

Matis Indians and the economy of culture media, tourism and anthropology in the Upper Amazon

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Lévi-Strauss, in an interview with Viveiros de Castro, commented that as (the indigenous societies) are getting hotter, meanwhile ours get colder. In France, this is very clear: the increasing interest in patrimony, and the efforts to find roots (Viveiros de Castro 1998). The Matis are in a very hot phase of their relations with international markets of tourism and television. And they become hotter precisely by giving value to their cultural patrimony. They show increasing interest in making money and gaining prestige for their material (blowpipes and bracelets) and immaterial culture (showing their hunting and animal parties).



*Binan Chapu Chunu and Txami show the mug produced by BBC.
"The gringos didn't tell us they would glue our children in a mug!"*

First Contact and the industrialized objects

The Matis established contact with the Brazilian government in 1978, before that, they had had just sporadic relations with outsiders, mainly rubber tappers and other Indians. The men and women who told me their memories from a time when they use to live basically among themselves, hunting, farming, gathering with tools made of wood and a few metal axes (Arisi 2007, Arisi 2010) are the same men and women who now I have observed negotiating to perform their monkey hunting and animal parties with foreigners from UK or South Korea. The Matis are establishing the

bases for the economy of their culture, the exchange of goods, technology and knowledge with outsiders.

I wrote about indigenous contact and isolation in my MSc dissertation and now I am working out a PhD thesis on how the same people are dealing with gringos from the other side of the globe. To write more bluntly: those old men and women came from the hidden head of rivers to be stars in the showbiz of global portrayal of Amazonia. I hope I can show from close observation what kind of difficulties and worries but also easiness and pleasures these kind of fast track historical events had brought to them.

Objectification of culture

At the same time that many anthropologists started to doubt of everything that smells like the essentialization of culture, both indigenous and many other peoples are starting to reify culture for themselves and to make claim for it for many reasons and in different ways.

The awareness and manipulation of the idea of culture that is taking place throughout lowland South America mirrors a similar self-conscious display of culture currently going on among indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world, such as in Australia (Myers 1991, 1994), New Zealand (Hanson 1989; Linnekin 1991), Melanesia (Foster 1995; Thomas 1992), and Polynesia (Sahlins 2000), among other places. (Oakdale 2004: 60)

In Brazil, there are researchers studying Indigenous transformations where culture participates in exchange relationships that become more and more commercial, intermediated by money (Coelho de Souza, 2005; Gordon, 2006; Carneiro da Cunha 2009).

I am engaging in this effort. I want to understand how people like the Matis create an economy of their culture, how do they negotiate with tourists, documentarists and anthropologists. All of us, consumers of their culture.



Matis, touristic guides and anthropologist camping with German tourists

Media in the forest and the Matis in the forest of media

I consider that I had three key moments when I could participate and observe the economic relation of the Matis with TV crews and with tourists. In July 2009, there was in the Javari a crew from MBC South Korea, the biggest communication company in that country). In August, three North Americans filmed for a pilot for Animal Planet/Discovery Channel, from the US, with a group of five Matis families in a Tikuna village, an indigenous community located in Colombia, by the Amazon river, close to the triple border Brazil, Colombia and Peru. Then, in October, I followed the Matis camping with four German tourists and three guides one from Yugoslavia, one Peruvian and one Venezuelan.



South Korean MBC TV crew shoots the Matis drinking "tatxik", beverage made of a vine

The first documentarists appeared in the lives of the Matis just after the contact in 1978. The Matis also entered, timidly, into the universe of information and communication technologies. They now use mobiles, digital cameras, emails, virtual networks like Orkut. Their images and films made by outsiders have been available in the internet for much longer.

My research tries to follow those associations that form this assemblage that provisory we can call the culture market or exotic culture market in the Amazon. I am interested in the economy and in the trading of the immaterial and material culture to outsiders. We, anthropologists, like tourists and documentarists, are important actors in the relations of those people from whom we all consume culture and who we may or may not help to create a certain status for culture itself and thereby a certain economy.

Thesis goals

To write an ethnography and analysis which will reflect the indigenous practices related to the

economy of their culture.

To contribute to the anthropological debate about indigenous transformations.

To contribute to Americanist and Amazonianist ethnology, in general, and the Panoan and Matis studies, in particular.

To question analytical and theoretical models regarding the Indianization of modernity (Sahlins 1997, Conklin 1997, Oakdale 2004), goods and objects taming/White people taming (Albert & Ramos 2000, Howard 2000) and post colonial (Appadurai 1986, Thomas 1991, Clifford 1997, Abu-Lughod 2002, Obeyesekere 2005).

[ed.: Any comments or input from materialworld readers would be more than welcome]

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