends up by giving a distorted view of what is going on. By confining himself to a consideration of the tangible features of the Aguaruna world, Siverts’ understanding of women’s interests and attitudes is sadly incomplete. A much more balanced picture of the Aguaruna’s ideas about manioc cultivation is to be found in Michael Brown’s *Tsewa’s gift*. To put it in Brown’s words:

To a scientific observer, the Aguaruna horticultural system is remarkably productive and resistant to the climatic fluctuations, plant diseases, and pests that make plan cultivation so risky in the temperate zone. Not so for the Aguaruna gardener, who feels that without magical intervention the success of her crops is always in doubt. The contradiction between garden productivity and the apparent anxiety of the producers is mystifying as

long as we envision economic or botanical facts as being separate from culturally constituted emotions, understandings, and strategies of production. (Brown 1998:87)

While an Aguaruna woman has command of all the botanical knowledge and technological know-how to cultivate manioc, these are not enough. The manioc plant, along with other root crops, is regarded as having a soul and during the early months of growth is extremely dangerous since it becomes thirsty and unless the thirst is quenched by the appropriate means it may drink the blood of people passing through the garden. The appropriate means is just one of a whole range of vital instrumental procedures that do not normally fall under the rubric of technology. These techniques include activities which materialists would dismiss as magical, and thus ineffective and unnecessary.

That the Aguaruna are not exceptional in their attitude to gardening is completely confirmed by Descola's account of their Jivaroan neighbors, the Achuar. As with the Aguaruna and as is generally the case throughout Lowland South America, Achuar horticulture when looked at by the outsider as a purely productive technique is extremely skilful, efficient and reliable. The Achuar, however, see manioc cultivation as a high-risk endeavor surrounded by danger. It is hedged in by ritual precautions because the necessary condition for successful gardening is the maintenance of good relationships with Nunkui, the creator and mother of all cultivated plants. Nunkui is characterized by what Descola describes as a "unity of being and multiplicity of concrete manifestations" (Descola 1994:198) which allows her potentially to be present in all gardens and her presence is essential if a garden is to thrive. The management of a good, well-kept and productive garden does not depend simply on the woman's technical skill but also on her ability to attract Nunkui into her garden. This she does through her knowledge of a repertoire of magical songs.

As with the Aguaruna, manioc is thought to have a soul and to live a family life similar to that of the Achuar, and Nunkui stands together with the garden's owner in a relationship of co-maternity to the manioc. The Achuar also perceive manioc as blood sucking and the potential danger they represent can only be kept in check by the magical songs of the garden's owner. Since these songs are individual and idiosyncratic it is only the woman whose garden it is that is able to control her "children". In other words, not only is a garden dangerous for others but potentially dangerous even for its owner. An economic activity that appears on the face of it to be straightforward, secure and relatively undemanding, is turned into one that is potentially dangerous and requires specialist esoteric knowledge. One effect of this is that it greatly enhances the status of female labor. Not surprisingly the women with the best and most productive gardens are regarded as those most endowed with an ability to communicate with Nunkui. One may add to this the fact that those with the largest and best gardens work no longer hours than those with the smallest and worst. What differentiates the

women is skill and in Achuar terms this is not just what we would call technical know-how.

Nor are the Jívaroan alone in perceiving what we see as purely technical activities as consisting of far deeper significance. To stay with manioc for a moment, we may take the case of the root's preparation among the Barasana of the Northwest Amazon as described by Christine Hugh-Jones. Here a daily and apparently mundane process is ordered by a set of ideas at the very heart of the Barasana worldview. As she writes "the technologically essential elements refer metaphorically to the processes of reproduction of social groups". It is a female counterpart of the main male reproductive ritual, the Yurupary rites. Later she explains that:

Pirá-paraná Indians are concerned with the separation and combination of the different elements that are involved in the life process both of the individual and of society – between the sexes, between opposed descent groups, between the natural and social worlds and so on...[M]anioc production is yet another such separating and combining process. (Hugh-Jones 1985:190, 192).

As an aside, we may also note in this description a further case of something very similar to the creative interaction of the 'like' and the 'other' that was discussed earlier.

As an example of another technique, we may look at the basket weaving of the Yekuana in Venezuela as described by David Guss. For the Yekuana basketmaking defines the very nature of Yekuananess. It is not simply a technical activity for in the course of learning the technique a man is initiated into more esoteric skills so that the best basketmakers are by definition the most ritually knowledgeable (Guss 1989:70). To weave is not simply to make a basket but simultaneously to recreate the universe. Once again a mundane practical activity is only assessable and understandable if allowance is made for the full meaning of the context in which it occurs.

Now from a materialist point of view it may be argued that these aspects of various practical activities can be safely discounted since it is merely a cultural elaboration that in the end makes no difference to the outcome. It is just this attitude that I wish to contest. If we are to understand the motivations of the native Amazonian, construct ethnoecological or ethnoeconomic models, we cannot leave out of the equation the cultural logic which is central to their own ordering of economic activity. To do so would be the equivalent of leaving out some key notion in our own economic models which are equally cultural constructs. It seems to me that the failure to do so is the equivalent of an Amerindian anthropologist studying modern farming in the Western world and paying no attention to such ideas as profit and loss or capital investment, but instead concentrating on the harvest festival.

I hope I have made the case for greater attention to be paid to that aspect of the environment that is not susceptible to direct observation, scientific or otherwise. If we do not we are being arrogant and patronizing and falling into the omissions of which we are prone to accuse others. Nor should it be forgotten that anthropological studies from all over the world have demonstrated that it is often very difficult to separate the rational from the mystical or the ritual from the technical act.

The theme of this congress and thus of the plenary sessions is the threatened peoples and environments of the Americas, and I have not yet touched upon it. However, as I hope you will appreciate by now, I regard what I have been talking about as much part of the Native Amazonians' environment as those aspects of their world that leap more obviously to mind and sight. But is this invisible environment as threatened as the physical environment? It might be argued that those most concerned with changing native ideas, as opposed to exploiting labor or land, are missionaries. Nearly quarter of a century ago, Elmer Miller, writing of the Toba of Argentina, drew attention to the paradox that the effect of evangelization had been to secularize these people. In other words, the Toba worldview was far more "supernaturalistic", as Miller termed it, than that of the Christian missionaries. Alongside spiritual teaching the missionaries introduced economic, medical and educational changes as witnessed by the presence of a store, clinic and school as well as a chapel in the mission compound. In these spheres the missionaries operated almost exclusively with naturalistic explanations whereas the Toba traditionally would have applied supernaturalistic causation. The effect was, he argued, a secularization of Toba ideas. If this is so, the influence of the missionaries is little different from those who seem more directly concerned with the material world by the exploitation of labor and land. Such activity, as the example of the Wakuénai reveals, equally acts to undermine ideas about the nature of causation in the environment.

Today there must be some doubt about how far this process of secularization among the Toba has gone given the continuing importance of shamanism among them. Nor do I think that the evangelization of Native Amazonians inevitably leads to secularization; it depends on the beliefs of the missionaries concerned. In a little known article (because it was published in a relatively obscure journal) I looked at the effects of evangelization by an American fundamentalist mission among the Trio. The missionaries set out to extirpate all activities, such as smoking, drinking, dancing and music, that might have anything to do with Trio beliefs, but they did not suggest that the invisible world that was the focus of those beliefs did not exist for the simple reason that for the missionaries it did exist. The denizens of the Trio invisible world were representatives of Satan and the missionaries' task was to persuade the Indians of this and to introduce them to a new set of omnipotent and beneficent beings. They

also brought with them western economics, education and medicine but what distinguished them from their Argentine counterparts is that, with the possible exception of certain aspects of the economy, they attributed causation to the supernatural, to divine intervention. For example, the Trio, who quickly came to appreciate the effectiveness of Western medicine, were told that its efficacy was in God's keeping and he would withhold it from the sinner. To begin with I was outraged by what seemed to be such a cynical use of medical science in the process of conversion, but came to realize that the missionaries themselves sincerely believed in what they were telling the Trio. Thus, although the missionaries' activities have resulted in considerable cultural change and impoverishment they have not totally undermined the Trio's basic other worldly ideas about causation.

Whereas the invisible environment of the Native Amazonian is undoubtedly fragile and vulnerable to outside influences, it is just possible that it is more resistant than the physical environment. Two recent articles support this position. Albert has shown how a Yanomami shaman has come to understand and object to the activities of the gold miners who invaded that group's territory by traditional ideas into which have been incorporated an external discourse on ethnicity and ecology. Townsley, writing of the Yaminahua of Peru, has noted that whereas most of their traditional socio-political organization has disintegrated, shamanism has flourished. The reason for this, he argues, is that it "has shown an almost infinite capacity to absorb and accommodate the imagery and ideas from the non-indigenous world, re-fashion them and build them into the core of its own practice" (Townsley 1999:451). It would be ironic that if "sustainable development" is more than a political slogan, it only proves feasible in the field of a shamanic political economy. There may seem to be a paradox here that ideas, the physically most unsubstantial part of the environment, are the most perdurable. But that, I think, would come as no surprise to most Native Amazonians.

NOTES

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