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978-0-521-57467-9 - In the Society of Nature: A Native Ecology in Amazonia

Philippe Descola

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The Achuar Indians live in the remote forest reaches of the Upper Amazon and have developed sophisticated strategies of resource management. Philippe Descola, who has gathered material over several years of fieldwork, documents their rich knowledge of the environment. He explains how this technical knowledge of the increasingly threatened Amazonian ecosystems is interwoven with cosmological ideas that endow nature with the characteristics of society. Combining a symbolist approach with an ecological analysis, the book contributes a new theory of the social construction of nature.

“This work is not only an historical and ethnographic contribution to the study of a particularly important area of the New World, at the hinge of Amazonian and Andean high cultures; it is also a work of undoubted theoretical and methodological value, one that opens up new paths for anthropological thinking.”

Claude Lévi-Strauss

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# IN THE SOCIETY OF NATURE

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*A native ecology in Amazonia*

PHILIPPE DESCOLA

Translated from the French by Nora Scott



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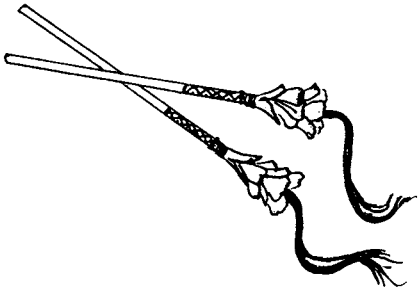
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## Preface



The present book is both a description and an analysis of the technical and symbolic relations entertained by an Upper-Amazonian Indian tribe with its natural environment. The result is a degree of ambiguity, which the unsuspecting reader might ascribe to some awkwardness in the construction or vagueness in the conception of the theme expounded. And yet this ambiguity is a basic constituent of the anthropological approach, which has always oscillated between a subtle geometric mentality and an *esprit de finesse*. The contradiction is usually resolved by a division of labor: while some favor a type of intuition rendered demonstrative by the consistency of the logical sequences it permits, others – less numerous, it is true – concentrate on detecting patterns which can be confirmed empirically by means of statistics. The theme I chose precluded such disjunction, since any system whose aim is the socialization of nature inextricably combines material as well as conceptual aspects. The analysis of energetic exchange flows calls for rigorous quantification of food production and time allocation, while the study of symbolic relations with the environment depends on the interpretation of myths, taxonomic systems, and magical techniques and rituals.

Unfortunately quantification and hermeneutics rarely make a happy match, and each member of this unlikely couple tends to be self-sufficient in its particular sphere of objectivation. Whatever the economy of the text, the description of production techniques, the measure of their efficacy, and the

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analysis of the social actors' representations of them seem doomed to discursive divorce. Each part of the development takes on a sort of internal coherence of its own, which persists like a faint echo when it comes to showing that these are not separate, autonomous objects, but merely discrete approaches to a single object. No doubt this unfortunate dissociation of the various ways of analyzing praxis is inevitable, however, and the present work is no exception. But beyond the methodological constraint of disjunction, I propose to show that it is illusory and useless to draw a hard line between technical and conceptual determinations. I have therefore given equal heuristic weight to quantitative and qualitative data in this analysis of the relations between one society and its natural environment. The nature of the subject dictates that the book be bound by the rules of the ethnographic monograph; but the reader must judge for him- or herself whether its ambition – to avoid the snares of dualism – is, in the end, fulfilled.

Any undertaking of this sort is obviously conditioned by the intellectual milieu in which it was conceived. As a young philosophy student, I succumbed, like many of my contemporaries, to the “scientific” fascination of Althusserian Marxism. Ethnology shook me out of this dogmatic lethargy and gave me a lesson in both humility and hope. Instead of a totalizing theory that promised to render reality absolutely intelligible, to my naive stupefaction, I discovered the existence of strange, exotic institutions for which no number of reductionist incantations of “determination in the last instance” could account.

Whereas Marx himself minutely detailed precapitalist socio-economic systems, we thought we could simply pronounce on the scientific worth of his labors, never addressing the question of their operative fruitfulness. To break out of the circular exegesis of *de jure* questions, I had personally to undergo the painful test of the facts; I had to take leave of the lofty community of philosophy and descend into the dark depths of empiricism.

The ethnological exile turned out to be promising, however, for, if it humbled the neophyte, it also gave him reason not to despair. Predictably for a philosopher, it was Claude Lévi-Strauss' work that greeted me on the threshold of my new world and was soon joined by Maurice Godelier. Of these authors, our little group of doctoral students generally knew just enough to hold forth with brio on the notion of structure, but that was about all, and it was very little. I suddenly discovered that what we had until then regarded as an idealism without a transcendental subject, or as a metastasis of Marxist epistemology could also be used to solve some thorny ethnographical problems. In his structuralist study of Amerindian myth-

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ology, Lévi-Strauss showed that the logic of the concrete was amenable to rigorous analysis, thus shaking the comfortable certainties of the reflection theory of myth. Grounding his thinking in a reinterpretation of Marx and in a vast body of literature on economic anthropology, Godelier challenged Althusserian mechanical causality by revealing the conditions in which certain elements of the “superstructure” could also function as relations of production. From Godelier and Lévi-Strauss alike I also learned that an ethnographer must be attentive to the slightest detail, however lowly. Resituated in a meaningful context, the plumage of a bird, the revolution of a planet, the productivity of a field or the construction of a fence become crucial elements for interpreting social and cultural reality. This scrupulous attention to the concrete fabric of material life was paradoxically lacking in the would-be Marxist ethnological works of the day. With a few exceptions – in particular André-Georges Haudricourt – ethnologists of a materialist stripe seemed to favor a morphological approach to relations of production over in-depth analysis of systems of productive forces. Both Lévi-Strauss and Godelier, each in his own area, made me see that the way to understanding social logics necessarily led through the study of the material and intellectual modes of socializing nature. Like exchange or ritual, the ecology of a society appeared as a total social fact that synthesized technical, economic and religious elements following a pattern whose deep structure was isomorphic with the other structures underlying the social whole.

This rather long preamble was meant to show the extent of my intellectual debt to those who pointed me towards the type of anthropological approach illustrated in the present work. But even when marked by gratitude, a declaration of filiation does not guarantee recognition of paternity; therefore I alone take the responsibility for any deformations that may have occurred in the thought of those who inspired my undertaking.

The initial intellectual fecundation led to the birth of an ethnographic study, which Lévi-Strauss and Godelier encouraged wholeheartedly. My ethnographic knowledge suffered from numerous gaps, and when, in 1973, Lévi-Strauss kindly accepted to direct my thesis, my entire apprenticeship still lay before me. I acquired the rudiments of my trade at the Sixth Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (now the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales), and particularly in the seminar on research methods in anthropology. I became acquainted with Amerindian anthropology in Simone Dreyfus-Gamelon’s seminar, which drew the whole generation of young ethnologists interested in the lowlands of South America. Her

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teaching and advice were valuable assets when it came to drawing up my research project. Maurice Godelier's seminar initiated me into the *arcana* of economic anthropology and to the techniques of measuring and quantification he had perfected in the course of his fieldwork among the Baruya of New Guinea. From him I learned that reading Polanyi and Schumpeter did not obviate the necessity of knowing how to measure a field or to time a task.

Finally, in 1976, I was able to leave for Ecuadorian Amazonia and to live among the Achuar, thanks to funding from the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, obtained through the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale of the Collège de France, whose director at the time was Claude Lévi-Strauss. I would like to thank the many people who helped me over the course of my fieldwork. Mr. Dario Lara, adviser with the Embassy of Ecuador in France, saw to the administrative formalities for my stay and provided me with a warm recommendation to the authorities of his country. A supplementary stipend from the CNRS and a Paul Delheim scholarship from the Collège de France enabled me to spend nearly all my time, from September 1976 to September 1978, with the Achuar. From September 1978 to September 1979, I divided my stay between fieldwork and teaching in the anthropology department of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, in Quito. This extension was made possible by a scholarship from the Mission de la Recherche, which Professor Olivier Dollfus was kind enough to obtain for me. My courses at the Catholic University gave me the opportunity to establish a true working relationship with my Ecuadorian colleagues, the only concrete way of showing them my gratitude for their warm welcome. From them I learned a great deal about the social and political realities of Ecuador, and about the art of living that characterizes Quito and which I dearly miss. I have in mind more particularly Segundo Moreno, Diego Iturralde, Marcelo Naranjo, Jose Pereira, and Jorge Trujillo, who have done so much to ensure that anthropology is recognized in Ecuador as both an important scientific discipline and an instrument for lucid social criticism.

I would also like to thank the civilian, military, and church authorities as well as the native organizations which gave me continuous support. I am especially grateful to Mr. Hernan Crespo Toral, director of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, for having granted me a permit to conduct ethnological research, and which served as a safe-conduct pass in many circumstances. The Federación de Centros Shuar took an interest in my project and gave me permission to proceed as I saw fit. I treasure memories of my conversations with a number of its leaders: Domingo Antun, Ernesto Chau, Ampam Karakras, Rafael Mashinkias, and Miguel

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Tankamash, who are struggling to preserve their cultural identity while facing the present with courage and realism. Without the support of this outstanding native organization and its Salesian advisers – in particular Juan Bottasso and Luis Bolla – I could never have realized my project. I also owe a debt of thanks to Lloyd Rogers (Shell-Mera Evangelist Mission) and to the North American pilots of the Alas de Socorro company, who organized most of my air trips around the Achuar territory.

To Antonino Colajanni and Maurizio Gnerre, pioneers in anthropological fieldwork among the Achuar, I am indebted for having guided my first steps in the forest; I would like to thank them here for that handsome gesture, which was the beginning of a long friendship. Professor Norman Whitten was constantly forthcoming with advice and encouragement; his familiarity with the places and people of Ecuadorian Amazonia, as well as his keen anthropological perception made him an ideal mentor for a beginning anthropologist. I received a warm welcome from my ORSTOM compatriots based in Quito, who gave me the benefit of not only their scientific aid but their generous hospitality.

In 1980 I returned to France and turned to writing my thesis, which constitutes the main matter of this work. During this period many colleagues and friends gave me their support. I am especially indebted to Mr. Clemens Heller, director of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, for his timely financial assistance on many occasions. Nor shall I forget the exceptional working conditions provided by King's College in Cambridge. But my gratitude goes first and foremost to my real and classificatory families, to use an expression common to ethnologists and the Achuar. By sharing his interest in Indian America with me, my father oriented my research towards the New World, while my mother devoted several months to typing my manuscript. With my wife, Anne-Christine Taylor, I shared the joys and trials of life with the Indians as well as the uncertainties and enthusiasms of work *in camera*. To say that this book owes much to her is an understatement. It is every bit as much the fruit of our complicity as of my own labors. Out of sight, but close to heart and mind, my Achuar classificatory family was formed little by little by the mythic ties of adoption. From Wisum, the first man to call me “brother” and to treat me as one, I inherited a vast kindred that extends to the limits of the tribe. This book is dedicated to all those Achuar who took me in and educated and protected me because they pretended to take the duties of our imaginary kinship seriously. I hope that, when the grandchildren of my brother Wisum are able to read this *apachiru Yakum papiri*, the world it attempts to describe will not have vanished forever.



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## Preface to the English edition

Although the original edition of this book appeared in French in 1986, I finished writing it in early 1984. In the ten years that have elapsed since then a great amount of material has been published on the cultural ecology of Amazonian Indians as well as on the ethnography of the Jivaro. Faced with the choice of either extensively rewriting the book to include and discuss this new material, or to let it stand as it was, I chose the second solution. Indeed, most of the data published in the last decade on native adaptation to Amazonian habitats appears to substantiate the hypotheses I set forth in this work rather than contradict them. As for the theoretical approach to the question of the relations between nature and society which I advocate here, I have every reason to believe that it has lost nothing of its actuality and relevance.

*Paris, 1993*

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## A note on spelling



The Achuar terms used in this work are spelled according to the traditional transcription of Jivaro adopted by agreement between the Federación de Centros Shuar, the Salesian Mission, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. This transcription is based on the phonetic system of Spanish and is not entirely rigorous; nevertheless, it seemed legitimate to choose a standardized system of transcription used in alphabetizing those for whom Jivaro is the native tongue.

	Standard Jivaro*	Phonetic transcription		Standard Jivaro*	Phonetic transcription	
consonants	ch	/č /	vowels	a	/ a /	
	j	/h /		<u>a</u>	/ã /	
	k	/k /, /g /		e	/ɛ /	
	m	/m /		<u>e</u>	/ɛ̃ /	
	n	/n /		i	/i /	
	<u>n</u>	/ɲ /		<u>i</u>	/ĩ /	
	p	/p /, /b /		u	/u /, /w /	
	r	/r /		<u>u</u>	/ũ /	
	s	/s /		y	/i /, /j /	
	sh	/š /		diphthongs	au	/ɔo /
	t	/t /, /d /			ai	/ei /
	ts	/c /, /ts /, /dz /			ei	/ɛi /
w	/w /, /β /					

\*In standard Jivaro an underlined phoneme indicates nasalization (see above); to simplify the typography, I have omitted the underlinings in the text.