

**SÉRIE ANTROPOLOGIA**

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**PULP FICTIONS OF INDIGENISM**  
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## Pulp Fictions of Indigenism

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### An American Orientalism

Were I to write in Portuguese (or in Spanish, had I the skills), I would be hard pressed to justify my use of the concept of Indigenism. While in Latin American countries *indigenismo* invariably means state policy or indigenous organizing against national pressures (see, for instance, Jackson's 1989 definition of Indigenism as "self-conscious indigenism"), what I wish to convey with Indigenism is much more than this. The fact that the word in English has no such connotation helps me delimit my field of interest. As I interpret it, Indigenism comes closer to being a sort of American Orientalism, or, in Coronil's conception, "Occidentalism", that is, "representational practices whose effect is to present non-Western peoples as the Other of a Western self" (Coronil 1997: xi). In the specific case of Brazil, Indigenism is clearly an ideological apparatus which includes not only state policies, but especially the vast repertoire of images, attitudes, and actions that both non-Indians and Indians have produced along the history of the country's interethnic front.

The present analysis is part of a larger project whose main purpose is to understand the Brazilian nation by means of the representations it has made of its Indians in the last 500 years. The multiplicity of these representations and of their authors renders the study of Indigenism a very complex and seemingly unending enterprise, for wherever we turn, we stumble on its manifestations, be they capital events such as legislation declaring the Indian "relatively incapable," or quotidian, plain, and apparently inconsequential remarks such as that of an urban taxi driver confessing that his Indian grandmother had been "caught with a lasso." In short, "what the media write and broadcast, novelists create, missionaries reveal, human rights activists defend, anthropologists analyze, and Indians deny or corroborate about *the Indian* contributes to an ideological edifice that takes the 'Indian issue' as its building block" (Ramos 1998: 6). The country's kaleidoscopic capacity to produce new interethnic designs upon a deep and lasting structure appears to be inexhaustible. Among the components of such a kaleidoscope is the widespread practice of essentialization both on the part of the majority population and of the Indians themselves. Culture, whether in its local manifestations or as a generic template for Indianness (or "indigenusness" as in Bowen 2000: 13) has wide currency in the fields of Indigenism. I have selected four contexts in which the processes of naturalization of the Indians and essentialization of their "culture" -- yes, in the singular! -- are particularly evident, providing us with a suitable framework to discuss the theoretical and political implications of these processes.

The vignettes sketched below are taken from Brazil's civil life, some routine, others more spectacular, where Indians and non-Indians engage in capillary relations the content of which is rarely made explicit. The notion of capillarity is particularly apt to characterize the close encounters of protagonists who speak different ideological languages and yet engage in Leachian ritual situations in which tacit misunderstandings are shared by all participants to each one's

benefit (Leach 1954: 102, 286). They are capillary relations also in Foucault's sense of power microphysics (Foucault 1979: 179-91) where blatant coercion is improper because it is superfluous. Another, but connected, sense of capillary relations can be glossed with the help of a dictionary definition: "of or pertaining to the apparent attraction or repulsion between a liquid and a solid, observed in capillarity" (Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language).

What happens in the cracks of western rationality is as revealing, or more, of the ways in which otherness is constructed and lived. The farcical dramas, wild mysticisms, and mixed up ordeals focused on here are examples of phenomena pertaining to the tension generated by the attraction and repulsion of opposites that thrive at the margins of western logic, and for this very reason, candidly reveal unexpected facets of interethnic relations that formal conventions are designed to conceal. In this sense, the pulp side of interethnicity is just another layer of bricks set on the extraordinary ideological edifice of Indigenism.

The material chosen for analysis evokes the subterranean, unconscious phenomena associated with Freudian slips whenever one says *x* while meaning *y*. Manifest as they are in collectivities rather than in individuals, such expressions of the national "unsaid" have an immense potential to unveil what might otherwise pass as mere *faits divers*, curiosities if not "infelicities" of the exotic (Mason 1998).

### *Episode 1.*

The material used here is drawn from nearly twenty newspaper clippings dating from 1988 to 1996. They display photographs of famous people in Brazil being "crowned" with feather headdresses by indigenous men and women. Among the celebrities are soccer players Romário and Ronaldo, the First Lady, Ruth Correa Leite Cardoso, former President Fernando Collor de Mello, presidential candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and an assortment of ministers, governors, and congressmen. In the 1980s and 1990s, practically anyone who aspired to be someone in Brazil was photographed either receiving or dodging an Indian headdress. So much public attention dispensed to an indigenous object is due to its reputation for bringing bad luck to non-Indian bearers. Associated with the item are macaw feathers, the macaw being an "ill omen in folk belief," according to a television newswoman (Marcia Peltier Pesquisa, Rede Manchete, December 23, 1997). The mass media may not have created this belief, but it has certainly amplified it, particularly at peaks of political effervescence. Taking no chances, public figures such as former President José Sarney, admit their fear and never allowed any headdress to be put on their heads. Some Indians and Indian sympathizers rebuff all this as Whiteman's superstition -- "the whites always mix everything up," says Shavante leader Mário Juruna (*Correio Braziliense*, June 12, 1988: 5) -- and respond by saying that it is the Whiteman himself who is the ill omen for the Indians (*Correio Braziliense*, September 26, 1988: 8). Pro-Indian Congressman Tadeu França repudiated the belief and added a possible explanation: "Throughout our history the Indians have become specialists in the art of losing. Perhaps for this reason, in the Whiteman's unconscious, the feather headdress represents the suffering of a race in extinction, and the whites fear the same destiny" (*Correio Braziliense*, June 12, 1988: 5).

Nevertheless, this has not deterred many an Indian from carrying on this newly invented interethnic tradition. Quite the opposite, they show themselves perfectly willing, in fact, rather eager to play the game of the "headdress curse." Adding fuel to the belief, a list of misfortunes that have beset famous heads is cited as evidence of the artifact's occult powers and, by extension, of the Indians' themselves: Tancredo Neves, nominated president in 1985, died of septicemia just

before his inauguration; Fernando Collor de Mello, elected president in 1989, was ousted two years later; Ulysses Guimarães, an immensely influential congressman, disappeared at sea in a helicopter crash on Columbus Day in 1992; Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, several times presidential candidate, has never been elected. A 1995 cartoon depicts Luís Eduardo Magalhães, then president of the House of Representatives, wearing an indigenous necklace while turning away from a headdress. Says the caption: "Luís Eduardo Magalhães ... did all he could to avoid having the headdress brought by a group of Indians put on his head. According to political folklore, it brings bad luck" (*Folha de São Paulo*, April 8, 1995, p. 1-4). A promising politician in his early forties, Magalhães died of a heart attack three years later. Even the statue of Justice that sits in front of the Supreme Court in Brasília was crowned by Indians during a demonstration for land demarcation in 1996 (Ramos 1998: 262). Nothing has yet happened to the statue, but it continues to be as blind as ever.

The self-fulfilling prophecy of the popular belief in the hidden powers of the Indians, reminiscent of the Putumayo historical miasmas described by Taussig (1987), is not limited to the fate of public people, but can extend to their works as well. Let us see an example from Brasília.

*Episode 2.* In the 1980s, the Bank of Brazil provided funds for the construction of a monumental building to serve as the National Indian Museum, located in Brasília, the seat of the Federal District and the nation's capital. Oscar Niemeyer, the famous architect who had built Brasília and a myriad of modernist edifices the world over, was chosen for the job. He sought inspiration in the traditional round houses of various indigenous peoples and, turning thatch into concrete, erected the monument in the appropriate location known as the Monumental Axis. But, upon gazing at his own achievement, even before completion, Niemeyer concluded that the construction was just too beautiful and large for the Indians. Together with the District's governor, Niemeyer then proclaimed his masterpiece as the future house of the city's Museum of Modern Art. Speaking for the Indians, the governor justified the move by saying that "the Indians don't want to be the object of folkloric contemplation, but rather of study and respect on the part of the community [i.e. the majority society]" (*Correio Braziliense*, June 5, 1988, p. 39). The consolation prize for the Indians was to have their museum built on the campus of the University of Brasília, "for the better knowledge of anthropology students" (Cunha 1988: 3).

The timing was evocative, as the new Constitution had just been approved and the Indians were in town celebrating their modest victories. A news item describes the occasion:

The indigenous nations interrupted commemorations for their gains in the Constitution in order to register a loss. The Brasília Indian Museum, which was to be inaugurated on the 15th, will be transformed into the Brasília Museum of Modern Art by suggestion of architect Oscar Niemeyer, supported by the governor of the Federal District, José Aparecido de Oliveira (*Jornal do Brasil*, June 6, 1988).

The initial reaction of a few Indians was somewhat fatalistic. The same newspaper added:

Shaman Prepori Kajabi, who performed the shamanic ritual at the National Congress to insure that indigenous rights be recognized in the Constitution, repeated the ritual this weekend at the unfinished Indian Museum and concluded: "museum is a thing of the Whiteman and the Indians shouldn't fight for what has always been the Whiteman's" (*Jornal do Brasil*, June 6, 1988).

But then came the indigenous curse on Niemeyer's concrete fantasy. As a dismayed Indian sympathizer put it,

Many artists swore never to set foot on the MAM [Museum of Modern Art] or have their works among its assets because the curse cast on it by the Indians Preporê and Sapain, when they evoked the Spirit of the Waters, is a permanent threat to both believers and non-believers and not yet undone (Fonteles 1989: 6).

Ten years later, no significant art works, both in number and quality, had been assembled to inhabit the new museum that is rapidly decaying under the relentless downpours of Brasilia's rainy season. On the lawned expanses of the stately capital still stands Niemeyer's folly, a spellbound semi-ruin which is both an eyesore and "eyewitness" to yet another act of official disrespect for Brazilian Indians. Recently, in a true fit of absentmindedness, the government reverted its decision and gave the derelict museum back to the Indians.

So far we have seen how interethnic imagery is constructed and naturalized within the limits of a specific country. But what happens in Brazil is not so very different from the WASP variations on the Indian theme or the Western Apache variations on the Whiteman theme that Basso (1979), Stedman (1982), Strong (1996), and the authors in the collection suggestively titled *Dressing in Feathers* (Bird 1996) have described for the United States. But the process of essentialization is not confined to the nation-state. There is also a host of media-alluring indigenous prodigies catered to international audiences. The following episodes, although sharing features and protagonists, have different agendas, messages, and results. Both happened in Brazil, but part of their importance had to do with the massive presence of foreigners. As a matter of focus, I will not fully explore the institutional importance and consequences of these events, but will limit myself to aspects directly relevant to the issue of essentialism.

*Episode 3.* In June 1989, the old town of Altamira in the northern state of Pará, had its five days of fame. The occasion was a mammoth gathering called by members of nine Kayapó communities to protest against the Brazilian government's plans for the building of a series of hydroelectric dams along the Xingu River. This megaproject threatened to flood the lands of eleven indigenous peoples. Representatives of 24 indigenous groups, government officials, 300 environmentalists, members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Catholic Church, anthropologists, and other pro-Indian people flocked into humble Altamira. In all, about three thousand people attended the gigantic rally on the outskirts of town. In turn, a portion of the majority pro-dam population paraded on horseback, thus heightening the sense of nervousness that normally pervades interethnic relations in the region. On the first day, June 20, there were about 100 journalists from Brazil and abroad. On the last day, June 24, the foreign press alone included about 150 people.

Running parallel to the hard core political events involving Indian leaders and government officials, show business personalities, such as the English rock star Sting and Brazilian singer Milton Nascimento, added excitement to the already electrified atmosphere. Trying mimetically to mingle with Indian men and women in full ceremonial regalia, bands of ecstatic young women speaking an assortment of European languages, clad in minimal tropical outfits, body paint on face and limbs, danced and smiled at the cameras in a state of grace as though living some New Age energizing fantasy (O'Connor 1993).

Some momentous scenes were inscribed in word and image and widely circulated. The one that most impressed the public showed a middle-aged Kayapó woman in the act of waving a machete so as to touch the cheeks of the director of the state energy company. Captured from various angles, her gesture travelled around the world and fascinated TV watchers. Oblivious of

ethnographic realities, some even suggested she should be elected the Woman of the Year for her courage in defying a powerful man. That, however, has more to do with culture than with courage:

The first Meeting of the Xingu Indigenous Nations gained a dramatic dimension on the morning of the 21st when the Kayapó Indian, Tuirá, rose from the audience and put her machete on the face of the Eletronorte director, José Antônio Muniz Lopes, who was trying to justify the construction of the Kararaô dam. Both the Eletronorte director and the emissary of the federal government, Fernando César Mesquita, went pale the moment the machete cut the air a few inches from Muniz Lopes' face. Leader Paulinho Paiakan immediately explained that it wasn't a war motion, but simply a ritual gesture by means of which Kayapó women express indignation (CEDI 1991: 335).

Equally spectacular was the arrival of Payakan, the major promoter of the event:

One hundred Brazilian and foreign journalists watched the majestic arrival of the Indian leader. Paiakan descended from the Bandeirante aircraft dressed in shorts and feather headdress, adorned with ritual paint and displaying the dressed wound on his belly [from recent appendicitis surgery]. He started crying as he stepped on the ground. Many of the warriors who protected him from the journalists' hysteria were also crying. Braced by leaders of the eleven Kayapó villages who came to meet him, the leader slowly crossed the lines of warriors greeting acquaintances. The scene left the foreigners spellbound (CEDI 1991: 331).

For ethnographic clarification, ritual weeping is part of the arrival ceremonies in several indigenous societies in Central Brazil (see, for instance, Wagley 1977).

Another powerful incident occurred when the Eletronorte director announced that the name Kararaô would no longer be given to the dam because it meant an aggression to Kayapó culture.

Paiakan listened closely to his promise to change the name and also not to use indigenous names in his power plants. Then [Paiakan] asked the warriors to show him what Kararaô meant. A group of warriors got up and in the middle of the stadium started singing furiously and performing a war dance (CEDI 1991: 335).

The apothecic closing session had a Kayapó leader displaying a copy of the Brazilian Constitution, singer Milton Nascimento saluting the Indians, and Benedita da Silva, a popular Black member of Congress, wearing a feather headdress. The foreign journalists covering the event "seemed entranced" (CEDI 1991: 335).

With its manifold functions, the gathering highlighted the phenomenon of an international market of exoticism as manifested in the interplay between non-indigenous consumers and indigenous producers of cultural resources as commodities. It profusely displayed both sides of the same coin: on the one hand, avid white audiences whose close proximity with "real" Indians served either as inspiration for mystical pursuits or simply as cheap thrills; on the other, equally avid "real" Indians turning their cultural capital into political muscle against undesirable state policies. Both sides reinforced each other's cravings by parading their affected selves under the enthralled lenses of the media.

The Altamira event is one of those phenomena that, in unfolding their complexities, make social analysis both a delight and a challenge. One might dare call it a total social fact of

interethnic politics. For there we find, on the non-Indian side, Altamira exposing the recurrent mixed messages: the Indians as obstacles to development who need to be fought back or persuaded to make room for progress, and the Indians as both nature keepers and virtuous victims of civilization, model cultures for a more enlightened West.

As for the Indians, we see their keen instrumentalization of cultural primordialities, their shrewd political sagacity, and their tremendous organizing drive. For instance, it was not by chance that the Kayapó chose the end of June to hold the meeting. As Terence Turner (1991a) explains, the Altamira gathering was planned to coincide with the final phase of the feast associated with the harvest of new maize, the most important inter-village ceremony. The Kayapó villagers, having already performed the first two phases of the ritual, were eager to assemble at Altamira as they would have done back home. That was the astute way the organizers found to motivate so many Indians, most of them monolingual, to come together for a series of political events that otherwise might not have caught their interest.

On the other hand, the experience leaders like Payakan had accumulated in their previous contacts with multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, and various NGOs in Brazil and abroad, was converted into financial aid to carry out the meeting. A well regarded personality among environmentalists, Payakan became known as a conservationist concerned with the future of the rainforest. After Altamira he was awarded the United Nations' Global 500 prize, the prize from the Society for a Better World, and was the subject of a *Parade's* 1992 cover story under the title *A Man Who Would Save the World*. The irony of it is that Payakan was one of the Kayapó who amassed a substantial wealth with the selling of hardwood and royalties from gold miners who operated in their reservation.

In the last episode we will see a dramatic reversal in Payakan's fortunes. One year he was a hero, the next year he was a monster.

*Episode 4.* The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Rio Summit, congregated a significant number of indigenous representatives from many countries. On an improvised camping ground by the Guanabara bay, they organized the Global Forum, a series of events independent of the official debates that went on at a posh hotel in an expensive part of Rio de Janeiro. Like in Altamira, the Indians, now from the world over, attracted the attention of cult followers, a multitude of journalists, and the public in general, and stole the show from their official counterpart.

What interests me here, however, is not the Summit per se, but an occurrence that took place thousands of miles away in Amazonia, but which strident echoes in Rio de Janeiro.

On the second day of the Summit, while Payakan was being expected at the Global Forum, news broke that Payakan had raped a non-Indian girl during a drinking spree on his ranch near the town of Redenção, adjacent to the Kayapó reservation. The case was immediately swept up in a wave of sensationalism that lasted for months. Accusations of savagery and cannibalism were hurled at Payakan and his wife who was reported as having inflicted severe physical harm on the girl. Payakan became the object of pornographic jokes and his name turned into a household word overnight. *Veja*, one of Brazil's magazines of wide circulation, had a cover story with an enlarged photograph of Payakan's face and the headline *The Savage: The leader symbol of environmental purity tortures and rapes a white student, and then flees to his tribe* (*Veja*, June 10, 1992). *Veja* and most newspapers had no qualms in condemning Payakan well before the trial. He was declared guilty until proved innocent. The case also raised a big polemic as to Payakan's imputability. As an Indian he was legally deemed "relatively incapable" because

indigenous people are legally presumed to be socially and culturally unequipped to operate in the national society as normal citizens. Hence, they are officially wards of the state. While his wife, who speaks no Portuguese, was considered to be unquestionably "primitive" (Ramos 1998: 54-55), opinions were divided about Payakan: some charged him with full responsibility because he was de facto emancipated from indigenous special status -- after all, he was a rich Indian who owned a ranch and a car. Others maintained that, as an Indian, he didn't know any better. On the one hand, although he knew what he was doing, he was driven by a "savage instinct," as *Veja* put it; on the other, he was a helpless example of indigenous ineptitude for civic life. In either case, public opinion divested Payakan of human agency. Among the tangled arguments for and against Payakan's imputability was the demand of a lawyer from the national Indian agency (*Fundação Nacional do Índio*, FUNAI) that only "an anthropological report showing that Payakan was an Indian integrated into civilization [could] make him accountable to a penal process" (Ramos 1998: 54). Surprising as it may seem coming from a lawyer, this statement has no basis, considering that the Indians are as imputable as any Brazilian with regard to penal responsibility (Carneiro da Cunha 1992).

Payakan was acquitted in 1994 on grounds of insufficient evidence. But a new trial in 1999 condemned him to six years in jail, after which his lawyers looked desperately for an anthropological expert willing to report on Payakan's civil incapacity. In their view, there was no problem in trading his freedom for his agency.

This *cause célèbre* triggered a flood of arguments that went beyond the case itself. Anti-indigenous sectors exploited the unfairness of giving special treatment to members of minorities and thus creating a double standard among the citizenry. *Veja* magazine, for instance, complained that the environmentalists' "difficulty in accepting the criminal side of Payakan comes from the recent mental habit according to which it is correct to always relativize the inconvenient behavior of minorities" (quoted in ISA 1996: 412). Journalist Janer Cristaldo "demanded that Payakan be punished, and questioned what he calls juridical privileges of Brazilian Indians. According to Cristaldo, 'the Indian doesn't work, doesn't produce, he simply devastates'" (ISA 1996: 417). Attorney Miguel Reale Júnior asserted that Payakan was no longer unaccountable and should go on trial for rape and attempted murder. He added: "we must put a stop to the myth of the naturalist Indian; from the moment he left his tribe and became acculturated, he stopped being an Indian to become a civilized mixed blood" (quoted in ISA 1996: 413).

These opinions appeal to the feeble idea that democracy means equal treatment to all, regardless of whether or not all are seamlessly equal in a society as grossly unequal as in Brazil. Thus used, the concept of democracy enters the realm of those inexhaustible symbols that are always open to conflicting interpretations (Ricoeur 1978: 242-65), depending on the position being defended.

Supporters of the indigenous cause were concerned that the negative repercussions of the scandal might be used by anti-Indian interests to undermine indigenous rights: The accusation against Payakan could become a convenient argument for the "'anti-environmentalist lobby' that opposes the demarcation of indigenous lands," feared Sydney Possuelo, FUNAI's president at the time (ISA 1996: 413). The minister of Foreign Affairs, Celso Lafer, stated that "the Brazilian government was worried about the publicity over the crime attributed to Payakan and feared that the matter might be exploited to jeopardize the struggle of the Indians" (*Folha de São Paulo*, June 10, 1992: 1-14). From the Rio Summit, the environmentalist Congressman Fábio Feldman declared: "At this moment when we are fighting for the rights of the Indians, doubt has been shed on the whole struggle for the preservation of Indian nations and the environment. I think

journalism in Brazil should be more responsible" (*Folha de São Paulo*, June 9, 1992: 1-10). From London, Stephen Cory, director of Survival International, blamed Anita Roddick, the owner of the Body Shop cosmetic chain, for the Payakan scandal. According to him, she "put too much power in the hands of a single individual" when she chose Payakan's community as the center of her operations for collecting raw materials. Cory concluded that Payakan's alleged crime was a "serious drawback" to the protection of indigenous rights (Seidl 1992: 1-14).

Behind the common feeling of indignation over the treatment given to indigenous peoples, these testimonies, like their opponents, also expose the interests behind their authors: the FUNAI "guardian" of the Indians is anxious about having his role -- demarcation of indigenous lands -- undercut, the foreign office minister fears undue publicity, the environmentalist identifies defense of Indians with defense of environment, and the NGO director chides his old foe, the "green" entrepreneur.

Thus brimming with intense meanings, the Payakan case, particularly in its association with the environmentalist mega-event that was going on at the Rio Summit, becomes a veritable laboratory for observing the birth of what Latour (1993: 11) would call a hybrid or quasi-object, viz., the Indian as a combination of human-made and natural components. It is the naturalization of the Indian in its fullest expression.

What is there in common between episode 1 (in fact, an ongoing affair) where the Indians are extensions of spooky raw nature; episode 2 where Indians are carriers of evil forces; episode 3 where Indians cultivate exotic marvels; and episode 4 where Indians are unduly protected as wild creatures? Among other similarities, they all point in one direction: the fabrication of a metonymic bond between Indians and untamed nature.

The ambivalence that Brazilian society displays toward indigenous peoples is manifested in a recurrent pendular movement between distance and proximity. While there are national voices that claim that Brazilians are underdeveloped because we have Indians in our backyard, there are also those who affirm that we are a special nation precisely because we co-exist with the Indians' wisdom and purity. These clashing conceptions bear, of course, no relationship with the realities of indigenous life. They are fabrications that serve different interests and apply only within certain conjunctures. In this sense the Indian is a product of non-Indian ideological engineering. Part nature, part artifact, the Indian provides the nation with a reservoir of arguments that justify positions as different as those just mentioned. As the Brazilians' privileged Others, the Indians epitomize what Coronil attributes to Occidentalism for bringing out "into the open their genesis in asymmetrical relations of power, including the power to obscure their genesis of inequality, to sever their historical connections, and thus to present as the internal and separate attributes of bounded entities what are in fact historical outcomes of connected peoples" (Coronil 1997: 14).

The metonymic association of Indian with nature is further motivated by another ambivalence -- that of Brazil with its tropical geography. On the one hand, it is praised as the blessed land where anything grows without effort. On the other, it is an earthly inferno of pests and diseases, inappropriate for the blooming of a higher civilization. The country's socio-historical record abounds in statements that defend either position (Leite 1993). No wonder the Indian-nature link is so strong in the minds of most Brazilians. While for some Indians can be as unwieldy as the tropics, for others they are as indispensable as the proverbial "lungs of the world," an epithet the unpolished ecological imagination has attributed to the Amazon forest.

If Indians are partly nature, partly man-made, what does their culture consist of for themselves and for their alleged creators? Here we enter the realm of essentialism properly

speaking.

### **Culture as political act**

A 1995 issue of *Current Anthropology* (volume 39, Number 1) was dedicated to the culture concept and problems of essentialism. Notable among the articles is Stolcke's analysis (1995) of what she calls "cultural fundamentalism," the truculent intolerance for different modes of life. Now rampant in Western Europe, this new form of social and political oppression of immigrants from poor countries has replaced the biological arguments of racism. By freezing alien cultures as immutable entities, cultural fundamentalism erects a barrier of incommensurability between the immigrants and the citizens of the receiving countries.

Stolcke's article is an excellent analysis of the new European ideology of inequality and very inspiring as a lead to examine other situations. I am inspired to follow a course that Stolcke did not take and cover ground that some of her commentators explicitly missed, i.e., the view from the other side. One purpose of this paper is to show what this "other side" has to say and do about the intricate process of representations, misrepresentations, and counter-representations of itself. The very significant differences between immigrants in Western Europe and indigenous peoples in Brazil notwithstanding, a few lessons can be drawn from the case explored by Stolcke.

One of these lessons goes back to the polemic around the concept of culture. Culture as fixed essence has been the concern of many anthropologists in the past decade (Thomas 1991, Abu-Lughod 1991). Fearing the political consequences for minority groups, culture experts have even suggested the banning of the culture concept altogether. Two whole issues of *Current Anthropology* (the aforementioned volume 39, Number 1, 1995, and the supplement of volume 40, 1999) are dedicated to scrutinizing the practical effects of the concept both on anthropology and on the world at large.

One argument for abandoning the concept of culture is that it has been appropriated by the public at large and contaminated with political ingredients that are detrimental to the powerless. But, as Hannerz argues, to now withdraw from the century-long effort of propagating the ethical and political merits of the anthropological concept of culture and "dramatically turn around and attempt to persuade [our] audiences to reject it, too" would amount to, at the very least, a loss of credibility. If, for fear of unsuitable appropriation, we started eliminating concepts, soon we would be wordless, gagged hostages to whatever forces made use of our intellectual production. Furthermore, the conviction that anthropology turns natives into irrelevant exotica, forever caught in the prison house of frozen traditions, and thus hands them over to western domination runs the risk of a) attributing quasi-demiurge powers to the anthropologist, as if the natives had no will of their own; and b) taking cultural differences to be political weaknesses in a globalized world.

On the basis of my experience with an indigenous inner world (Ramos 1995) and with the nationwide politics of contact in Brazil (Ramos 1998), not only do I disagree with both implications, but also aspire to help deflate the anthropological ego and persuade the West that cultural diversity is not only good to think but, most importantly, indispensable for putting the West in proper perspective, and for the very sustainability of humankind. In this sense, I am still with Hannerz who continues to be confident that the concept of culture allows anthropologists to transmit to lay audiences the opulence contained in "meanings and practices acquired (in varied ways) in social life," the "potential for human diversity," the value of contributing "to a public

conversation," and the possibility of making "better use of such intellectual authority as we may have accumulated" (1999: 19).

The irony pointed out by Sahlins should not be lost on us: in the past, anthropologists bemoaned the vanishing of native cultures exactly when anthropology was ready to use the full potential of the culture concept. Now, that the natives themselves seized culture as a political asset, anthropologists want to abandon it as a pernicious concept. Suffering from "epistemological hypochondria," anthropology, Sahlins argues, "has been seized by a post-modern panic about the very existence of the culture concept (...). Everybody has a culture; only the anthropologists question it" (1997: 137. My translation).

In indigenous hands, the culture concept, like the Latin alphabet, becomes an important tool to mark their differences from majority societies. Once in command of the technology of writing, the Indians use it to their own purposes. The same happens with culture (Turner 1991b). They have no qualms in instrumentalizing certain cultural features they know will impress the whites, regardless of whether such features are part of their own traditions, are borrowings from other peoples, or are newly created. Consider, for instance, the publicity that surrounded some Kayapó men during the big forest fires in the northern Brazilian state of Roraima in 1998. About half the state was on fire under the bewildered gaze of the world while the government was impotent to control the blaze. After weeks of near panic in the nation and beyond, two Kayapó men, stimulated by an official of the National Indian Foundation, flew to Roraima and performed shamanic rituals to induce rainfall. The next day a downpour began to extinguish the flames. The press wasted no time in promoting the supernatural powers of the Kayapó and, once again, the Indians were in the country's folkloric limelights. One interesting detail: shamanism is not a traditional feature of Kayapó culture. But who, apart from anthropologists and the Kayapó themselves, would doubt that *pajelança* (Portuguese for shamanism derived from the Tupian word *payé*, usually translated as shaman) is an Indian thing? Or take the mega-event into which the 1987-88 constitutional assembly was transformed when hundreds of Indians from various parts of the country descended upon the National Congress in Brasília to influence the congressmen's decisions. Among them were groups of people from the Northeast, long ago stripped of traditional cultural diacritics and, in most cases, of their own languages. In an effort to affirm their Indianness not always evident from their physical appearance, they entered the capital city's political stage wearing a bricolage of feather skirts and headresses of undefined cultural origin, but fitting a popular stereotype. Thus clad, they made headlines about indigenous rights alongside the gorgeously attired Kayapó.

Strategic essentialism is not limited to matters related to collective empowerment and may not even be limited to the instrumentalization of one's own culture. It can also serve personal aspirations. Consider the following case, as it was described to me by a former employee of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI). A woman from a highly mixed indigenous group in the Northeast married a Shavante man and planned to visit his family in the Center-West. In preparation to meet her in-laws, she went to the Indian Art shop at the FUNAI headquarters in Brasília. From the collection of artifacts on display she picked choice pieces of dress and adornment from various indigenous groups around the country. She then wrote a formal letter to FUNAI asking them to cover the cost of her "Indian Tribal Uniform." She justified her request with the following, to her, irrefutable argument: how could she present herself to her husband's obviously indigenous people dressed as she was in Western clothes.

Short of mathematical formulae, practically any concept is open to different, even contradictory readings. As with the concept of democracy, essentialism, exoticism, and even

incommensurability can be turned around to mean the exact opposite of what one might expect. Conflicting interpretations very often occur in a context of conflicting political or ethical positions when misunderstandings, either unintended or induced, fuel sometimes portentous wars of ideas. Take Lévy-Bruhl, the early French philosopher-anthropologist who was crucified by his peers and posterity for having proposed the near impossibility of westerners to penetrate the cultural world of primitive peoples, as the mental principles in both types of society were so distinct that one should not assume that western logic was adequate to apprehend other types of logic. In a world where being radically different has invariably meant being radically inferior, Lévy-Bruhl's theory was stamped as outright value-laden and ethnocentric nonsense. Actually, he was proposing a lesson of humility to anthropologists who took for granted that the human essence is the same everywhere, *ergo* perfectly grasped by westerners, and that primitives were simply imperfect versions of Victorian society.

Introducing welcome inflections to the usually intransigent anti-essentialist position, some voices have reminded us that in human affairs absolute truths are neither appropriate nor desirable. "There may be possibilities of virtue in incommensurability," declares Fitzpatrick. "Not all notions of incommensurability are founded on the mutual hostility and oppression that typify cultural fundamentalism" (Fitzpatrick 1995: 14). Debates around the evils of essentialism might be deflated with similar ponderings. Hale, for one, rejects the manichean division between "essentialism" and "constructivism" which he regards as perhaps "useful to track theoretical allegiances within the academy, but ... is insufficiently attentive to the range of ways that 'essentialist' precepts are woven into political consciousness and practice, and the highly variable material consequences that result" (Hale 1997: 578). In fact, he doubts that the constructivism-essentialism polarity will last much longer (Hale 1999: 492. See also Briggs 1996).

Applying this discussion to indigenous peoples, one may summarize the arguments by asking what would be worse, to be diluted into dominant societies, or fight to retain cultural distinctiveness at the cost of segregation. Of course, those in the position to best answer this question are the native peoples themselves. Before exploring this troubled ground of interethnic friction, to use a familiar concept in ethnic studies in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America (Cardoso de Oliveira 1964: 13-30), let us examine yet another bone of contention in the debate around the concept of culture, namely, exoticism.

### **"The exotic is not at home"**

Although closely associated with essentialism, exoticism has a logic of its own. As with cholesterol, it is possible to identify negative and positive exoticism. Negative exoticism results from the political abuse that is made of alterity, be it directly extracted from native practices taken out of context or in distorted ethnographic descriptions (an icon of bad exoticism is the image of the Yanomami created by a host of authors that followed in Napoleon Chagnon's footsteps). Conversely, the positive side of exoticism asserts that cultural diversity is fundamental to deflate the bombastic *West* that poses as the winner, vis-à-vis the hopeless *Rest*, taken to be the loser. When promoting a movement toward constructive othernesses, exoticism shakes off its *-ism* along with its ethical and political virulence and, as a banner of affirmative difference, becomes a legitimate tool to counteract the hegemonic affectation and superiority complex of majority societies.

Does exoticism exist at home, that is, involving national minorities, or does it occur only when there is a considerable physical distance between exoticiser and exoticized? I tend to agree

with Peter Mason (1998: 148) when he maintains that "the exotic is not at home" because "the presentation of the exotic necessarily entails displacement and detachment." I would like, however, to add another layer of complexity to his argument. The historical co-existence of national societies with their internal others tends to erode the exotic flavor that cultural traits once had. The process of cognitive and affective metabolization of domestic differences wears out the sense of disengagement that characterizes the exotic gaze from afar. The curse of the feather headdress illustrates this point. Unlike the distant fascination or repulsion that characterizes the reaction of a distant observer of differences, Brazilians who either believe in or scoff at the occult powers of the artifact do so with a measure of involvement that can move them to participation. This process of engagement, whether intentional or not, would signal the passage from exoticism to essentialism. Indeed, one can observe this process when a minority unrecognized as such, striving to affirm its cultural differences, hits the wall of national indifference. There is a moment when such a minority will have to artificially create displacement and detachment in order to be noticed. There are plenty of examples in the realm of so-called ethnogenesis where cultural traditions are revived or reinvented by minorities in search of ethnic recognition (Hill 1996; Oliveira 1999). Indigenous peoples in Northeast Brazil illustrate this mechanism. To resist the nation's indifference to and even denial of their ethnic singularity, these Indians have made a collective effort to distance themselves from the mass of the national population by displaying diacritics associated with Indianness in the popular imagination. Some, like the Pataxó in the eastern state of Bahia, in their quest for ethnic identity, sought to fill in the cultural gap left by the loss of their mother tongue by learning the related language of the Maxacali in the neighboring state of Minas Gerais. How could they claim to be different from Brazilians if the only language they could speak was Portuguese? How good can an official national language be as a vehicle for ethnic distinctness? Those who succeed in asserting their ethnic personae by exhibiting exotic traits are apt to join the chorus of authenticity be it real or constructed. If, as Rosaldo maintains, demanding authenticity from culturally despoiled minorities amounts to an act of "imperialist nostalgia" (Rosaldo 1989: 68-86), the cultural resurrection of peoples such as the Northeast Indians in Brazil could amount to an ironic relief from this malaise of the majority.

Once cultural differences are created and admitted by society at large -- here the media play a major role -- the artificiality of distancing is no longer necessary and exoticism makes way for essentialism. While exoticism at home may not last, it is precisely at home that essentialism qua political praxis prospers, as the European situation exemplifies.

### **The essentialist boomerang**

In the complex interplay of interests, understandings and misunderstandings that are part and parcel of the interethnic "middle ground" (White 1991, Conklin and Graham 1995), the manipulation of primordialities (à la Geertz 1973, Chapter 10) by means of overemphasized cultural diacritics or the emphasis on separateness via exclusive language and rituals, indicates that indigenous peoples such as the Kayapó and Shavante, among others, insist on maintaining their specificities without, however, renouncing the possible benefits that the surrounding nation-state may offer. To this end, they don't hesitate in complying with some stereotypical expectations on the part of non-Indians. Under the guise of going along with what is expected of them, the Indians reinforce what they want the national society to see in them -- if this brings them political benefits.

Two well-known concepts come to mind as I try to make sense of all this. One is

Goffman's impression management: "The performer who is to be dramaturgically prudent will have to adapt his performance to the information conditions under which it must be staged" (1959: 222). The other is Bateson's schismogenesis: "a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals" (Bateson 1958: 175). Both concepts bring to the fore the mutuality of the parts involved in interaction, and their constant scrutiny of each other's actions and reactions. Goffman's concept emphasizes the minutiae of face to face interaction where the actors deliberately adjust their behavior according to their own reading of their interlocutor's reactions. In Bateson's schismogenesis, we have the factor of accumulated experience influencing an actor's predisposition toward another.

In the case of the feather headdress and the Indian Museum, Indians and non-Indians performed their respective roles in a rather hyperbolic fashion as a way to reinforce a context where otherness (of Indians to whites and vice-versa) had long been constructed. It also meant an ironic distance between the Indians and the powerful. In the case of the Altamira gathering, to many outsiders otherness meant proximity, a means to reach authenticity as if by osmosis, by contagion, following the assumption that Indianness is part of redeeming nature. In both cases, the Indians behaved as was expected of them by embroidering the outer layers of their Indianness. As each party acted out the other's expectations, Indians and non-Indians were together in the same grammatical mode of essentialization. Their tacit agreement to disagree in situations where antagonisms must give way to the maximization of social gains is, once again, reminiscent of Leach's operational definition of ritual and myth as applied to his Highland Burma data, "a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony" (Leach 1954: 278). Underneath the extravagant tales issued by the media, both sides were using culture as a productive political artifact for their own purposes.

It should be clear that the act of performing culture is not necessarily an act of essentialism. It would not be appropriate, for instance, to call essentialist the enactment of a rite of passage for the internal purposes of a given society. But whenever cultural traits are displayed out of their specific cultural contexts, one has at least potentially an act of instrumentalization.

Are indigenous peoples free to instrumentalize their cultures at will? Can they have the essentialist cake and eat it too? Given the fact that essentialization occurs in a context of political inequality in which the Indians are invariably placed on the weaker end of the power spectrum, invoking resonant symbols of alterity can bring about a boomerang effect like in the case of the Kayapó leader Payakan. The ferocious response of the media to his alleged crime of rape paralleled the high praise he received as a genuine defender of indigenous and environmental integrity. On trial was the savage wearing feathers rather than the human male. Part of the outrage against him had to do with his economic success which offended those people for whom real Indians must be pure and poor. Payakan's exercise in essentialism stumbled on the hurdle set up by the logic of interethnic politics.

## Quasi-objects or full subjects?

When it comes to visibility as an empowering mechanism, capitalizing on cultural traits in national arenas is one of the most effective resources at the disposal of indigenous peoples. But essentializing is not the only option the Indians have for claiming ethnic justice and recognition. We can detect at least two other courses of action taken by Brazilian Indians: one, clearly collective, is the appearance of indigenous and pro-indigenous organizations; the other, contingent upon individual choice, is the pursuit of legitimacy from positions within the state apparatus such as ministries, the Indian agency, or party politics.

The first timid attempts at political organizing in the early 1970s (Ramos 1998, Chapter 6) gathered momentum during the following decades and reached a pace of proliferation of indigenous organizations now on the order of 250 associations in the Amazon alone (Albert n.d.). Most of these organizing efforts aim at amassing resources, both material and human, to carry out community projects such as economic production, education and health assistance. They invariably come into existence as the result of the concerted action of both non governmental organizations, or the Catholic Church, and indigenous leaders to meet demands that should be, but hardly ever are, fulfilled by the state as the legal guardian of the Indians. The outcome of these joint efforts has been dubbed "ethnopolitical hybridizations" and regarded as a mixed blessing (Albert 1997). With most indigenous lands in the Amazon legally demarcated, political claims that rallied around territorial issues have shifted to demands for development projects steered to the market economy with all the risks pertaining to commodification. A new style of indigenous awareness, more aligned with the rational standards of resource management, has replaced the charismatic era, when eloquent indigenous leaders exhorted non-indigenous audiences to recognize the legitimacy of their ethnic differences (Albert n.d., Ramos 1998, Chapter 6).

Underlying this new ethnic managerial model is the relatively novel master narrative of the West that takes sustainable development as its banner. Indigenous peoples touched by contemporary concerns with nature conservation respond by organizing themselves in order to cope with the global market of sustainability. In the political economy of ecological wisdom it is not unusual to find expressions of essentialism when the Indians take on the role of guardians of nature as opposed to whites, destroyers of nature, either as a justification for, as active producers, the maintenance of their land rights, or as an assertion of cultural autonomy. The fact that a number of indigenous peoples are engaged in non-sustainable activities, such as lumbering and gold mining, (see, for instance, the *Newsweek* article "Not as green as they seem," March 27, 2000: 10-14) does not seem to tarnish the Indians' more established reputation as natural environmentalists if for no other reason than the widespread belief that, after all, they are part of Mother Nature. A striking example of the influence of western conservationist discourses on the assertion of ethnic pride is the blend of global environmental concerns with traditional beliefs formulated by Yanomami leader and winner of the Global 500 prize, Davi Kopenawa, for whom the whiteman's demonstrations of ecological knowledge are an enormously impoverished and distorted version of shamanic wisdom. Westerners' failure to understand how nature really works in both its material and non-material essence is, for Kopenawa, responsible for their ineptitude at preserving natural resources and their infinite proclivity for destruction (Albert 1993).

On a totally different key, other indigenous personages in the Brazilian ethnoscape have chosen a different path to ethnic politics. No longer taking collective decisions, these are individuals, usually urban dwellers, who have a good command of the Portuguese language, are

thoroughly acquainted with the ways of national society, and have held posts in various public bureaucracies, such as the National Indian Foundation, the Ministry of Culture, or have engaged in party politics (Ramos 1988). While claiming full Indianness, these men and women have an overtly non-essentialist agenda in that they do not appeal to cultural diacritics to defend their ethnic identity. Their goal is to achieve ethnic justice by working from within the state system. There is, however, a category of indigenous "civil servants" that in no significant way distinguish themselves from any other civil servants who are more intent on keeping their jobs than on defending their fellow Indians if this involves challenging the powers that be.

One of the best known urban leaders is Marcos Terena who has been active in the Brazilian Indian movement since the early 1980s. An outspoken critic of attempts to essentialize the Indian, Terena defends equal rights for indigenous peoples, but with the preservation of ethnic differences. In other words, he advocates citizenship rights for Indians via integration without assimilation. Equality for him would be achieved through equivalence rather than similarity. In an interview just around the Brazilian quinqucentennial in April 2000, Terena stated: "My dream for this 500th anniversary is to establish an alliance of mutual respect so that we can transform this country into a place of good conviviality." Asked about the integration of indigenous peoples into the national society, he declared: "From the moment the whiteman understood that he had to protect the Indian, another domination model was created around the idea that Indian is that who wears body paint, stays in his village, and engages in rituals. It is as though the Indian had no evolving dynamic of his own. Thus, the Indian was preserved and the consequence was the serious impoverishment of the original indigenous people. The Indian remained between two worlds. When some Indians jumped over the wall of that supposed protection, they discovered that there were people speaking in their name. Then another system of government domination emerged, paternalism" (Soares 2000).

Terena has often been criticized by both Indians and friends of the Indians for his gentle, apparently accommodating style. He has even been charged with co-optation for firmly keeping to his conviction that working from within the system can be as effective as frontal opposition. Like Terena, other Indians have been assailed with unfair legislation, unfair treatment at work, discrimination, prejudice, and all the barriers that meet individuals who challenge the deeply rooted stereotype that Indians should be relegated to the jungle, remain uneducated, forever captive of frozen quaint traditions.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Whether dressed in feathers, T shirts, or executive suits, Brazilian Indians are a growing population that disclaim the pseudo prophecies that never tire of announcing their extinction. Among the heralds of doomsday, intellectuals of various persuasions have declared the end of indigenous peoples in Brazil by a specific date that never comes. The late anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, who had forecast their disappearance by around the year 2000, reconsidered his prophecy when he realized that not only the indigenous population was recovering from one of its lowest points in the 1950s, but the vitality of the Indian movement in the 1980s heralded a promising future. Indeed, under 100 thousand in 1950, the indigenous population is now over 350 thousand, albeit still a fraction (0.2 percent) of the national population.

One might be tempted to generalize and state that the smaller the native population, the higher its visibility. However, potent counter examples such as the indigenous peoples in the United States and, particularly, in Argentina, quickly dispose of such a generalization. One is left

with the conclusion that the Brazilian case is perhaps unique in the Americas. The *Indian* has inhabited the consciousness of the country's non-indigenous population since its early colonial days. Brazilian nationality has created indigenous imagery that suits its own claims that the Indians are the legitimate heirs to the land, a necessary cornerstone for its foundation as a unique society based on the myth of the three races (Indian, Black, and White), and for its cry for cultural independence from European influences. Perhaps the novelty of contemporary Indigenism is the active role Indians themselves play in the construction of this national imagery. The first two episodes exemplify the joint venture of Indians and non-Indians in the production of a pluriethnic scenario. Both episodes show how convoluted the process of forging otherness can be. The roundabout way in which some sectors of Brazilian urban society create an essential chasm between "civilized" and Indians discloses an interesting ambivalence regarding belief systems. Many cosmopolitan Brazilians are either unwilling or reluctant to admit their susceptibility to supernatural phenomena, particularly when these emanate from the mysterious indigenous world, so they transfer their metaphysical discomfort to the gullible populace: the macaw is a bird of ill omen in popular folk belief. Rarely confessing in public to be believers, these urbanites attempt to have the cake and eat it too: to play the folkloric game and keep their rational selves distanced from the "pre-logical" Indians. Their ignorance of indigenous lifeways, often tacitly nurtured, is convincing proof of this distance. Once the great Indian/non-Indian divide is safely established, a whole range of symbolic possibilities opens up: indigenous diacritics become available for as much signification and resignification as needed to account for non-rational fissures in the allegedly rational world of civic affairs. Brightly colored feathers and esoteric shamanic seances are some of the most fitting items for this purpose both for their visual appeal and for the reassuring confidence that, thanks to protective ethnographic ignorance, social distance is comfortably preserved. Such are the ways of essentialization.

Oppression is hardly ever so complete as to leave no alternatives to the oppressed. In the last decades, particularly since the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution, Brazilian Indians have been enlarging the number of their interethnic options to include courses of political action beyond catering to the essentialistic tastes of the majority society. Whereas "playing Indian" has been a very effective way to claim their rights and air their grievances, indigenous leaders are increasingly favoring other tactics of empowerment, either rejecting altogether the appeal to essentialization, or invoking cultural primordialities not as bastions of incommensurable otherness, but as an affirmation of equality within a regime of legitimate differences. On the long and winding road from quasi-objects to full subjects, Brazilian Indians, like so many native peoples the world over, have learned to value the concept of culture and, with remarkable sagacity, have taught the non-indigenous world, including anthropologists, how to critically absorb and reshape received ideas. Often acting as if in contradiction to good common sense, indigenous men and women have shown an extraordinary political wisdom behind what has appeared to many non-Indians as sheer naiveté. Well ahead of the critical capacity of their observers, Indian leaders have often surprised anthropologists with their novel tactics and strategic talents (Ramos 1998).

In the face of all this, we may well ask: how far does social theory help us understand the originality of the indigenous political imagination? Just to stay with the issue at hand, when theoreticians tell us that essentialism is bad politics, what they do is create a theoretical blind spot. As long as this blind spot persists we will always run the risk of colliding with reality.

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