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General introduction

Nature and society: lessons from Amazonia

Devoted to the theme of the socialization of nature, the present book attempts to navigate between two conceptions of the world usually presented as mutually exclusive: the one sees nature as an animate twin of society, the other conceives it as the set of phenomena occurring outside the realm of human action. It is the signal privilege of ethnologists to tread this line, between a silent *physis* subjected to mathematization and a cosmos telling its tale through the illusory voice of those who make it speak, as they would walk a familiar road between two grassy banks, looking now to one side, now to the other. At once consenting trustees of a rationalist tradition and patient students of exotic systems of thought, they thread their way along the seam between two worlds. The pages that follow chronicle one such trek as it tacks between two representations of the relations one society entertains with its natural environment.

The setting is Amazonia, a region of the globe whose diversity of plant and animal life has excited the curiosity of the native inhabitants as much as that of the men of science who have visited the area. To the latter goes the responsibility of having transformed the great Amazonian forest into a major site for the naturalist projections of Western imagination. From Oviedo to Buffon, scholars have looked upon this original world as a sort of botanical and zoological conservatory, only incidentally inhabited by

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humans. Thus reduced to appendages to the realm of nature, the Amerindians could hardly be credited with a cultural approach to this domain. Only two years after the discovery of the New World, a Spanish doctor who had sailed with Columbus wrote: "Their bestiality exceeds that of any beast" (quoted by Fernandez de Navarrete 1825: 371). Nearly two and a half centuries later, this stubborn prejudice was vehemently illustrated by Buffon, for whom the American Indian "was in himself no more than a first-class animal and, for nature, merely an inconsequential being, a sort of impotent automaton incapable of bringing her reform or succor" (*Œuvres complètes*, VX: 443). It is to the immense credit of the pioneers of South American ethnography that they invalidated this approach by revealing to the Western World the richness of the symbolic productions of these "impotent automata" and the sophistication of their techniques for exploiting the environment. But naturalist ideology brooks no proof to the contrary; and so it is not surprising to see, as of late, the Amazonian Indians pressed by the distant heirs of Buffon into service as an unwitting illustration of the implacable determinism of ecosystems.

Present-day ethnography advances contradictory interpretations of man's relationship with his environment in the Amazon Basin. Briefly, two main approaches can be identified, the mutually exclusive character of which often has to do more with polemics than with reality. One approach sees nature as an object upon which to exercise thought, as the privileged matter, the springboard, for the taxonomic and cosmological imaginings of forest peoples. Environmental features are an unavoidable methodological constraint if the internal organization of the systems of representation is to be accounted for with any rigor. Nature and the way it is used are invoked as mere demonstrative props of the main undertaking, to wit: establishing the semiology of native discourse.

Starkly contrasting with the first approach, concerned mainly with symbolic morphology, ecological reductionism wildly attempts to explain all cultural manifestations as epiphenomena of nature's "natural" work. Postulating that society is totally determined by its environment, this utilitarian interpretation rejects any specificity that might obtain in the symbolic and social sphere. If these opposing perspectives may at times have been seen as two forms of monism, reproducing the aporias of an abusive mind–matter dualism, it is perhaps because both concede only a subservient role to practice. In one case, attention is focused almost exclusively on productions of the mind: any reference to practice is only as one of the ways of deciphering different types of encoded discourse (myths, taxonomies . . .); in the other case, practice is entirely reduced to its alleged

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adaptive function, thereby forfeiting all meaningful autonomy. And yet techniques of using the body, nature, and space are often the bearers of rich symbolism. But this symbolism is often implicit and not necessarily visible in the normative ideological productions – such as myths – usually called upon to explicate culture. In societies which, like the Achuar, have no coherent canonical theories of the world, the structures for representing practices must be pieced together from a motley collection of clues: an avoidance practice, a magical chant, or the way game is handled.[1]

I have attempted, using an ethnographic case, to analyze the relations between humans and their environment from the standpoint of the dynamic interactions between the techniques used in socializing nature and the symbolic systems that organize them. I have tried to isolate the principles that structure a praxis – the praxis itself being non-reducible – but, in so doing, not to prejudge the levels of causality or their hierarchy, a certain form of methodical doubt being needed if the snares of dualism are to be avoided. Materialist empiricism views representations of material life as secondary elaborations, mere ideological reflections of modes of appropriating and socializing nature. To me this perspective is unacceptable, for there is no justification for assigning causal or analytical preeminence to the material over the conceptual. Every action, every labor process begins with a representation of the conditions and procedures necessary for its execution. Or, according to Maurice Godelier's formula, "the conceptual part of reality" is no less concrete than its material part (1984: 167). A practice is thus an organic totality, in which material and conceptual aspects are closely interwoven; if it is an oversimplification to say that the latter are no more than deformed reflections of the former, it is still perhaps not impossible to assess their respective roles in the structuring of practices.

I am aware of the enormous difficulties raised by such an approach, and my ambition is not so much to map the problem as to mark some of the trails leading to it. As I said in the foreword, the object I have outlined is particularly difficult to construct, since the point is to avoid creating a separation between the ways the environment is used and the forms of representations these are given. It is on this one condition that we can show how the social practice of nature hinges at one and the same time on the idea a society has of itself, the idea it has of its material environment, and the idea it has of its intervention in that environment. My task was facilitated by the fact that the Achuar go about their socialization of nature in a primarily domestic setting. And so the household suggested itself as one pole of analytical continuity to which the different ways of using and representing the environment could be attached. Each household, standing

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alone in the forest, thinks of itself as an individual independent center where the relation to nature is constantly being acted out. The household's autonomy in the use of production factors is echoed by its autonomy with respect to the symbolic preconditions of this use, since no outside mediator is needed to perform the rites of propitiation.

Part One of this work, "The Sphere of Nature," describes the Achuar's environment and their representations of it (excluding the uses to which it may actually be put). This is pure author's artifice; if, upon occasion, it is possible to analyze the components of an ecosystem, while leaving aside a human presence that contributes ever so slightly to its modification, it is arbitrary to study the ways this system is represented outside the context of the techniques and ideas the Achuar use to interact with it. The choice was dictated by the necessities of synthetic exposition; it also allowed me to show that, contrary to the claims of neofunctionalist theses, the Indians' knowledge of nature is not governed exclusively by utilitarian considerations. Leaving the theme of abstract environmental knowledge, Part Two analyzes the various domains of concrete practice of nature in their material and conceptual forms. I have taken over the spatial divisions used by the Achuar themselves to differentiate the ways of socializing nature according to the metaphorical form and the place of practice (house, garden, forest, river). To a detailed, quantified description of the various subsistence techniques I have thus added an interpretation of the symbolic specificities of the practice used in each of the autonomous domains in which it manifests itself in a distinctive way. Chapter Eight, a thematic study of Achuar categories of practice, attempts to draw a parallel between the time allocated to the different sectors of activity and the indigenous model of the sexual division of labor. The last chapter is a detailed study of the productivity of the Achuar economic system which advances some hypotheses for the interpretation of its homeostatic character.

This type of analysis implies certain constraints which it is only fitting to state at the outset. The Achuar are new arrivals on the ethnographic scene, and the extreme scarcity of historical documents restricted my study to a strictly synchronic framework. The result is a snapshot, as it were, of the relations between the Achuar and nature taken at a given moment in their respective courses of development. The synchronic perspective demands in exchange that the object chosen be of homogeneous composition.[2] When Anne-Christine Taylor and I began our field study, however, a fraction of the Achuar population was beginning to undergo certain socio-economic mutations, sparked by episodic contact with missionary organizations (see Chapter One). Although the effects of these mutations were scarcely

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noticeable in daily life, I thought it preferable not to introduce into the study of the system of resource usage an analysis of the possible origins of its transformations. I therefore decided to use, in the framework assigned to this work, only the ethnographic material we had collected in those parts of the Achuar territory not yet penetrated by missionaries. But even given this methodological precaution, I am not so naive as to think that the subsistence techniques used by those Achuar who are the most sheltered from outside contact are still of an aboriginal type. However isolated it may be, no refuge area in the Amazon Basin is a true isolate; there is no Amerindian population that has not to some extent borne the technological, epidemiological, and demographic consequences of the European presence. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the system of socialization of nature presented here was, in 1976, one of the best preserved in Amazonia. Many Achuar were still fortunate enough to have no regular relations with the dominant national society, something quite rare at that time. Their lives were therefore free of all those constraints normally imposed upon indigenous nations by the internal colonial apparatus.

So that misunderstandings do not arise, I would also like to state the nature of my enterprise as it relates to the problematics of such fields as human ecology and economic anthropology. It is already clear that I have eschewed a naturalist perspective and, while I have undertaken to analyze the Achuar ecology, I will not be using biologists' techniques. I use the term ecology in its broadest meaning to designate the study of the relations obtaining between a community of living organisms and its environment. Employed as a shortcut, the word does not imply any affiliation on my part with the theoretical positions held by the proponents of geographic determinism, quite the contrary; one of my objects is to refute the reductionist theses of ecological anthropology. Moreover, considering the complexity of the problems encountered by biologists in studying symbiotic interactions on a tiny scale, it is evident that an ethnologist can hardly deal with the ecology of a whole human society in anything but an almost metaphorical form. The anthropological analysis of the relations between a society and its environment thus requires that two methodological precautions be observed. In the first place, the existence of many ecological chains of determination and the fact that they are tightly intertwined demands that great care be taken in the assignment of causes: the system of constraints an ecosystem is thought to exercise on the ways humans adapt can be elucidated only conditionally. But it must also be emphasized that the relations a society entertains with its environment are not univocal and cannot be conceived exclusively in terms of adaptive responses; ethnology's

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contribution to an ecological approach – in the broad sense of the term – consists rather in showing the creativity each culture brings to its manner of socializing nature.

If it is to fulfill its aim, such a project should consider those relations that people contract with one another in the process of production and reproduction, and especially those that organize the forms of access to resources and the way they are used; it should therefore encompass the entire sphere of social relations. I chose not to do this here for reasons of ease of exposition, not of principle. In order to justify my hypotheses and give the reader a chance to judge for him- or herself, I needed to make the ethnographic description of the intellectual and material techniques of utilizing nature as complete as possible. Therefore this did not seem the place to go into a serious analysis of Achuar social structure as well. In the interests of keeping the text to a reasonable length, I also decided to leave aside the description and analysis of the techniques used in producing certain artefacts, of which it may be said that they represent a later stage in the socialization of nature. Pottery manufacture, the weaving of cloth and baskets, and the fabrication of ornaments are complex activities, and their products are loaded with very rich and partially esoteric symbolic values; too hasty a treatment would not have done them justice.

This book is not really a monograph in economic anthropology, then, despite the detailed measurements it contains of both allocations of labor and returns of subsistence techniques. If the term economy is meant to designate that structure which combines, in a different way for each society, the system of energetic exchanges consciously organized within an ecosystem with the system of sociocultural devices which makes it possible to reproduce these flows, then it is clear that this work will be dealing primarily with the first term of the pair. The way the Achuar organize domestic production legitimizes the separation. Without being exactly autarkic, each isolated domestic unit nevertheless constitutes an autonomous center of production and consumption which depends on its social environment only to reproduce its labor power, renew some of its means of labor, and ensure the conditions of its access to natural resources. As households depend only minimally upon each other for the concrete process of socializing nature, it seemed justifiable provisionally to leave aside the supralocal social relations of production. In sum, although this book is a totality with a goal of its own, it is also the first stage of a vaster undertaking, the basis for a future analysis of the forms and conditions of social reproduction found in Achuar society.

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Achuar and Jivaro: an illusory state of nature

The Achuar are one of the four dialect groups that make up the Jivaroan linguistic family (the others being the Shuar, the Aguaruna, and the Huambisa). With a population on the order of 80,000, the Jivaro are probably at present the largest culturally homogeneous indigenous nation in the Amazon Basin. Scattered throughout the forests covering the eastern foothills of southern Ecuador and northern Peru, they occupy a territory greater than that of Portugal, one endowed with a rich ecological diversity (Figs. 1 and 2). Prior to the Spanish conquest, the Jivaro held sway – linguistically at least – over an area larger than they do today, since it extended all the way to the Pacific coast (Descola and Taylor 1981). Within the Jivaro group, the Achuar represent a small bloc of some 4,500 individuals sprinkled along either side of the border between Ecuador and Peru (Fig. 3).

Although the popularity of shrunken heads in the West earned the Jivaro dubious fame, paradoxically the group remained little known to ethnologists. Of the huge number of publications devoted to the Jivaro over the past two centuries, we found only three monographs, during our exploratory study in 1974, that offered any appreciable guarantee of ethnographic diligence (Karsten 1935; Stirling 1938; Harner 1972); and two of these were written before the last World War. All three provide only sketchy information on the economic and social organization of the Jivaro groups. Finally, the verdict which, in 1945, concluded the review of Jivaro sources in the *Handbook of South American Indians* still seemed valid thirty years later: "Present needs include adequate studies of technology (which are now only partially available), clarification of social structure and function and of marriage practice through a genealogical approach, verification of the patterns of religion and shamanism, analysis of property rights, and study of agricultural methods" (*Handbook of South American Indians*, 3: 619). Harner's book on the Shuar, published in the interval, fell far short of filling in all the blanks, and those remaining thus provided a clear outline for a program of research.

Preliminary investigation revealed that, as of the early 1970s, the Achuar were the last of the Jivaro groups still to be spared the destructuring effects of Western contact. They maintained the most salient features of a traditional way of life, fast vanishing in the other dialect groups. Moreover, no description of the Achuar had ever been published; some urgent "salvage ethnography" seemed in order if one of the last unacculturated societies of the Amazon Basin was to become known.[3] The idea of gaining a

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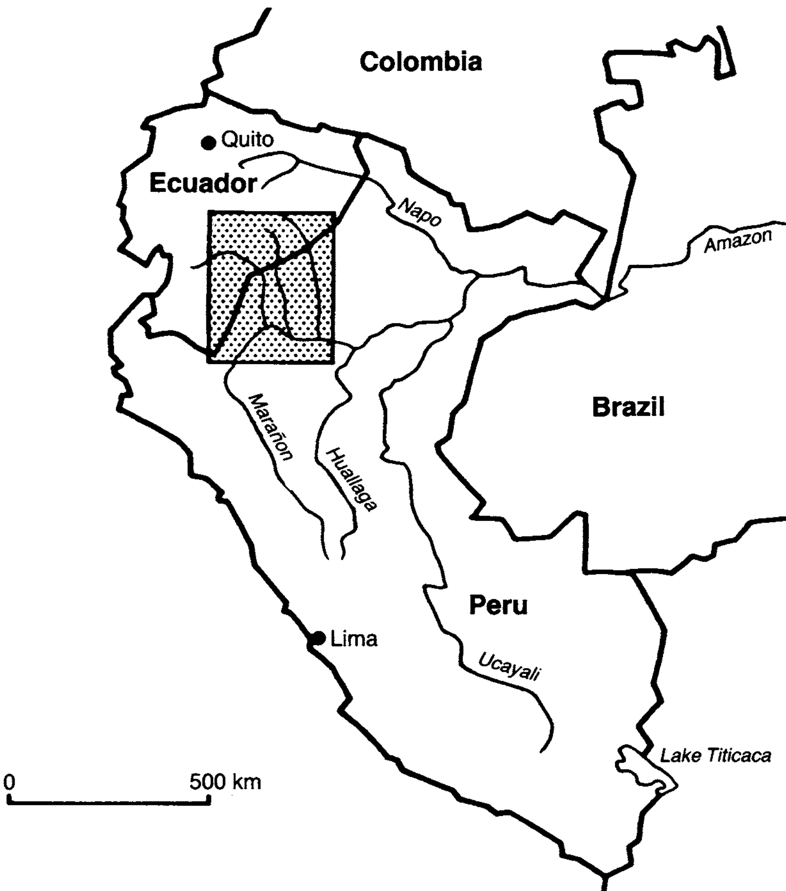
more intimate understanding of these paradoxically little-known Jivaro, which first germinated in the remote calm of a library, eventually led us to share the Achuars' daily life for the better part of three consecutive years.[4]

The Achuar are a perfect synthesis of those enigmatic inclinations peculiar to many societies of Amazonian Indians. They are a near caricature of zero-degree social integration and the living illustration of the inadequacy of functionalist conceptual models to account for the facts of a society. The lack of those institutions that Africanists have taught us to regard as the sociological axes of classless societies – chiefdoms, village communities, unilineal descent groups – does not seem to hamper the Achuar to any degree. Internal conflict is permanent, but it does not follow



1. Location of the Jivaro Group in Upper Amazonia

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the fine segmentary logic dear to ethnologists. In view of the extreme atomization of these quasi-autarkic households engaged in endemic feuding, it is obviously tempting to evoke the presocial condition in which, according to the well-known formula, "every man is Enemy to every man" (*Leviathan*, Everyman Library, 1970). It is with reference to a Hobbesian state of nature, then, that Chagnon proposes to interpret certain warlike societies, like the Jivaro or the Yanomami (1974: xi, 77). In the case of the Achuar, the state of generalized anomia is more apparent than real, however; and it can be reduced without risk of a philosophical misconstruction

In point of fact, their residential atomism is tempered by a supralocal structure for which the Jivaro have no name and which we will call the "endogamous nexus" (Descola 1982b). An endogamous nexus consists of from ten to fifteen households scattered over a relatively well-defined territory, whose members are closely and directly related by kinship and affinity. The concept of endogamous nexus has no formal existence in Achuar thought, unless it is as an echo of the prescriptive norm to marry "close to home" (both geographically and genealogically). Prescriptive marriage between bilateral cross-cousins reproduces the parents' and grandparents' marriages, following the classic Dravidian model (Dumont 1975; Kaplan 1975; Descola 1982b; Taylor 1983a). Polygyny, preferably sororal, is widespread; residence is strictly uxorilocal and levirate is systematic. Nexus are never completely endogamous, the highest rates of endogamy being found in those with the highest demographic density; many exogamous unions stem from the abduction of women in the course of raids on neighboring nexus.

The territorial axis of an endogamous nexus is the river or stretch of river whose name is used to designate all members of one nexus as being part of a geographic whole (e.g. *Kapawi shuar*, "the Rio Kapawi people"). Although the scattered households of a nexus are strung out, more or less uninterruptedly, along the river and its main tributaries, the territorial divisions between endogamous zones are fairly clear. There is generally a no-man's-land of at least a day's walk or canoe trip between adjacent nexus. The abstract unity of each nexus is thus based on territory and on the interlacing of ego-focused kindreds, but also on the sphere of influence of a great man or a pair of great men, most often two brothers-in-law who have exchanged sisters. The Achuar great man is a tried and tested warrior who, because of his ability to manipulate vast networks of alliances, is capable of organizing the offensive or defensive strategy of a nexus. He assumes a directive role only in times of conflict, and then in military matters alone; any allegiance

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to him is personal, temporary, and not codified by any institution. Moreover this war leader derives no particular economic or social advantages from his status, even though his fame generally enables him to capitalize prestige, making him much sought as a partner in trading networks. The great man is thought of as temporarily embodying the unity of a nexus and, by virtue of this, the territory he represents sometimes carries his name ("the land of X").

Serious conflicts within a nexus are rare; when one does break out, the opponents are often a native of the territory and a resident relative-by-marriage from another nexus. Usually ignited by a real or imaginary infraction of the marriage rules, this type of clash, individual at the outset, rapidly escalates into a conflict between nexus. The male affine returns to his kindred for help and protection, and spreads highly alarming rumors about the belligerent intentions of the nexus he has just left. The most frequent pretext for transforming a *casus belli* into declared war is a sudden death in one or another of the factions present, which is attributed to a shaman's attack. Indeed, Achuar shamans are credited with being able to kill from a distance, and their death-dealing capacities are often called upon in confrontations between nexus (Descola and Lory 1982). As the two sides recall more and more unpunished murders yet to be avenged, the shared responsibilities become inextricable. Both sides then launch a series of expeditions, the aim of which is to kill as many of the other side as they can.

When a conflict threatens to spread, the great men of each camp gather their factions into big fortified houses capable of sheltering up to six or seven domestic units. For the duration of the war, which can last up to two or three years, the assembled Achuar live in a state of siege, broken by periodic sorties into enemy territory. When the most deadly phase of the conflict is past, each unit regains its former place of residence. Whatever the outcome, a clear military victory of one nexus over the other does not imply territorial annexation. The object of armed conflict is therefore not local sovereignty. Achuar society lives in a perpetual state of war, and it is no doubt significant that their vocabulary has no term for peace; daily life swings between times of out-and-out warfare and periods of latent hostility. This endemic feuding has important demographic consequences, since something on the order of one out of every two male deaths can be attributed to war, as compared to one in five for women.

This rapid sketch of the Achuar sociological armature brings out the highly labile character of a system of social relations organized around factionalism and institutionalized feuding. Although it is periodically reaffirmed through "fortress life" and drinking parties, solidarity among

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