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Quem somos nós: os Wari' encontram os Brancos

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BOOK REVIEWS

***Quem somos nós: os Wari' encontram os Brancos.* Aparecida Vilaça. Rio de Janeiro: Editora da UFRJ. 2006. 607 pp., 76 figures, 5 maps, 1 table, bibliography, index. US\$ 54.50 (paper)
ISBN 85-7108-290-1. [<http://www.editora.ufrj.br>]**

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Who we are: the Wari' meet the whites, a free translation of the title of Aparecida Vilaça's most recent book, is an exhaustive ethnography of the Wari' (Pakaa-Nova) Indians from Rondônia, in the southwestern Brazilian Amazonia. It is a result of two decades of a relationship established between the ethnologist and professor of Anthropology at the Museu Nacional (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro) and this Txapakura-speaking society. The central theoretical and analytical axis, through which the ethnographic data is presented and the argument constructed, turn on how *le pensée indigène* responds to Alterity, to "Otherness", in its both internal and external scales and a relational ontology. In other words, Vilaça tries to portray the ways in which the Wari' are responding and constituting themselves through time in contact with other societies, and especially the non-Indians personified by the different social actors who have represented the Brazilian national society in different epochs and under particular ideological strategies of expansion and contact.

Such a portrayal includes the description of the socio-cultural processes of the embodiment of the term *Wari'* – taken as a self-determinant and a self-identifying noun of a collectivity composed, until the pacification phase systematically began in the mid-twentieth century, by several dispersed sub-groups untouched by Western post-Renaissance and especially humanistic conceptions and experiences of alterity based on "identities" or the search for "similarities." This complex mosaic as well as the immanent characteristics of alterity itself provide Vilaça with the frame for understanding contact, as explained in the title her book: of a society that constitutes itself *within* otherness.

Hence, *Quem somos nós* consists of a portrayal of the socio-cultural life and customs of a people which is "constructed" in as much as it attempts to reconstitute the history of contact with the Wari' told from within, from the standpoint of how social constructs we usually term "culture" mediate historical processes, and which result is a *gestalt* pervaded by both ruptures and continuation, by changes and sedimentations, structures and contingencies; a result of both native agencies and forms, which, ultimately, respond to the place this society occupies in local Brazilian history. We are, in other words, given a description of a people from the analytic standpoint that considers categories and social entities as essentially relational and diachronic. Beside the sophisticated and elegant discussion within which the author conducts her analysis – comparing and contrasting her own data with, for instance, theoretic schemes advanced by Lévi-Strauss and Sahlins – Vilaça's study is strongly marked by the fashionable theoretical trend termed Amerindian perspectivism, a re-reading of Lévi-Straussian structuralism devoted to lowland Amazonian societies, developed by her mentor, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, with whom she creatively engages throughout the entire book.

The book is organized in twelve chapters organized into three parts: *Alterando-se* ('Alternating'), *No mito* ('Inside the myth'), and *Queremos gente para nós: the pacification* ('We want People for us: the pacification'). Part I presents Wari' social organization *stricto sensu* (p. 49) through the historical perspective of group formation, migrations and fission, war and alliances with other groups, enemies, and the Brazilians, as well as their relation with the formations of their territories, villages and the passage from sub-groups to a sort of unified society aggregated under the term Wari'. Nonetheless, this description follows a main theoretical focus: to describe and discuss how the Wari' conceptualize and experience otherness, the alien, the enemy, the White man, who, ultimately are amalgamated by the native term, *wijam*, the meanings of which are grounded in the logic of Wari' kinship dynamics, which opposes and approximates – along with the variants of time and space – consanguine kin and affines, affines and *wijam* as potential kin, which, by its turn, are directly related to the social process of consubstantiation of the Other. This process calls attention to the importance of substance and substance transmission, following some Brazilian ethnologists and Brazilianists in the last three decades. Consubstantiation is employed as an analytical concept to identify a native principle that defines their own kind in as much it constructs the relational and temporal foreign/affine/enemy/White/kin, their respective lived social relations, as well as their respective attributed ontological qualities (including their conception of "humanity", "human kind", "nature", predation, cannibalism, the constant need for the socialization of the environment, of things and beings, including the need for their constant subjectivation).

Further, this native principle is presented through detailed ethnographic accounts of the local feasts, commensality, and the role played by the body and native theories of bodylines as a "physical" counterpart of the experienced social relations and social forms along with the group's history of contact with others, and their own historical narratives, based on data that Vilaça collected from non-Indians such as missionaries, government officers, etc.

In Part II, Vilaça takes a different approach in her quest for the native's conceptualization and lived experience of alterity. She presents four Wari' myths that contemplate the question of alterity. Her ultimate aim is to unveil the logical interconnection between myth and historical narratives. In this way she hopes to contribute to Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques* of lowland South-American Indians, especially in their conceptions of otherness regarding the taxonomic position attributed to the White man. In this she follows an established trend in Brazil by represented by, among others, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Vilaça argues that the relation the Wari' establish between mythical and historical narratives/passages follows a logical, rather than a historical, order. "Myth and event are related because they are structurally analogous, and not because the event is confused [by the Wari'] with the mythical episode" (p. 37). According to her, Wari' myths evidence a set of parallel relations between the White man, who is conceived both as enemy and foreign, the dead and the brothers-in-law (p. 342). This categorization stands for both mythic and "real affinity" (p. 342) as well as the types of relationship the Wari' have been establishing with the Brazilians since the latest pacification period. Wari' have had to start living and interact with the "enemy" (affine/White man, etc.), and have had to incorporate and subjectify these types of humans, hence, transforming affine-like relations into kin-like (consanguine) relations. This transformation constitutes the natives' pragmatic response to a *crescendum*, a common history with the Western Other, who were the former (and still potentially) enemies they killed and ate.

Finally, Part III ponders the different phases that constituted the latest systematic attempt of “pacification” of the Wari’ that began at the end of the first half of the twentieth century. While Part III emphasizes the description of the Wari’'s perspectives of such “encounters,” Vilaça also draws on her research data of the Whites’ perspectives. This approach contributes to the reconstruction of Wari’ (more specifically, one of Wari’ sub-group’s) mythic narratives of such events. It is interesting to note that the participation of other “already pacified” Wari’ sub-groups in this pacification phase (and who were mixed with other *wijam* composed by SPI officers, White settlers, a Roman Catholic priest and by Protestant missionaries from the New Tribes Mission in Brazil) was essential for the uncontacted groups’ understanding and provided meaning to the events, since the latter affirmed that the “enemies” were proclaiming they were *Oronao* (one of the pacified Wari’ sub-groups), who were viewed by the former as “distant relatives” they had not seen for a long time.

One major contribution of this section is the description of how the events termed “pacification” have been understood and managed by the Wari’ themselves. Vilaça shows how the Wari’ have pragmatically incorporated Otherness using a cultural repertoire (including mythical narratives and the kinship scheme, both of which are directly related and sustained by the dynamics of consubstantiating the Other, metaphorically or literally transforming them into kin, and resulting in them living a kin-like social relation) that, ultimately, has mediated new socio-historical and politico-economical conjunctures (summarized by the expansion of Brazilian national frontiers) with which the Wari’ actively became part and deliberately took a new strategic position to cope and interact.

Finally, Vilaça’s portrayal reinforces the theoretical proposition that mythical and historical events are complementary forms of social consciousness, whether modern Western or not; their immanence seems to be ontological, even though White’s and Wari’'s versions of the same episode do not necessarily match or are contradictory due to an *a priori* opposition. This leads us to reflect on our own construction of alterity in contemporary ethnology. We have to be careful not to make the other (in this case the Wari’) an Idealized Other, conceptualizing, for instance, *la pensée indigène* as symmetrically inverse of Western reasoning (p. 197), for one may risk denying historicity (here framed more as dynamics and potentiality of alteration over time) to human culture in response to social processes of contact. Therefore we have to take it seriously when the Wari’ say that they are “becoming White,” including that they may be “thinking” as the Whites.

In other words, Vilaça answers the question, “*Quem somos nós?*” by framing mythical and historical consciousnesses as two *complementary* modes for expressing concrete episodes of their social life, both internally and beyond their proper socio-cultural frontiers, so to speak. If there is any weakness in *Quem somos nós*, it is the unresolved tension between these two modes. It remains to be seen whether this problem can be resolved theoretically or through continued empirical research. The great achievement of this book is to call attention to an important phenomenon, and add to our understanding of it. For despite of the structural particularities that characterize and oppose “Myth” and “History,” what seems to be important in observing the Wari’ case, is that agency is present in both modes of consciousness, resulting in something new: “becoming White”! Peter Gow (2001) called our attention to this phenomenon among the Peruvian Piro in *An Amazonian Myth and its History*, and at this point I cannot help but to read Vilaça’s book except in relation to my own research among the Xokleng Indians, Meridional Gê with whom I have worked for last 16 years. They tell me that they want to understand and incorporate the “*sistema do Branco*” (“White

man's system") in order not to be cheated by the latter any longer, especially in a time characterized by massive external interest in and commoditization of their land, resources and "culture." These developments lead me to wonder whether the binary oppositions them/us, nature/culture, and myth/history upon which many influential anthropologists have built supposedly universal theories of alterity are, or are still, operative among some Amerindian groups.

I end with two conclusions that Vilaça herself may not share. First, "alterity", both as a universal human experience and as an anthropological concept to respond to otherness, is contextual and dynamic, thus historically comprised. It has also been the subject of political and ideological disputes throughout centuries in the Western world as well as within anthropology. Second, in a globalized world, the anthropological search for particular cultural logic and non-Western epistemology have to take into consideration that "alterity" nowadays is formulated, empirically experienced and widely expressed worldwide inter-culturally, even among people from Amazonian indigenous societies. If we do not acknowledge the important role of "alterity" in our ethnographic writings, we risk imposing our own epistemologies and ontologies and thus fail to apply anthropology's basic principle of recognizing and bringing to light the "native's point of view." This principle is more important than ever as the natives' perceive and objectify new conjunctures that mediate their present history of contact with non-Indians, even when they themselves claim they are "becoming White." What "White" means for the Warí and for the Xokleng Indians is ontologically different from what it means for us. The "anthropization" of "the White" by non-Western societies seems to me where the ethnological enterprise should be concentrated on nowadays. By doing this, we are also suggesting that we should be aware of and critically examine how ethnological and anthropological knowledge – our knowledge of "the other" – is being produced and by what means and aims it is being constructed.