

MYTH, TRANSFERENCE AND PREJUDICE
IN A HEMMED-IN AMAZONIAN SOCIETY

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For the last several years I have been involved in a project sponsored by the Spencer Foundation to study the contact of the Parintintin Indians with the Brazilian Amazonian society (Madeira River variant) that surrounds and engulfs them. I gave an overview of this project here a few (four?) years ago; now I can give a progress report.

An indigenous people entering a national society organized in an industrial economy faces enormous obstacles to their successful adaptation. They are crossing a boundary not only of economic skills and social knowledge, but of fundamental values and conceptions of social behavior and goals of social activity. Furthermore, they face strong discrimination based on stereotyping, stereotyping which codifies misunderstanding of indigenous values and social patterns by the dominant stratum.

Nonetheless, they draw on the resources of their own social conceptions in their understanding of the social system they encounter, and on the resource of their own values in adapting to new social pattern. Their adaptations to urban social situations, and to the economic order that absorbs them even in their own homeland, draw on the patterns available for reproduction of their

social groups and for moving into new territory, patterns derived from deep socially-rooted assumptions that are condensed in the mythology.

Piaget discussed this aspect of the process of adaptation as assimilation -- the extension of existing structures or schemata to deal with new situations (1954; 1971:107-8); and Gadamer talked about the assimilation of new knowledge to existing schemata as Vorurteil, "prejudging," which is most commonly translated literally as "prejudice" -- for him the first step of learning. (This is followed--or accompanied-- for Piaget, by a stage of accomodation in which the discrepancies which come about in applying previous concepts to new situation lead to revision of the schemata; for Gadamer, learning.) (You may note similarities to Sahlins's (1981, 1985) "structure of the conjuncture".)

Today I will be talking about the first -- assimilation of new social situations to existing schemata, as it affects the process by which the Parintintin came to terms with new situations, both on a group level -- and here the schemata are articulated in myth -- and on the affective level in individuals, where the process of assimilation is transference.

I will start out by saying that this project which started out as a somewhat "applied" one -- it grew out of my taking part in a team sponsored by the FUNAI (National Indian Foundation, the Indian service of Brazil) to propose a delimitation for a reservation for the Parintintin -- has deepened my understanding of the Parintintin social organization as no previous more academically oriented study did. Some of the basic principles of Parintintin social organization stood out with great clarity as we (my Brazilian colleague José Carlos Levinho, anthropologist in the FUNAI who is now director of the Museu do Indio, and I) watched these people struggling in their confrontation with a new, dominating society. They are forced to adapt to a capitalist commercial situation, to living temporarily or permanently in an urban environment, and to having their living space, formerly limited only by shifting enemy groups, circumscribed by rigid European-capitalist ideas of boundaries. The last has led to some of the most profound challenges to the adaptation of their social order to new circumstances: a society that highly values movement and the freedom to move is now hemmed in.

The establishment of a reservation with a FUNAI post has not eased the problems that arise from the new circumscription. In fact, the FUNAI has added further complications. The FUNAI agency in Porto Velho, Rondonia, which has taken responsibility for the Parintintin, has not responded with a great deal of flexibility to the pattern of mobility when it inconvenienced their mode of operation. The Indian service has a long history of encouraging indigenous villages to move to the post; in Rondonia, that pattern

was only interrupted recently by one anthropologically enlightened coordinator in Porto Velho, Rogerio, who instituted a new policy of encouraging the recently contacted Uru-eu-wau-wau to maintain their separate villages away from the post -- a change resisted by FUNAI staff. For the Parintintin, this rigidity has led to considerable suffering on the part of recently bereaved individuals. The Parintintin are accustomed to moving whenever there is a death in the village. Depending on the status of the deceased person, one house may move to another location, or the whole village may move. If the loss is a deeply shared one, the strongly dominant tendency is for the whole village to move. This is an important part of their mourning process. But recently, when an older Parintintin leader -- my close friend Manezinho, with whose family I lived during my first field trip -- lost his wife Nega, and informed a FUNAI official of his intent to move his house away from the post to another spot that would not hold memories of his spouse and constantly remind him of her loss, the official strongly objected to his move. It would take his grandchildren away from the school, he said.

Manezinho acquiesced. When last I talked to him--two years ago now -- he was going to just move his house to a different place in the settlement. But it cost him a good deal of pain and intensified grief. The prohibition on his moving prevented him from handling his grief the way he wanted to, and the way his culture had always done.

The Parintintin are a fairly typical, Tupi-speaking society of the Amazonian region of Brazil. They are a highly mobile riverain group -- this is important -- with a livelihood based on fishing, hunting and the shifting cultivation of manioc, potatoes, various kinds of tropical fruits, etc. Before they were "pacified" in 1923, they used to move their settlements every few years, transplanting their manioc, pineapples and cotton and cashew bushes to new clearings and rebuilding the houses in the new location -- or simply carry the framework to the new village and rethatch it. Most of what they had was pretty mobile, and they took it along. What could not be easily moved were the plantations of major fruit-bearing palms--pupunha, tucuma, acai, cupuacu, and many others--and such resources as arrow-cane and Brazil-nut stands. These remained as resources at the old village sites which they would come back for.

This pattern of mobility posed a problem for us when we were making the proposal for a reservation. There was a strong tendency for young men to move away from the Parintintin territory -- some of them to other parts of the territory, but in many cases to work for Brazilians outside the area, even in the cities, especially nearby Humaita and Porto Velho. This posed an alarming drain on the population of the area, raising the possibility that the Parintintin territory itself might before long be emptied of its indigenous occupants. This is not altogether a new or fanciful possibility. Other Tupi-speaking groups share this tendency to mobility, and some of the Guarani have been known to pick up and

move en masse, leaving behind a post and a chefe de posto (Indian agent) serving an abandoned reservation. One Guarani group left its reservation in the state of Sao Paulo, moved on up the coast to Pernambuco, where its residence was recorded somewhat less than a decade after they left, then on up almost to the Amazon, and back down around along the Xingu -- a migration of several thousand miles, all in a few decades.

As we investigated, it became clear that the Parintintin departures from the land did not amount to an exodus. Though individuals and families stayed out in the world for years, a great majority of them periodically returned -- even from the city -- to spend a period of time in their home territory, or with relatives in another part of the Parintintin area, after which they might remain or go out in a new foray into Brazilian society. The pattern was one of outward movement and return, not a continuous outflow.

But the investigation did lead us to some further conclusions. As we examined the pattern, and compared it to the pattern of movement we could reconstruct in precontact society, we noticed further parallels that led us to recognize deeper patterns that had escaped me when I restricted myself to an internal study of Parintintin society. The pattern by which the Parintintin occupied new territory when it came into the Madeira region and moved up the major rivers in a southerly direction, was one of leaders moving with their groups up rivers, but returning from time to time to occupy previously used sites. It was an out-and-back movement, like the movement into the cities now. But even more, a young

leader undertook the opening up of new territory by hiving off of his father's or father-in-law's group and establishing a new settlement at a key point in the new territory, a point with access to a river and to hunting and fishing, palm groves for fruit and for thatch, and gardening resources, and other important resources such as arrow cane. The new leader's control of these resources from his strategically situated site -- his 'gwyr -- would be an important element in his attracting followers to open up the new territory. The process is repeated as the young leader takes his settlement further and further up the river he has chosen as his yvy -- his territory -- periodically circling back downriver to one of the spots opened up earlier. (Later in life, leaders are apt to return to one of the first spots they opened up on splitting from their father's group, romanticized as the origin.)

This pattern of group reproduction requires open space for the new group to move into. It was precisely the pattern followed as new groups moved into the urban scene. Antonio Arima moved into Humaita, established employment in a bakery, then obtained jobs there for other Parintintin men. These lived at his house for a while before they established residence nearby. Antonio claimed their subsequent allegiance to him as their headman, chefe--exactly as a young man would in founding a new local group in the forest. He ran into problems, though, in part because he did not have the same control over employment resources as he would have had over forest ones, in part because the expectations of his putative followers did not fully match his.

This pattern of opening up new territory -- in the forest or in the city -- is one instance of a pattern of cyclic progression that can be seen in many domains of Parintintin culture: it can be seen in a conception of cross-cousin marriage voiced to me by one Parintintin years ago, and in a cosmology whose fundamental coordinates are ñande tenonde-pe and ñande reviri, "the direction in which we are going" (i.e. southwards upriver) and "behind us." The "great tapir," tapiranuhu, apex of the hierarchy of species, resides at the point of origin-- somewhere around Rio de Janeiro, Paulino told me. This pattern of cyclical movement is realized in many myths¹, but especially in the founding story of shamanism, the myth of Pindova'umi'ga. In this, Pindiva'umi is annoyed by the fighting of the children in the forest, and resolves to leave. He goes up to the sky to look for a place, but the sky is crowded with vultures. He dives into the water, but it is full of fish. He goes underground, but he encounters ghosts there; and he goes into a tree, but it is occupied by bees. Finally, after this grand tour of the ecosystem, he goes once again into the sky, this time going higher than ever -- up to above where the sky is divided -- and he found an empty place. That's where he decided to relocate, and went back down to retrieve his family, lifting them up with the house--along with all the best land for agriculture and hunting--to

¹For example, "Bahira quarrels with his brother," in which Bahira vanishes with his family to a distant waterfall, where his brother seeks him out only to have him vanish again to another distant waterfall, and so on; and the story of the voyage of Tarave'pytym'vi from the point of origin to where the Parintintin now live, leaving a couple off at each settlement and continuing on south toward the Uru-eu-wau-wau and Karipuna.

form the abode of the sky people.

This myth, the origin myth of the sky people, is what establishes most completely the fundamental cosmological principle of movement. Movement was a fundamental necessity of reproduction of the social order; but the circumscribed circumstance they now live in, on a reservation hemmed in by borders, interdicts moving into new space. How can this be overcome?

Antonio Marazonas was faced with this paradox.² He was evicted from his own territory by the sale of a fazenda that had been established on that part of Parintintin land. He moved to the northernmost part of Parintintin territory, the Ipixuna, but there he had the choice of living in various groups with other headmen. He quarreled with each headman there in turn, until he was unwelcome there, then moved to the Laguinho area, where he again entered into competition with the headmen of each of the groups he lived in as well. The only route left to headmanship for him was to form his own group; but there was no room to expand outward in the reserve, which was bounded on its one viable side by the Transamazon highway.

Finally, he hit on an ingenious solution. He took advantage of the FUNAI's new interest in the Parintintin to enlist an official from the Porto Velho agency in ejecting a squatter, Maranhao -- actually the employee of a powerful landowner of the region -- who

²This incident was reported to me by Jose Carlos Levinho, who arrived for a field trip just after it had occurred. He was able to reconstruct it talking with all of the principals, including the FUNAI official involved. For a fuller account and analysis of this incident, see Kracke and Levinho, 1990.

was settled in a place on the border of the newly delimited Nove de Janeiro reserve. He managed to convince the official, and a contingent of military police, of his (totally unfounded) claim that he had grown up there, his father had gathered Brazil nut in the grove of Brazil-nut trees that was now Maranhao's.

Thus, with a harmless fiction he enlisted the Brazilian government in expelling a squatter to open a location for his own settlement. It was not the traditional way of "opening" a place, but he quickly attracted a group of other displaced men and women living in the area. With his own place, he was no longer a threat to the leaders of other groups, and established his leadership in a much more secure way.

The manner of deception by which he established his proprietorship was sanctioned by an equally prominent theme in Parintintin myth -- the celebrated figure of the trickster.

Brazilians who witnessed this coup might attribute Antonio's interest in Maranhao's spot to economic motives: Brazil nut groves are an important source of income. But, though his methods included an appeal to Brazilian values -- family rootedness in the "old family homestead" -- his real motives were much more Parintintin, the need for new space to establish a new group in order to establish his credentials for leadership as a headman.

TRANSFERENCE

Let me illustrate transference with my interviews with one man, Bebé, whom I met in the Amazonian city of Humaitá. Bebé, who works as a cook and motorist on a regatao (a kind of boat that plies the Madeira River buying gold from prospectors and selling them supplies -- a traveling trading post), is a striking person, affable and magnetic, and highly articulate. In one or two encounters between his group and local Brazilian antagonists, he served as a highly affective spokesman for his group of Parintintin.

Bebé is a man of contrasts. On the one hand, he exemplifies beautifully some very deep-rooted patterns in Parintintin life. Bebé's peripatetic mobility is almost a caricature of this Parintintin characteristic. "I never stop in one place", he says, "I always move on". Yet he speaks no Kagwahiv, disclaims any knowledge of myths, and in his manner and accent he could pass for a typical Brazilian garimpeiro, gold prospector. His contact with Parintintin society is only in his occasional visits to his mother in Humaitá or at her place on the Pupunhas Indigenous Area.

With his peripatetic life and frenetic energy, Bebé would have been hard to interview with the kind of approach I like to use for psychoanalytic understanding. (I like to hold a series of daily interviews with an informant, over a period of weeks to get a sense of the deepening of the relationship over time). But, as it turned out, I was given my opportunity with Bebé when he suddenly became very ill. With a low grade fever, he was struck

with faintness and weakness that confined him to his hammock. Coming to Humaitá, he was diagnosed at the hospital as having several varieties of parasites, from amoeba to helminth, and malaria to boot. Thus he was confined for several weeks in his mother's house in Humaita, and I was able to interview him.

We spent a lot of time talking about his symptoms, his deprivation of energy, and his hopelessness and discouragement about ever being cured. He blamed the place his mother and stepfather were opening up on the reservation, which he considered dangerously unhealthy, especially because of the stagnant water filled with rotting leaves and debris that generate malaria and other diseases. He has no faith in the hospital -- not without justification in terms of its past, though it has recently been transformed by a dedicated staff -- and he asks about rezadores, ritual curers, but does not have the energy to go to one. As the interviews progress, and the hospital treatments have only a slow effect, his despair intensifies.

In the fourth interview, after he despairs that he never was this sick before, I ask him about an epidemic of measles that he had earlier spoken of that occurred when he was young, which he had spoken of as the first illness he remembered. In order to date the illness in his childhood, I asked if his father had been alive at the time. When I put the question, he was confused; he could not recall whether his father was alive or not at the time. He finally decided he must not have been, for when he was sick at the barrac-ao, where he was working, and his mother came to fetch him,

she came alone.

As he recounted the story of his illness, he gradually began to retrieve the image of his father lying near him in the longhouse when he emerged from his feverish unconsciousness. It was the next day, in his interview, when, returning once more to his memories of that illness, he realised that his father was one of the many of his relatives who had died in that same illness that he had survived.

When he had this realization, a look of utter pain crossed his face and he rolled over in his hammock to face the wall. I asked him what he was feeling, and he said "nothing". "Mam~ae!" he groaned, more than called. When she came and said "what?" he said "I just wanted..."

From that point, he was more hopeful about his illness, and began to be more positive about the progress he was making, managed to get to a rezador, and recovered his spirits. The memory of his father's death in this illness he survived, with all the complicated mix of feelings he had about it -- perhaps including guilt for for having survived what so many of his close relatives had died in -- was present and revived by his present illness. It was so painful that he could not allow the memory into his consciousness, but he could not get rid of it. Instead he experienced the memory as if it were a fact of the present situation. It was present as a sense of overwhelming oppressiveness about the present situation, the hopelessness of preventing his father's death transferred to a feeling of

hopelessness about his own recovery. This presence of the past as present, insisting itself as if the past were part of the present reality, is the definition of transference. And the transference of a past memory into the present, this feeling of of the present as a repetition of the past, can only be undone by recovering the past as memory. This is what Bebé did.

The death of Bebé's father was the beginning of the wandering. It was soon after his father's death that he left his home in the Maia'zustes to work for first one then another boat owner -- as if to flee the pain of his father's death. When we see the excruciating pain that his father's death caused him, of loss and grief mixed with guilt, we can see why his pattern of wandering was so much more extreme than the usual Parintintin wandering, and why he abandoned -- or repressed -- even the memory of his childhood language and the culture he grew up with. To flee the pain, he had to flee his childhood.

At the same time, Bebé's experience tells us something about the normal pattern as well, for it points up the fact that for many Parintintin men, the death of the father is the point at which their wandering begins; only for most of them the father's death is not quite so traumatic, and so wandering does not take them so far afield as to abandon the culture and forget the language.

Bebé's experience is an example of transference in the more general sense in which Freud used it in Interpretation of Dreams, when he speaks of an unconscious idea being present but only able to express itself by attaching itself, so to speak, to a conscious

idea. It can only be detected through little inconsistencies in the expression of the conscious idea, or affects that are (perhaps just slightly) inappropriate or excessive -- like Bebé's excessive despair over his illness. Again, in "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through", Freud made the opposition of remembering to the repeating of the past in the present that we are condemned to when we cannot bring the memory to consciousness.

What led me to ask him about the measles epidemic in the first place? There was something, I think, about his helplessness before the illness, that reminded me of a child's, and prompted me to ask him about childhood illnesses which he might be re-experiencing.

The first anecdote I told you is a clear example of assimilation on Antonio Arima's part: he read the situation in Humaita in terms of the categories of his own tradition, as a potential situation for forming leadership. Here, ignoring some crucial differences, he misread the situation: his "hidden prejudice" betrayed him. The second situation was somewhat more complicated. Prejudice enters here, too, in terms of Antonio's perceiving the possibilities of a potential empty site for locating a new group. But to recognize the site as "empty," he had to resort to Brazilian juridical categories: Maranhao's occupation of the site was illegal. In making his case, he drew on other Brazilian values, fabricating a family history of residence in that spot. Here there was conscious, aware manipulation of the prejudices of

the Brazilian actors in the situation.

Transference, in the third case, is an affective form of what Gadamer refers to as "hidden prejudice" (1986 [1960] p.239)³. It is the perception of a current situation as identical with a past one, precisely because the past one is not available to memory. It is, then, a case of excessive assimilation -- the total assimilation of the present to the past that is brought about when memory of the past is repressed, but which is opened to accomodation when repression is lifted. The repression prevents any modification by accomodative processes, until it is lifted and the differences can be appreciated.

³"It is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to the voice that speaks to us in tradition."

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