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Amerindian experiences of change and hierarchy in recent ethnographies from South America

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Amerindian experiences of change and hierarchy in recent ethnographies from South America

Experiências ameríndias de mudança e hierarquia em etnografias recentes da América do Sul

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I discuss four recent ethnographies relevant to two current debates in Amerindian South American anthropology: change and hierarchy. Firstly, I present some of their analytical tools and their approach to indigenous experiences in the Bolivian highlands, Patagonia, Brazilian Upper Xingu and Surinam. This review essay will not exhaustively discuss the content of these books but only those relevant to the comparison of these books' main emergent problems and contributions.

Social change; Hierarchy; Amerindian studies; South America; Ethnography

São debatidas quatro etnografias recentes, relevantes para dois debates atuais na antropologia ameríndia sul-americana: mudança e hierarquia. Em primeiro lugar, são apresentadas algumas das suas ferramentas analíticas e a sua aplicação às experiências indígenas nas terras altas da Bolívia, Patagónia, Alto Xingu brasileiro e Suriname. Este ensaio de revisão não discute exhaustivamente o conteúdo desses livros, mas apenas aqueles relevantes para a comparação dos principais problemas emergentes e as contribuições específicas desses livros.

Hierarquia, mudança, etnologia, ameríndios, América do Sul



- *Amazonian cosmopolitans. Navigating a shamanic cosmos, shifting indigenous policies, and other modern projects.* Suzanne Oakdale. Lincoln: Nebraska University Press. 2022.
- *Loss and wonder at the world's end.* Laura A. Ogden. 2021. Durham: Duke University Press.
- *Nurturing the other. First contacts and the making of Christian bodies in Amazonia.* Vanessa Grotti. 2022. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- *After servitude: Elusive property and the ethics of kinship in Bolivia.* Mareike Winchell. 2022. Oakland: University of California Press.

The four books I discuss here are relevant to an anthropological debate on two current issues in Amerindian South America: change and hierarchy. Before exposing their treatment, I will first present below some of their most visible analytical tools and how they approach indigenous experiences among the inhabitants of Ayopaya (Bolivian highlands), Selk'nam of Patagonia (also known as Ona or Yagán), Kawaiwete (formerly known as Kaiabi) in Brazilian Upper Xingu along with Trio (a transnational Carib-speaking population known as Tirio in French Guiana and as Tiriyo in Brazil) and Akuriyo of Surinam. Not all the sections of this review essay will discuss all the content of the works of the social anthropologists based in the Global North Mareike Winchell, Laura Ogden, Suzanne Oakdale and Vanessa Grotti. This will rather depend on the relevance of each work, the available space and certainly also my own competence.

Analytical tools

Regarding their analytical tools, the Oakdale's ethnography explicitly adopts those of Perspectivism, and Ogden's work would seem to similarly embrace the concept of "wonder". Rather tacitly, in the case of Winchell's monograph, a reader could observe the mark of certain recurrent dualisms. Finally, when it comes to Grotti's descriptions, one finds a rejection of frequent analytical concepts ("identity" and "familiarization").

The emphasis on the body in *Amazonian Cosmopolitans* — e.g., "These are stories of how these men's bodies changed as they became part of new social configurations" (p. 2) — follows Perspectivism, for example, when she evokes "the simultaneous possession of two bodies and two perspectives" (p. 14) — an expression of Perspectivism previously mentioned once by Vilaça (2021. See also Latour 2009, Viveiros 1998, 2004, 2012, Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Oakdale describes as well what she considers "an Amazonian orientation", that is, "a trend to bring the primacy of alterity over identity" (p. 2).

This deviation from identity as an analytical tool is also shared by Grotti's *Nurturing the Other*, which states that there is an "Amerindian ontological incompatibility with the notion of identity" (p. 16). This radicalisation might arise from her observation that the distinction between human and animal bodies requires a constant effort among Amazonian groups.



Grotti takes distance also from two other notions: those of familiarisation and victim. In the first case, and despite those problems highlighted by other anthropologists, she prefers the concept of domestication — instead of that of familiarization — to describe the asymmetric relationships she finds between Trio¹ and Akuriyo². In her own terms,

(...) certain asymmetric caring and controlling processes (...) lead to incorporation into a domestic sphere without involving the making of kinship in the manner characteristic of familiarization. The term ‘domestication’ also leaves space to account for the perpetuation of differentiation between slaves and masters over time, involving a kind of counterfamiliarization (p. 23–4).

It is the “social appropriation” (p. 129) of the Akuriyo by the Trio that leads Grotti to distance herself also from the essentialized and dualistic image of indigenous peoples as victims. Another dualistic image appears to be behind some of the arguments on ownership in Ayopaya elaborated in Winchell’s book.³ Attachment seems to oppose alienation when *Servitude* tries to describe, for example, Ayopayan “elaborations of land” as “attachments to place... [that] coarticulate material and spiritual worlds” subverting “modern expectations that objects can be both absolutely possessed by, and hence also separated from, human inhabitants” (p. 12). On the one hand, the reader finds “a modern ethos centered upon the alienability of land and labor” (p. 11) inserted in a modern economy in which kinship has been occluded. And, on the other hand, Ayopaya appears as a site of “relational practices”, “expectations of attachment and mutuality... to places” (p. 10).

In the coming section, I will try to show how these analytical postures (expressed in adoptions and rejections) might inflect the way each author approaches the indigenous worlds they have been exposed to during their respective fieldworks.

Indigenous worlds’ inflections

One can find diverse inflections when it comes to the forms in which the analysis of each of these books relates to indigenous worlds. Grotti describes in much detail the Trio perspective but not as much of the other group that lives with them, the Akuriyo. The latter, as if *Nurturing the other* would be somehow caught in Trio views, remain mostly silenced. As visible as Trio, Kawaiwete (leaders) remain visible as the central focus of *Amazonian cosmopolitans* but only as long as they can be considered their own biographers.⁴ In the case of Ayopaya, its inhabitants’ perspectives (on land ownership, for example) are very present in *Servitude*, although in a mostly dualistic form. Finally, in the case of *Loss and Wonder at the world’s end*, Selk’nam’s notions remain opaque mostly due to the broader interests of its author.⁵

The domination the Akuriyo suffer remains rather unexplained in their own

1 The Akuriyo are also called Oyaricoulet, Triometesem, Wama, or Wayaricuri people. They inhabit in southwestern Suriname and were nomadic hunter-gatherers and had their own language until they moved to a village with the Trio and adopted the Trio language in the late 20th century. Many Akuriyo died within the first years after contact by Protestant missionaries. They are hunter-gatherers. The population was estimated in less the one hundred recently.

2 The Trio, Tiriyó or Wü Tarëno speak a language that belongs to the Carib language family and live both in southwestern Suriname and in the northern Brazilian state of Pará. They reside in villages led by a leader who chooses the place to reside and gathers his relatives there (the head of household’s wife, unmarried sons, daughters and sons-in-law). They also have a ritual leader who takes care of ceremonial dialogues with his pairs. The Trio established contact with groups of maroons, fugitives from slavery who settled in the region in the late 18th century and have maintained regular trade relations with them. More recently, some Trio families have been involved in wage-earning activities, obtaining greater access to cities, formal education and commerce.

3 Ayopaya is a province of Bolivia located in the department of Cochabamba. Ayopaya Province (whose capital is Villa de Independencia) has an area of around 10,000 km², with varied microclimates and topography ranging from snow-capped mountains and valleys to tropical regions, rich in mineral resources (for example, sodalite), hydrocarbons, and biodiversity. The province is mostly agricultural. According to the 2024 Bolivian census, the population of Ayopaya Province is more than 55,000 inhabitants. The province hosts more than 360 indigenous Quechua and Aymara peasant communities.



terms. Grotti recognises that although, in theory, they should be absorbed (supposedly through a form of education) as kin; in practice, they are kept as marginal people in state of servants. Instead, the discourse of those who subjugate them is very present: “This tension between an ideal of integration and a practice of nonintegration of the Akuriyo is salient within Trio discourse itself” (p. 124). The ethnographer does note Akuriyo are not willing to give their testimonies in front of their masters: “cornered into a role that they lack the means (or perhaps the will) to challenge... they do not have the means to express views about the matter. When asked directly *in public* about their wellbeing, they would avoid eye contact, smile shyly and stay uncomfortably silent” (p. 113. My emphasis).

Oakdale’s indigenous biographies remind other recent one dedicated to the Wari’ Paletó, although one could find here two “indigenous fathers” of the anthropologist. They are the cousins Prepori and Sabino, both leaders — or *wyriat*, which translates as “the owner or caretaker of a place” (p. 79) — of their extended families. Remarkably, they have also been intermediaries between worlds in almost any possible dimension. For instance, Prepori became a great shaman and one of the Villas Bôases’ key assistants in the Xingu’s administration. And, as a boy, Sabino worked taking care of a white man’s cattle and then became a government-appointed leader, an intermediary for rubber companies, and a translator of Catholic missionaries. Oakdale contextualises and glosses their testimonies in order to reconstruct specific historical events, or to note some lacunas — “I cannot say for certain why Prepori did not give an account of this trip” (p. 128).

Despite this interest, it is not completely clear to which exact periods of fieldwork her recordings of both leaders belong. And maybe more importantly: How do their specific conditions could affect what is being told or omitted? But still other questions arise if one goes out of *Amazonian Cosmopolitans’* analytical frame: How do these narratives intersect with the Kawaiwete existing types of discourse? Is the genre of autobiography relevant or present in Kawaiwete literature? Would it be pertinent to organize these narratives not only in terms of a historical reconstruction of past events but also in terms of the place they have in Kawaiwete orality and cosmovision?

Similar to Oakdale, Winchell also intends to insert Ayopaya testimonies in recent Bolivian history but here mostly paying attention to events concerning land ownership. The above-mentioned dualism is expressed in the case of land ownership through the contraposition of two entities. On the one hand, a State-driven modernizing project which promotes the possibility of “capital without kinship” (p. 24); and an “exemplary ownership over self and land” implicit in a concept of property as a “bounded sphere of ostensibly natural economic activity apart from religious traditions, kinship ties, or prescientific superstitions” (p. 14). On the other hand, one would find persistent Quechua “ambiguous ownership regimes” (p. 1) and Ayopayan conceptions of wealth and belonging bound in place and to history through “kin-making practices” (p. 13). Despite this description, it is not entirely clear what exactly are those “older traditions of asymmetrical exchange” and “vernacular traditions of land and water management” (p. 101). Additionally,

4 The Kawaiwete (also known as Cahahis, Cajabis, or Kayabi) speak a language from the Tupi-Guarani family and inhabit in northern Brazil, in the state of Mato Grosso, more specifically in the Xingu and Apiaká Kayabi Reserve. They are fishermen and hunters. Almost all the inhabitants of the Xingu National Park are bilingual and fluent in both their language and Portuguese.

5 The Selk’nam (also known as Onawo or Ona) are an Indigenous people speaking a language of the Chon family in the Patagonian region of southern Argentina and Chile. Traditionally, the Selk’nam were nomadic hunter-gatherers and fishers. They were contacted by European explorers as late as the end of 19th century, when started its devastation by settlement, gold mining and farming. Some Christian missions were established to preach to the Selk’nam, but closed due to the small number of Selk’nam remaining. Martín Gusinde wrote in 1919 that only a few hundred Selk’nam remained. In 1916, Charles Furlong estimated there were less than 1,000 Selk’nam in Tierra del Fuego. Nevertheless, in the 2017 Chilean census 1,144 people declared themselves to be Selk’nam. The descendants of this previously considered extinct people are in the process of cultural reappropriation and recreation.



both narratives of resistance — “the Pachamama, who had been slighted by years of forbidden sacrifice” (p. 243) — and concepts such as “in-ayllu” (p. 200) or “Sumak Kawsay” (p. 258) remain unproblematized.

While mentioning Selk’nam “sacred sites” (p. 6) and the ubiquity of images of their *hain* ritual, Ogden points out that many Chileans are unaware that they still live there today. Similarly, in *Loss and Wonder at the World’s End* Selk’nam are ubiquitously mentioned but their roles only occasionally described, for instance, when examining the introduction of foreign animals, the effects of deforestation and tourism, the performances of some artists, the contents of a non-published ethnographic archive and the critique of Darwin’s view of Patagonia — by Anne Chapman, about which Ogden writes: “There is nothing like the rage of an old woman to rewrite history” (p. 31). For instance, the reader will find many details about the sound recordings, dermatoglyphs, field notes and correspondence of the archive of Charles Furlong — a former army colonel who presented himself as the first US citizen to explore the interior of Tierra del Fuego — but not as much about the Yaghan community living in Villa Ukika on Navarino Island. The “speculative experiment” (p. 84) suggested by Ogden — who considers herself probably the only person who has read Furlong’s handwritten notes in their entirety — does not seem to explore with the same intensity how this indigenous group has coped precisely with their loss (either the successive spoliations they have suffered or how they face the serious environmental problems that affect Patagonia today).

After this brief observation of the positions of these books regarding theoretical perspectives and indigenous worlds, I will pay attention to how these monographies deal with two key notions of Amerindian ethnography: hierarchy and change.

Change: Oscillation, cosmopolitanism, conversion and climate change

It would be safe to say that one of the main topics shared by all the reviewed ethnographies is the dynamics of change in the groups they study. Here, these changes originate either from indigenous cosmovisions themselves (as in the case of cosmopolitanism or oscillation) or from external forces (for instance, modernisation, population concentration or religious conversion).

Grotti’s book points out two forms of change among the Trio: population concentration and Christianity. She describes how Trio were relocated in one place after previously being several historically separate groups. Regarding conversion, the author describes its particularly radical nature. Among Trio shamans, for instance, conversion amounts to cutting ties of kinship with their helping spirits, conceived as children who must be cared for and fed. Despite this radicalness, Grotti wonders whether this conversion — carried out, as in other Amazonian cases, to stabilise in a state of peacefulness the coordinates their bodies cross by — will persist over time. She suggests the possibility of oscillation illustrating it through Trio ideas about personhood as a state in a constant oscillation “between a state of fierceness and a state of peacefulness” (p. 16).



As in the case of *Nurturing the Other*, in *Amazonian Cosmopolitans* change is also linked to an external force and to an inner propensity. Among the Kawaiwete, the first is also relocation, here to the Indigenous Territory of the Xingu River, “a utopian space that could be a model for the future in the post-World War II context” (p. 143), where ten different groups (some of them, ex-enemies) speaking different languages were joined in a “highly globalised” place (p. 4).

Regarding cosmopolitanism, it is defined – without mention of the use of the concept in Amerindian studies in Spanish (cf. Ortiz Rescaniere 1999) – as “an attitude of openness”, a “global extension of moral and political horizons” (p. 1). The lives of Prepori and Sabino are an expression of this cosmopolitanism, either as mediators in the rubber trade or as shamans for whites in the city. Oakdale stresses that both of them simultaneously bring together “productively” (p. 117) Kawaiwete cosmology and non-indigenous elements (such as Western medicine or modern air travel). As the late Alejandro Ortiz Rescaniere and others have also previously described it, Oakdale insists in that their “careful watching and learning from others’ habits, customs, and, sometimes, languages” is performed avoiding “not to permanently turn into one of these others” (p. 2). If these are internal mechanisms of change, Winchell and Ogden focus instead on its external causes.

In Ayopaya, change is mainly the consequence of a land title program sponsored by the government of Evo Morales, which apparently intended to clarify land use, secure Indigenous liberty and offer political repair but in fact sought “to fix rural subjects in space in order to integrate them into legible systems of centralized political rule” (p. 156). If Winchell assesses this project as too close to “familiar trajectories of political and economic liberalism” (p. 243), Ayopayans outrightly reject its land collectivization associating it with “land dispossession, violated Indigenous sovereignty, and... a romanticized model of Indigeneity that assumed all Indigenous people would be opposed to resource extraction, economic development, and urbanization” (p. 143). Paradoxically invoking “traditional rights to individual land ownership premised on ‘local uses and customs’”, Ayopayans dismiss the possibility “that firmer property rights offered essential routes to Indigenous empowerment” (p. xiii). Instead, they seek historical redress and accountability in an abiding connection both to landscapes and across indigenous and Mestizo families among whom land has often been granted through informal land gifts. While externally driven change is here thus rejected by indigenous populations, in *Loss and Wonder* it would be mostly lamented (at least by the author).

In the case of Ogden, she stresses one aspect of change that has also been partially highlighted by Winchell’s reflections on land ownership: loss. Starting with the premise that “Loss seems to define our present era” (p. 5), she seeks to observe the ways in which life is valued in Tierra del Fuego, a region troubled by imperialism and climate change. Her inventory of human and nonhuman actors populating this setting of externally driven destruction and colonisation includes beavers, sheep, logging, missionaries and the Selk’nam. Since the point of view of the latter stays somehow opaque, it is rather difficult to assess their specific attitude here.



Considering all these expressions of change among Amerindian peoples, cosmopolitanism (Latour 2004, Stengers 2005, Blaser 2016) and oscillation appear on the opposite side of governmental programs and climate change. The corresponding attitudes also oppose themselves. If the first ones could be desired or manipulated, the latter are either rejected or lamented. In the next section, these mechanisms of search or rejection will be inserted in different Amerindian hierarchical structures allowing violence (and intimacy) in Ayopaya, control and dependency among the Trio and Akuriyo, mediation with non-indigenous worlds in the case of the Kawaiwete leaders and, finally, loss in a Patagonia saturated by climate change.

Hierarchy: Violence, ownership, mediation and loss

To the question of why Ayopayans resist government-sponsored change, Winchell replies invoking existing Andean practices of hierarchy (Goudsmit 2021, Fausto 2024). Thus, *Servitude* mentions an “entrenched racial hierarchy” (p. xiv) that configures not only their “engagement with wealth” (p. 23) but also indigenous-mestizo relations of violent mistreatment. The author focuses on practices concerning “concubinage, forced adoption, sexual violence, and honorific languages of parentage” (p. 8), which she considers a heritage from an “hacienda system” of bonded labor or *pongaje* (p. xii).⁶

Bondage becomes almost slavery in *Nurturing the Other*, where Trio organised expeditions — supported by North American evangelical Protestant missionaries — searching for other indigenous peoples. According to Grotti, the reasons for these expeditions simultaneously lie in conversion to Christianity — “I... wanted to kill him because he was not a relative. But now I am Christian, so... I think that the other group is made of relatives” (p. 27) — and an Amerindian relational ontology seeking “to incorporate alterity” (p. 5). In any case, the outcome of these expeditions is the perpetual dependency of the Akuriyo by the Trio. The former are considered by the latter as “unskilled” to perform activities that imply sociability (as the production of their own beer), lack a cooking space of their own and rarely manage their own households as autonomous units. In consequence, to process game, fish and garden yields, Akuriyo must use the cooking space of Trio families who manage and redistribute these elements and thus secure themselves with a constant source of foods (the Akuriyo are considered outstanding hunters too). In sum, they are kept in “a state of social subordination through a series of nurturing techniques” (p. 20), and with “attributes [that] confirm or maintain their ‘wildness’” (p. 102). Grotti notes this situation have lasted decades and even seems hereditary:

these Akuriyo families were split up between their captors, and ended up forming a subservient class of people whose obligations of service and need for education eventually were... passed on to their children. Thirty years on, they remain subservient as their difference and inferiority are perpetuated by the idea that the Trio have a monopoly on a human... perspective. (p. 106–7).

6 It would be interesting to compare the organization of labour and social hierarchies through “kinship-based idioms” in Ayopaya — where “former employers likened servants to family members or children and emphasized the ‘love’ and affection binding employers to servants” (p. 40) and where everybody agrees “that hacendado families should care for their former servants” (p. 38) — with the understanding of hierarchies expressed in the Kawaiwete notion of leaders owning the followers they care for, and the Trio notion of ownership of Akuriyo.



Akuriyo's position is described as similar to that of "dogs" for Trio:

As additional hunting tools, the Akuriyo become extensions of the Trio bodies... There is a striking similarity... They use both [dogs and Akuriyo] for hunting, take responsibility for their 'education' or training, and expect them to be subservient and submissive. (p. 127).

But even dogs are closer to their owners than the Akuriyo: the "relationship developed between a dog and a household is more proximal than the one used with Akuriyo helpers, who are never referred to in kin terms... an Akuriyo is not a pet, but a marginal, nonmarriageable other" (p. 128–9). Coercion and control are thus at the core of this relation of nurture, which can certainly shift "according to social contexts and scales," but remains inherently hierarchical (p. 5).

In the Upper Xingu, the processes of (forced) relocation are also associated to ideas of "taming" among the Kawaiwete. Oakdale mentions "longstanding ideas about how to tame and incorporate new groups by teaching them peaceful, restrained behaviour, new rituals, and dietary practices" (p. 6). The consequences are maybe equally devastating but apparently not so persistent as those described by Grotti. For example, when Prepori "helped relocate forty-four people from the Peixes River traveling by air to the Xingu on Brazilian Air Force planes... most Kawaiwete lands were left available to colonists... 'ethnically cleansed'" (p. 144). And after Sabino was "sent out by the SPI [Serviço de Proteção ao Índio] to "contact" a more remote group of Kawaiwete" (p. 79), some of them died "of diseases at this post." (p. 176).

Although the situation described by Oakdale does not seem as extreme as the Akuriyo case, it poses the question of how to deal with these asymmetries when thinking from cosmopolitanism. What role would the exert of domination towards others have in Amerindian cosmopolitanism? Even if one does not pay attention to forced relocation, hierarchy is unavoidable in Oakdale's description of Sabino and Prepori as mediators and leaders. If their mediations (for instance, with dangerous spirits or non-indigenous agents) benefit their followers, then their hierarchy is expressed as ownership: caring for them, leaders own their followers. Is hierarchy still conceived in terms of care and ownership (Brightman *et al.* 2016; Costa 2018) when cosmopolitanism insert Kawaiwete in relations of domination with external forces?

These are the Amerindian structures of hierarchy highlighted by these authors when describing the dynamics of change suffered by the indigenous group they visited. As we have seen, the exposition of both, hierarchy and change, can be correlated with diverse theoretical postures and places given in each monograph to indigenous worlds. A brief summary follows in the next section.

Final thoughts

Using (or discarding) diverse anthropological theories, analytical tools and rhetorical strategies, these four ethnographies deal with Amerindian experiences



of hierarchy and change in South America. The description of these experiences occupies the core of some of these ethnographies, but also its margins in some others. In the first case, though, the description is restricted either to its comparability with a Western discursive genre (in the case of the Kawaiwete) or to a group that dominates another silencing it (in the case of the Trio). When the description of the indigenous experience of hierarchy and change occupies rather its margins, this is because the focus shifts towards more or less known dualisms (as in the case of Ayopaya) or towards (indirectly) related issues (as happens in the case of the elusive descriptions of the Selk'nam).

Regarding the specific axe of transformation, it becomes almost unavoidable when dealing with external forces (visible particularly in Ogden's ethnography), but also when the transformative effects are mainly expressed by an inner attitude or trend (as in the case in the ethnography of Grotti). The reader of these ethnographies will be able to approach also the dynamics of change, either through manipulation of foreign elements (for instance, in Oakdale's conceptualization of cosmopolitanism) or through resistance (for example, to modernizing projects regarding land ownership in the case of Winchell's Ayopaya).

Concerning the axe of hierarchy, it appears as a central frame if not of analysis at least of the descriptions. The monographs examine the verticalities found during fieldwork through rather positive structures of intimacy (for instance, in the cases of the books by Winchell and Oakdale) and nurture (for example, in Grotti's book). Nevertheless, other ethnographic cases address hierarchies also through more coercive structures such as ownership (for instance, in the case of *Sevitude*), control (in *Nurturing the Other*) and violence (as in the ethnography of Ogden).

In sum, for different reasons, but equally valid, these four South American ethnographies constitute important scientific works for those interested in the current situations in which radical alterity and turbulent devastation entangle among contemporary indigenous societies in South America (Rivera Andía 2018).



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After completing his doctorate, he was director of the Museum of Peruvian Culture and a researcher in Europe and the US, supported by the Maison des sciences de l'homme, UNESCO, the Smithsonian Institution, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, among others. He has published articles, ethnographies, compilations (“Non-Humans in Amerindian South America”), and documentaries (“The Owners of the Land”) on the cosmologies of the Peruvian Andes.

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