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In 1975, Jean Jackson, reviewing Lowland South American ethnography, wrote that, despite the significant increase in the quantity and quality of such work, South America remained, anthropologically speaking, the "least known continent". This state-of-affairs is probably still true despite the fact that the number of publications that have appeared over the past fifteen years far exceeds that from the period Jackson was writing about. Furthermore, in my estimation the recent work done on Lowland South America, with the possible exception of that from Papua New Guinea (there are some fascinating parallels between the two areas that have been little explored so far), is amongst the richest and most innovative that has appeared during that time. Unfortunately there is no space in this review to explore fully the reasons for this relative obscurity, although hints about my thinking on them occur in the text.

It has been necessary to make harsh and arbitrary decisions about what topics to cover and whose contributions to include. The editors of this volume encouraged me to take a personal stand so this article is very much a personal overview. I consider only a fraction of the work of which I think highly and have excluded almost everything of which my opinion is low. It is up to the reader to decide why no reference is made to any particular work.

The topics with which this review is mainly concerned, descent and affinity, fall within the general area of what is called social organization. This may sound dull and prosaic, but I believe that the ideas that have been developed over the past fifteen years have taken us a long way from the standard anthropological definitions of these terms. Indeed it has become clear that within Lowland America it is extremely dangerous to draw a distinction between the social and the cultural, and because of this there is a general lesson for anthropology to learn. However, before turning to these topics I want to spend a valuable paragraph on a different matter; one that has to a degree dominated the South American scene over the past two decades. It is the debate, if that is the right word, between the various protagonists of materialist, ecological and sociobiological explanations of social organization.

This is a vast topic and to do justice to it would require more space and time than I think it deserves. Initially the debate was driven by a naïve scientism that assumed positivistic facts would speak for themselves. If you collected enough data, regardless of their social and cultural context, and piled them on top of each other, some sort of answer would appear. This was then replaced by ideological commitments, often tempered by a misplaced teleology, that were basically reductionist in approach. Although some authors have continued to maintain a reluctance to acknowledge that the products of the human mind are also real and influential factors in a people's relationship to a given environment, a degree of moderation has crept in. Monocausal explanations have given way to an acceptance of multicausal factors, and then as the focus became less narrow and the appreciation of the native peoples' interaction with their environment greater, a further vital step forward was made. This has been signalled in the language adopted. A title such as Resource management in Amazonia: indigenous and folk strategies (Posey & Balée 1989) expresses well this shift in emphasis. In particular there is now the realisation that the Amazon forest is not the untamed wilderness of popular (and even scientific) imagination but to a significant extent (11.8% of the Brazilian terra firme; Balée 1989: 14-15) is the result of planned native activity. The evidence increasingly indicates that far from being pawns of an intractable environment, native peoples have, or at least had, sophisticated techniques, of which social organization is one, for managing floral and faunal resources.

This dispute, mainly conducted between North American anthropologists, has gone on alongside the developments in other, mainly Brazilian and European, schools of thought that have a more humanistic outlook. What is interesting is how little these two approaches have impinged on one another. An exception to this was a rather uninspired and artificially induced debate in Current Anthropology (Ross 1978). More illuminating have been the recent exchanges in the same journal between Bruce Albert (1989; 1990) and Napoleon Chagnon (1990) that suggest a chasm too great for a dialogue to bridge, at least for the time being.

This has not meant that the humanistic school has ignored the material world in which the Amerindian lives. It is merely that its members have taken a rather different line about the Amerindians' part in it. Perhaps one of the best examples of this type of work is Philippe Descola's La Nature domestique (1986) which incorporates both statistical material collected by himself together with the Achuar's own interpretations and understanding of their intentions and actions. Unfortunately, this work, in French, has as yet to make any impact on those who could learn most from it. Indeed it appears that Descola's work has not yet been reviewed in any of the main North American journals.

Descola's work is also part of a highly influential current of thought on social organization that can be traced back to the mid-1970s. Jackson (1975: 319-320) had commented on the fact that there had been a serious revision about the classification of many Lowland South American societies as unilineal, especially those reputedly matrilineal. This applied particularly to the Gê and the Guiana peoples, reclassified as cognatic, among whom uxorilocal residence had given earlier ethnographers the spurious impression of the presence of matrilineal descent groups. However, this was only a first step in what was to become a radical re-appraisal of
the concept of descent itself. It is difficult to identify any single individual responsible for this although there is a number of possible contenders. The public and collective revision was made at the symposium on “Social time and social space” at the International Congress of Americanists held in Paris in 1976 (Overing Kaplan, ed., 1977). Here a number of speakers questioned the value of “descent” as the term had become generally to be understood in anthropology. Perhaps one of the most succinct was Irving Goldman who, deploping the lack of an adequate theory of descent, insisted that such a theory must be rooted in an “understanding of the native theory of descent, that is, of the generative process” (Goldman 1977: 182).

Although that conference is widely considered to mark a watershed in Lowland South American anthropology and was the public expression of a general intellectual ambience, one can point to other contemporary works that contributed to the same movement. For example, Roberto Da Matta (1976) pointed to the social as opposed to the biological component of descent among the Apinayé. He later (1979) went further and proposed that continuity among the Northern Gê is achieved by “substitution” rather than “descent” because it occurs between the living and requires little depth of genealogical knowledge. At about the same time, Robert Murphy (1979) queried whether it was wise to import from other areas classical notions of lineage and lineality that did not seem to fit the South American case. It was the publication of “A Construção da pessoa nas sociedades indígenas brasileiras” (Seeger et al. 1979) that proved decisively influential. These authors rejected what they labelled as the African model with its emphasis on the definition of groups and the transmission of goods and offices, and went on to make some positive proposals. They argued that, in Lowland South America, societies are structured in terms of the symbolic idioms (names, essences, etc.) that relate to the construction of the person and the fabrication of the body. This set of ideas has been very influential, although one suspects that its full impact has been lost because not only that work but much of the resulting literature has been published only in Portuguese. An exception to this is Seeger’s 1981 monograph on the Suya. Of similar merit are Manuela Carneiro da Cunha’s Os Mortos e os outros (1978) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s Araweté (1986) in which the importance of death and of cannibalism as basis for a theory of the person is explored at length.

However, the problem of descent and lineality has failed to go completely away—especially as far as the Gê are concerned. Nimuendajú had reported matrilineal groups among the Northern Gê, and although attempts have been made to explain how he made such a mistake, some ethnographers have been reluctant totally to reject his claim. Thus William Crocker (1979), for example, hypothesised that the Canela, even if they no longer had matrilineages, had had them in the past. Christopher Crocker, although he went to some lengths to show that the Bororo are not matrilineal, still found himself writing that “the Bororo can be considered as functionally but not ideologically matrilineal” (J.-C. Crocker 1985: 32). The whole question has been recently and exhaustively re-examined by Vanessa Lea (1986) who insists that the Kayapó legitimise a « House’s » ownership by of names and prerogatives (nekrets) in terms of uterine descent that may be traced
back as many as seven generations. Indeed she argues that to deny the Kayapó have any notion of descent because their notion does not resemble that classically defined is to throw out the baby with the bathwater (ibid.: 399). Lea’s point is well made for there seems to be a problem of language and in our efforts to rid ourselves of the unwanted connotations that cling to descent, we have left ourselves speechless. It is true that the imagery associated with our word “descent”, the idea of descending generations that continually move down and away from some ancestor, is in most cases alien to native Lowland South Americans who use different forms of representation. A good example of this are the Canela who represent the idea of descent in terms of the sweet potato vine with each new potato figuring a more distant female descendant. “Descent” is the horizontal spread of the vines (i.e., matrilines) away from the central plant (W. H. Crocker 1990: 266-267). A more radically different idea is found among the Barasana who represent the succession of generations as leaves piling up on the forest floor and employ ritual means to keep in contact with their origins (S. Hugh-Jones 1977: 209). At the same time, Christine Hugh-Jones (1979) has shown how the Barasana ideas of descent involve two components: a one-generational cycle associated with male bone and semen and female flesh and blood, and a two-generational cycle involving the inheritance of patrilineal names. Among the Gê, as well as the shared substance of kinship, there are social units reproduced by means that are overtly non-genealogical: the transmission of name-sets. In the case of the Kayapó, it is the consistent transfer of names and prerogatives across several generations of mothers’ brothers to sisters’ sons that gives this society the matrilineal colouration of which Lea writes. Christopher Crocker (1985: 32) is clear that as far as the Bororo are concerned, they do not regard members of the same clan as blood relatives; rather membership is based on other shared qualities, refractions of the group’s totemic essence. Even so this does not mean that blood relationships are unimportant for they are, in both the uterine and agnostic lines. Thus while the Bororo organize themselves through two relationships systems, these are integrated in a variety of ways. For example, the mode of transmitting names, ownership of which bestows membership in corporate groups, is based on genealogical relationship. On the other hand, in Guiana the absence of social formations means that kinship is more exclusively the idiom of social relationships and shared substance the idiom of kinship. Thus, it would seem that, after all, everywhere in Lowland South America, genealogy, real or classificatory and however shallow, influences the transmission of properties, whatever they may be.

An excessive concern with definitions is not very productive and we should look for other ways in which to describe what is there. Lea (1986) has made a useful proposal. In grappling with the intricacies of Kayapó social organization she came to appreciate that it is the “House”, as the owner of names and prerogatives, that is the significant unit in societal continuity. It would appear that it was only after she had reached this conclusion that she became acquainted with Lévi-Strauss’s concept of “sociétés à maison”. This notion of House has allowed her to look again at the difficult problem of the nature of the social units (domestic clusters) that are located in the residences that encircle Gê village. The problem has been that these units are not “corporate groups”, at least in the usual anthropological
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sense of the term which almost invariably implies unilineal descent. However, Lea has used the notion of House as "moral person" to good effect in explaining the nature of these institutions as the units that transmit names and prerogatives. Furthermore, following Lévi-Strauss, she suggests that Kayapó Houses are able to accommodate the conflicting principles of social organization that exist in the society. By putting the emphasis on the House, she also finds herself in a position to reconsider the roles of centre and periphery, usually taken as a key feature of Gê and Bororo social organization and often associated with a series of other distinctions such as men and women, and public and private, with the implication that the second terms are inferior. In her view, this characterization is wrong because it is the Kayapó Houses on the periphery that own, control and transmit the names and valuables that are vital for the reproduction of the units (moieties, etc.) that operate in the centre of the village.

It might be said that to introduce the notion of House is merely to muddy the waters further by the addition of another ill-defined concept. I disagree with this on condition that the notion is not used too rigidly and that it has expository value. I find its application to the Northern Gê and the Bororo illuminating. How far it will work elsewhere in Lowland South America remains to be seen. The meaning of the maloca in the Northwest Amazon has been extensively explored by Christine Hugh-Jones (1979) and it is clear that here the House is an essential element in Tukanoan society. But these people with their shallow, patrilineal exogamous descent groups seem less in need of the House to counteract opposing principles. In Guiana where, as stated above, social relationships are mainly expressed in the idiom of kinship categories, the notion of House serves to hide the difference between kinship and co-residence, so that coresident non-kin become more kinlike than non-resident kin, thus mediating the opposition of inside and outside. But in neither case, is the notion of House likely to elucidate as much as it does for the Gê, where the House takes on the role of the "moral person" with corporate continuity.

Alongside the question of descent there is that of affinity and to some extent the problem here is even greater than it is with descent. Whereas with the latter term, we know that we are referring to the general area of the relationship between generations and the "generative process", we cannot be so certain that what has come to be called "affinity", because of a shadowy similarity with affinity elsewhere, necessarily concerns those related through marriage. The situation has been worsened by the tendency to refer to spouses as affines which they are not in normal English usage nor in many South American cases where they become kin as they increasingly participate in a common substance.

A starting point for considering this problem seems to be the concentric dualism that is pervasive in the symbolic ordering of Lowland South American societies. In this scheme the inside is associated with familiarity, kin and safety, the outside with the other, affines and danger. Joanna Overing Kaplan, in a review article (1981), drew attention to the fact that while different societies manipulate this distinction in different ways, both parts of the cosmos are everywhere equally important because the universe only exists and reproduces itself through the mixing of things that are different from one another. The evidence that affinity is part
of this otherness is very strong. Thus, among the Panare the distinction between marriageable and unmarrigeable may be expressed in the terms *piyaka* and *tunkonan*, the literal translations of which being respectively “another of the same kind” and “another of a different kind” (Henley 1982: 100-101). However, it is Albert’s 1985 study of the Yanomami that has most effectively described the concentrically constructed classification of groups, running from coresidents through friends and allies, enemies, potential enemies to those who are not known. He has further shown that these groups are distinguished not only by particular configurations of exchanges and conflicts but also, in quantifiable terms, by the types of mystical attack that emanate from them. The analysis is then taken a step further and it is shown how enemies, possible enemies and the unknown are tied into a system of reciprocal predation, mystical or actual, which is expressed through the notion of symbolic exo-cannibalism. The putrefaction and decay of the flesh on the exposed corpse are seen as the consumption of the flesh by the predator. Thus the first stage of the funerary ceremony, the exposure of the corpse, is linked in with the wider set of concentric relations. The relationship between a given community and its allies is ritually expressed through the endo-cannibalistic consumption of the ashes of the bones. The crucial role in this is played by classificatory affines of the deceased: in the first part of the funerary ritual by a coresident classificatory affine, and in the second part by a non-resident classificatory affine drawn from the category of friends and allies. People in these positions act as hinges that articulate between the different spheres of the Yanomami’s socio-political world, and, in the course of the funeral ceremony, serve to mask such fundamental distinctions as kin/affines, coresidents/allies.

This is just one of a series of works that has drawn attention to the cannibalistic imagery to be found in many Amerindian cosmologies. Although the association of enemy, cannibal and affine is widespread, its exact configuration varies. Thus Overing (1986) has described the abstract role of the cannibal outsider among the Piaroa and shows that it is the means whereby violence is excluded from intra-settlement relationships. This contrasts with the Pakaa Nova whose funerary rituals involve the actual consumption of flesh and bones by real affines (addressed as kin), who are reluctant cannibals compared with strangers (addressed as affines) who are avid cannibals (Vilaça 1990). Viveiros de Castro (1986) describes the role of the cannibal gods in the ontology of the Araweté and more recently (1993) has attempted to generalize a concept that arose from that work. This is what he has called in Portuguese “terceiro incluído” and in English, after Peirce, “thirdness”. This notion refers to the widely reported presence in Lowland South America of roles mainly external to kinship: formal friends, trading partners, and captives but including the Tukanoan mother’s sister’s child. They provide the dynamism within the concentric world by mediating between the same and other, the inside and outside, friend and enemy, living and dead. Above all, perhaps, it is the potential or classificatory affine that fulfils this role of thirdness, and why it is that affinity, which suggests something to do with relations through marriage, has also to do with the fact or fantasy of cannibalism.

Clearly more thought will have to be given to this idea of thirdness, but its identification offers some new avenues to explore. For some years it has been
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apparent that Amazonian affinity presents problems and various terms (such as “affinability”) have been coined in order to try and cope with the difficulties. In practice, most of these seem to have been introduced in order to protect the integrity of the dualistic structure of the so-called Dravidian terminologies. The recognition of a “third term” or the “ternary nature” of many terminologies offers a possible escape from the Indologist model (in my own view, nothing has been or is to be gained by referring to Amazonian terminologies as Dravidian) in the same way as the Africanist models of descent have been found wanting. Furthermore, and this is perhaps the important thing, the existence of the third term as a mode of articulation in a concentric dualistic structure is perfectly consistent with the generative process that we call “descent”.

This returns us to the beginning of this discussion on affinity, and the fact that creativity comes from the mixing of two unlike things which are potentially dangerous to one another. There is here what Viveiros de Castro (1993) has dubbed the “symbolic economy of predation”. The relation of this “symbolic economy” to the other Amerindian economies is best stated in these words (my translation):

The relations of predation hierarchically encompass the relations of production. This means that an economy of symbolic exchanges, linked to the creation and destruction of human components [...] circumscribes and determines the political economy of marriage and of the allocation of productive resources, a dimension which becomes a specific incidence of the global order of cannibalistic sociality. The simplistic conception of marriage exchange as involving the distribution, circulation and control of individuals (classically women) must give way to a shrewder consideration of the symbolic attributes and properties which circulate, not only in marriage but also in the general order of an assumed predation (Viveiros de Castro & Carneiro da Cunha, 1993).

In other words the widest social world of the Amerindian is not predicated on the narrow-range exchanges of spouses and things but on symbolic exchanges which even incorporate unknown people. Clearly there is here an idea of some considerable power and there is much evidence to support it although I would query whether this exchange has to use the symbolism of predation. There is one recent work which seems to suggest that an opposite concept might also be an appropriate predicate for such a schema. This is Fernando Santos Granero’s study (1991) of the Amuesha among whom it is the relations of love that hierarchically encompass all other relationships and give legitimization to them. This is not to say that cannibalistic ideas are absent, but the Amuesha associate them with the relatively narrow range influence of the shamans rather than the wide-ranging moral influence of their priests.

Love or violence, the proposed scheme of far-ranging symbolic exchanges incorporating unknown people, has obvious importance for the study of social organization. The focus of much work has reflected what is often the natives’ own view of their social world, consisting of the community and a handful of neighbouring communities, although ethnographers have realised that this ideal isolation and autonomy are, in practice, unachievable. What has been missing is the wider view whereby societal reproduction does not depend on the production and exchange
of visible and material items but on invisible but no less real events. The assumed cannibalistic consumption by an outsider of the putrefying Yanomami corpse is no less important than a visible birth for the continuity of society.

I have dealt, but only superficially, with the Amerindianization of two key terms in social organization. More space would allow for the consideration of a similar process with other concepts: hierarchy, gender, property, postmarital residence, for example. One crucial lesson that has emerged from all this work is that social organization is inseparable from culture; even to express it in these terms may be misleading since it suggests that they may be potentially separable. In Lowland South America, at least, all the evidence points in the opposite direction.

Finally, and although it is not in my remit to propose or predict where future studies should lie, the way now seems clear for a genuine comparative approach to Lowland South American sociocultural phenomena. This does not mean that we have all the analytical tools at hand, but rather it is only through comparative studies that appropriate tools can be identified and honed. It says little for Western thought that it has taken 500 years to begin to discover what we have destroyed.

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NOTES

1. It is to be hoped that this situation will improve with the publication of the English translation currently in preparation for Cambridge University Press.

2. A revised and shortened version of this work is now available in English (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO 1992). At the time of writing I have had not the chance to see it.

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