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The Savage European: A Structural Approach to European Iconography of the American Indian

THE SAVAGE EUROPEAN: A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO EUROPEAN ICONOGRAPHY OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

BERNADETTE J. BUCHER

Among pictorial documents showing non-acculturated Amerindians shortly after the European invasion of America, the de Bry collection of *Grands Voyages* published in 13 volumes between 1590 and 1634¹ is certainly the most voluminous and richest corpus. It consists of some three hundred engravings that illustrate narratives of travel in America ranging from Columbus' expedition in the late fifteenth century to the Dutch and English conquests in the early seventeenth. Thus a great many tribes are represented, from the Algonquians of Virginia to the Alacalufs of Tierra del Fuego. In addition, a period of almost a half-century elapsed between the appearance of the first and the last volume, so that some of the prints show the same group of people at different periods of contact. They could therefore provide a valuable source of information about possible historical changes among the peoples represented.

Unfortunately, most of these engravings were made in Europe by artists who had never seen the New World, and who imagined it after reading the texts they were to illustrate. Some of the pictures were based on sketches, drawings, or watercolors made by cartographers who had taken part in an expedition. The first two volumes of the collection are an example of this.² But, apart from these exceptions and a few other prints from later volumes, the iconography of the *Grands Voyages* offers little reliable information about Amerindians that is not available from the texts, whether on material culture, social organization, religion, or myth. On the other hand, these pictures are extremely revealing about the ways Europeans visualized Indians and the New World at the time. In this respect, the de Bry collection constitutes a unique ethnographic document, not so much about Indians *per se*, but rather about the European modes of perception—of how Europeans of that

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period viewed cultural and physical differences of other peoples.

It is from this point of view that the engravings are here considered as documents. It is obvious that anyone who wants to make inferences about non-Western cultures from historical pictorial records must face this problem: to what extent is a given European-made picture biased by the cultural and historical classifications through which the observer perceived an alien people and the observer's political intentions regarding the people he describes? In other words, the problem the ethnologist has to face is ethnocentrism—that of the picture-maker, and that which derives from the ethnologist's own culture. More often than not, the attitude of the latter is, in this respect, a negative one: ethnocentrism is the gremlin that has jammed the circuit, the villain who has maliciously hidden a precious needle in a haystack. However justified, such a negative approach may seriously hamper the search for an accurate and systematic means of analyzing pictures. If, on the other hand, we turn the anthropological inquiry momentarily away from the needle, toward the haystack, ethnocentrism will appear as a problem in Western systems of classification and of their relation to political attitudes. By trying to be the ethnographers of our own culture (at least as it was four centuries ago), we may get an insight into the processes through which certain cultural or physical traits are distorted, transformed or overlooked altogether. We may also discover rules that predict when and how such transformations are made by specific groups of people at certain periods of history.

A larger study on the *Grands Voyages* illustrations (Bucher n.d.) showed that de Bry's engravings constitute a form of nonverbal mythology in which the "pensée sauvage" (or undomesticated thought of certain specific European groups of that time) expressed itself freely on the subject of the New World and its inhabitants. Without exploring this mythology in detail, this paper will indicate how some conceptual tools of the structural analysis of myth are useful for studying this type of document and how these tools can contribute to the development of a semiotics of pictures.

TECHNIQUE OF BRICOLAGE

Any study of semiotics starts from a few postulates: one is that cultural processes can be studied as communication processes and that, as such, they are based on systems (Eco 1972). A system is defined as a totality composed of interrelated and interdependent elements. As a result, the meaning of an element or of a term can only be understood in terms of its relationship to the whole. At first, the description of the communication network to which the *Grands Voyages* belongs reveals only a congeries of heterogeneous elements. This network involves the following.

(1) The makers of the collection, including not only a family business, a dynasty of Dutch Protestant engravers exiled to Francfurt-am-Main for their creed (father, sons, grandsons and grandson-in-law), but also those who participated in the workshop, editing, translating the texts to be illustrated and those who helped in designing the etchings, as well as those who wrote the captions to the engravings.

(2) The literary sources of information through which the engravers formed their ideas about the New World. These

sources led to the information network of the big maritime companies of the Protestant countries involved in the conquest of America and in league against Spanish papal supremacy. First, the Company of Virginia for which a great number of the texts included in the *Grands Voyages* had been compiled and collected in England by the diligent Richard Hakluyt.³ Then the Dutch company of the East Indies in relation to which most of the texts beginning with Part IX were written. Most of these texts were reports informing the company about the way their money, invested in exploration, had been spent. It is from this point of view that the New World and its inhabitants were described.

(3) The audience for which the collection was created, and which seemed to impose other constraints on the perception and representation of the New World.

(4) Finally, there are the iconographic models, a maze of iconographic motifs borrowed from very heterogeneous sources. Some were drawn by skilled cartographers, others were sketches made by sailors and navigators, while others were woodcuts from the early sixteenth century illustrating the first accounts of the conquest. To these must be added medieval pictures of the "savage," and the marvels and monsters of far away countries. The de Bry family also used engravings from the first volumes of the *Grands Voyages* (White's Algonquians, le Moyne's Timucuas and the pictures of the Tupinambas) as models to represent Indians from other parts of the continent.

In brief, the representation of the New World in the *Grands Voyages* seems to depend upon a multitude of sources and constraints and, if it does contain "ethnographic facts," these have been amalgamated into a strange syncretism between different peoples from different periods. On the other hand, we can recognize here the technique of "bricolage" described by Claude Lévi-Strauss as an analogy to the ways in which mythic thought or "pensée sauvage" operates:

The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual "bricolage"—which explains the relation which can be perceived between the two [1966:17].

In the same manner, the makers of the *Grands Voyages* used odds and ends, debris from former constructions to rebuild a new ensemble, by a double process of selection and combination. Out of chaos, this new ensemble becomes a consistent whole with an internal logic of its own. This logic uses the material at hand—an Algonquian hairdo, a Tupinamba practice of roasting human bodies, a piece of Inca costume—as signs to mean something else.

Within this framework, even a single isolated picture must be considered as a piece of a vast puzzle that has to be unraveled before the meaning of the piece can emerge. For this, Erwin Panofsky's method, with its three stages of analysis (pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation) remains a fruitful approach to decipher this forest of cultural symbols (1955:33-40).⁴ But once the stage of "iconological interpretation" is reached, structural analysis of myth can bring us new tools of exploration, in particular the notion of

systems of transformation. First stated by C. Lévi-Strauss in 1945, this concept was used later in *La Pensée Sauvage* (Ch. 3) and became the cornerstone of the four volumes of *Mythologiques*. Again, there is no space here to undertake a full-fledged structural analysis of the *Grands Voyages* prints to show the use of these tools. My intention is simply to sketch the directions of such an analysis and to indicate some of the results it can lead to.

SYSTEMS OF CLASSIFICATION AND TRANSFORMATION

In spite of the chaotic aspect of the collection, there are clearly two axes. First there is the diachronic axis, irreversible, provided by the chronological order in which the volumes were published and by the sequence of the illustrations within each volume. For instance, first comes the idyllic image of the Algonquian of Virginia, then the Timucua of Florida, followed by the grim picture of the Tupinamba in Brazil and the Spanish conquest in Central and South America.

Second is the synchronic axis, provided by recurrent iconic elements in the representation of the New World and its inhabitants. Moreover, among the assemblage of elements that make up the varied representation of the New World in the 300 prints, a set of constants appears through different codes. There are four of these: (1) the physical appearance of the Indians, expressed by means of two codes, anatomical (somatology, anthropometry, sex, age) and vestimentary (clothes, ornaments, body paint, etc.); (2) the actions Indians perform—gestures, attitudes, postures (whether cooking, hunting, fighting or eating, and so forth); (3) the sociological relationships among the characters represented in a print—wives/husbands/children, priests/sorcerers, enemies/allies, guests/hosts, conquerors/conquered; (4) the habitat in which they appear (landscapes, fauna, flora, dwellings).

The problem is to find out if there is a systematic relationship between, for example, the anatomical representation of an Indian male and the habitat in which he lives, or between an action (eating a roasted human limb) and the status of the cannibal. By permuting one recurrent element of the representation of Amerindians into all the contexts in which it appears (for instance, the long-haired or bearded Indian, or the disheveled sagging-breasted woman) two things can be discovered. On the one hand, paradigmatic oppositions such as that between the long-haired bearded Indian and the well-groomed, shaven Indian, or between the sagging-breasted female Indian and the well-shaped one. On the other hand, syntagmatic chains within which one of these elements combines with others, are revealed; for example, the long-haired Indian sticking an arrow into his throat, while Magellan is discovering the Straits, or elsewhere, the long-haired Timucua berdaches used for tasks reserved to women; or the Cuna hermaphrodites from the Isthmus of Panama given to the dogs to be devoured.⁵

Thus a meaningful system based on heterogeneous elements emerges and reveals various systems of classification through which the Europeans visualized and conceptualized the New World and the different Amerindian "customs." For instance, the representation of Tupinamba cannibalism

pedum interuallo, quadrata figura, æquali vero trium fere pedum altitudine,



Figure 1

(*Grands Voyages*, Pt. III) in Figure 1 rests upon a classificatory system that relates, through a close network of correspondences: (a) elements of the physical representation of Tupinambas; (b) parts of the human bodies as they are quartered before being cooked; (c) modes of cooking used to prepare the different morsels (whether boiled or roasted); (d) and, finally, their distribution among the cannibals according to their age and sex (Bucher n.d.).

Furthermore, this classificatory system is itself part of a system of transformation between the perception of cannibalism and (Pt. IV, V, VI) the vision of the Spanish conquest in America with the representation of the Carib Indians generously offering fruit to the conquistadors who subsequently expropriated, tortured, and destroyed them. This, in turn, reveals itself as the transformation of the Biblical myth of the Fall and integrates the existence of the Indians into a protestant interpretation of the original sin. Thus the engravings depicting Indian customs which shocked Europeans of the time (nakedness, "idolatry," and cannibalism) are shown to be organized, down to the smallest detail, on a tripartite conception of time shaped by a theological interpretation of human nature. Within this conceptual framework, correspondence is established between: (1) a classification of matter and the natural world

coming from very old cosmologies and the system of correspondences between Macro and Microcosm used by alchemists; (2) a classification of land in terms of subsistence technique and the legal rights to exploit it, as it was organized in Europe at the time; (3) the social and political relations between the Indians and the Europeans.

Thus, the key to sorting out of ethnographic fact from the mythical interpretation of the observer is not to be found at the level of a surface interpretation of the engravings—even with the help of a thorough knowledge of the observer's background—but at a level where ethnographic facts are integrated consistently as part of a myth. These structures can be unveiled through a semiotic analysis. Since such an intricate analysis cannot be presented in a short essay, I shall concentrate on one aspect of these systems of transformation, an aspect that accounts for the distorted and biased perception that Europeans had of subsistence techniques among the Amerindians.

MYTH AND ECOLOGY

Throughout the mythical system built up around the bearded male and the sagging-breasted female Indian, one finds a congruence or isomorphism between an anatomic



Figure 2

code, an alimentary code, and a sociological code. This congruence systematically relates certain categories of food given or eaten by certain physically anomalous characters to sociopolitical attitudes of the Europeans toward the Indians. These relationships appear meaningless or arbitrary until related to the division of land for subsistence purposes in Europe at that time.

This mythical system is based on three groups of transformations organized on a tripartite conception of time: before the Fall/after the Fall/Apocalypse. The first group corresponds to a mythical time when alliance with the Indians was not only possible, but prescribed. In this phase, offerings of garden fruit by Indians to Spaniards, as in Figure 2, are a transformation of the offering of fruit by the demon in the garden of Eden. The Spaniards, failing to reciprocate as they should have, behaved like the demon in paradise, thus marring forever European-Indian relations.

The second group of transformation (after the Fall of the Indians) implicitly justifies a taboo of intermarriage between Indian and Protestant, because of the original sin committed by the Spaniards. This second moment of the mythical history of the conquest is expressed by a symbolism of food given and food refused, this time using smoked fish and raw bird. These are opposed with regard to subsistence technique to the fruit of the first transformation group as animal to vegetable diet, and as gardening to hunting and fishing. Finally, in the third group of transformations, the alimentary

code is expressed by juices of roasted human flesh licked by female cannibals (see Figure 1), and ashes thrown on a Dutch captain by an old Indian woman. On the sociological level, this corresponds to an apocalyptic vision of social relations.

Thus, the mythical interpretation of the deterioration of Indian-Protestant relations is accomplished through a logic of concrete qualities embodied in different types of food offered, eaten, or rejected. To understand their symbolic values, one must place them in the context of the European ecology at the time.

The fruits from the garden correspond to a privileged category: it is the private, enclosed space around the house, which is fertile all year round, thanks to the proximity of the house and the continual fertilization by domestic refuse. It is also private and not subject to any of the obligations or taxes levied on the other parts of the land. Birds and fish, on the other hand, pertain to an uncultivated nature: land or waters, woods, forests, marshes, rivers, and sea. This territory is subject to a group of communal rights (Duby 1962). As for human and ashes, they are non-foods and are not involved in the division of land for subsistence purposes. They rather partake of the space reserved for garbage or cemetery.

Within this mythical framework, there is a glaring omission—the third division of land in Europe in terms of subsistence, the one reserved for agriculture and animal husbandry. In the European context, it represents a mediation between the two others: on the one hand, the garden,

fertile all year round and private, and on the other, uncultivated land or waters, which are communal. Agriculture and stockbreeding seasonally alternate the properties of the two: part of the year the land is cultivated, fertile. It is enclosed and private. Once the harvest is over, fences are removed and livestock are let in to graze freely on stubble and bush outgrowth left on the fallow fields. It then becomes communal (Duby 1962).

The importance of this omission in the mythical scheme should not be overlooked. It is part and parcel of the justification used by Protestant settlers to expropriate Indian land and later restrict them to reservations. This fact is, of course, contrary to the observation of ethnographic facts recorded in the very texts included in the *Grands Voyages*. Nevertheless, as far as the graphic representation is concerned, Indians appear almost exclusively as devoid of agriculture. The only real representation of Indians as agriculturalists is to be found in the first two volumes of the collection at a time when the company of Virginia was putting all its efforts in a propaganda campaign to attract settlers to North America. However, the perception of Amerindian subsistence techniques show even there an inconsistency quite revealing in itself. For instance, Figure 3 is supposed to depict a Timucua technique of sowing corn and beans that was quite different from the method of sowing used in Europe. The caption of the print explains that

a woman makes holes in the ground with a stick and another drops the seeds into the holes. However the print represents two contradictory ways of sowing. One woman makes holes and another broadcasts the seeds in the European way, thus rendering an efficient indigenous technique completely absurd.

In another print, Figure 4, Timucuas are preparing a feast. Again, portrayed is a juxtaposition of actions that do not really make sense. A man pours food into a large pot containing boiling water. In the foreground, another man pours water into a hole made in the earth, and on the opposite side, another man throws the contents of a basket on the ground. In the background, women are sorting out grains, nuts, or seeds; a man grinds some food on a millstone. The caption says that they are herbs used for seasoning.

In reality, this strange preparation of food may be used as evidence that the Timucuas utilized the technique of leaching to render edible a naturally toxic plant. In the ethnography of the Timucuas (Swanton 1922; Mooney 1910; Ehrmann 1940), leaching is not mentioned as part of their technique for producing food. Swanton, quoting le Moyne de Morgues as he mentions the holes in the ground, does not venture a comment (1922:376). Ehrmann (1940:184) gives a puzzling interpretation: the Timucuas must have had cleanly habits, for "at feasts, holes were dug into the ground to hold water for washing."

Culturæ & fationis ratio.

XXI.

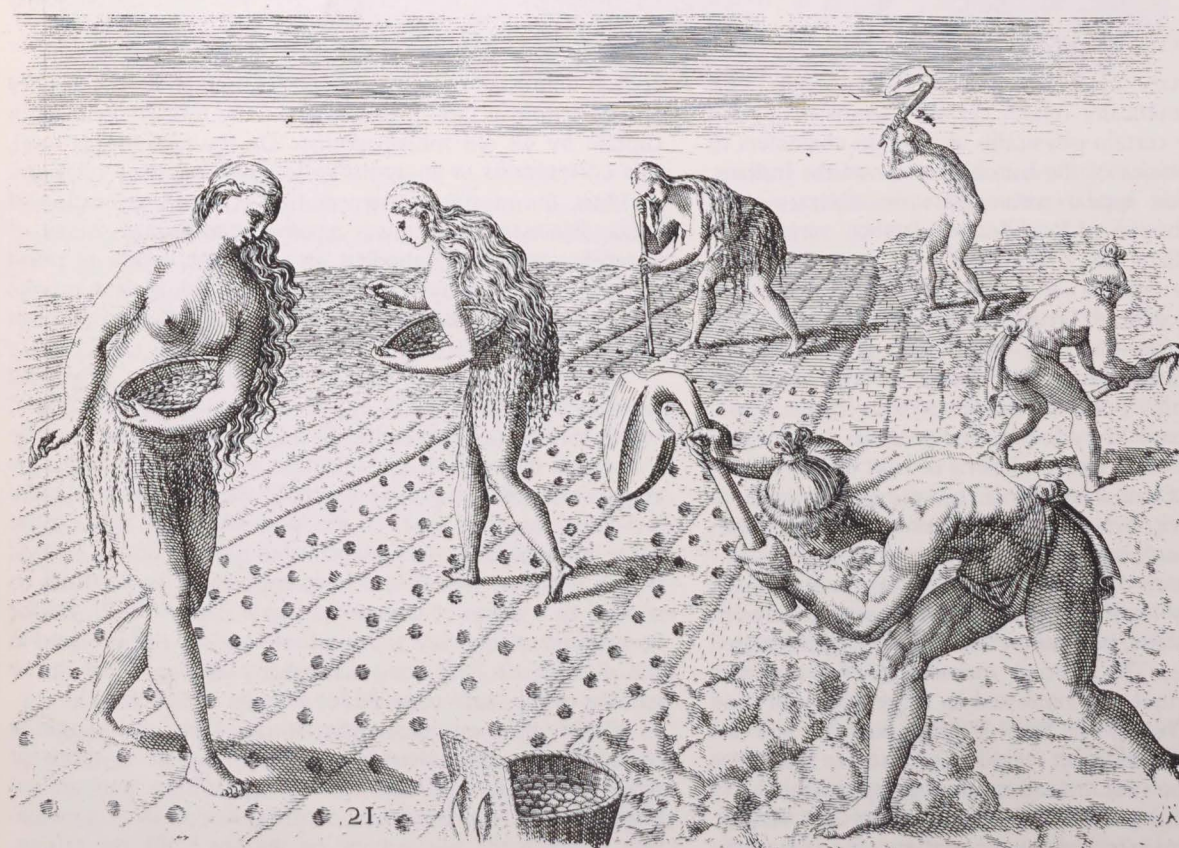


Figure 3

One of the first Europeans to understand the process of leaching in North America was Cabeza de Vaca (1555), who accurately described how mesquite is made edible by some Indians, probably from Texas or Northern Mexico. His description of the process could almost serve as a caption for this print, except for a few details. After they dig a hole in the ground, says Cabeza:

then they put the fruit into it and grind it with a wooden stick. They add more fruit which they mix with earth in the hole and grind it again for a while. After this, they remove the contents of the hole in a container looking like a small round basket and pour enough water on it to cover it completely. Next, the man who had been grinding the grain tastes it and if he thinks that it's not sweet enough, he asks that more earth be added and until he is satisfied.⁶

Although it cannot be identified from the print, the plantfood prepared by the Timucuas may be acorns. Mesquite is out of the question, because of its desert habitat; manioc is unlikely; but acorns were part of the Timucua's environment and it is known they ate them. The practice of leaching acorns is common to many North American Indians, especially among California Indians for whom it was a staple food (Driver 1953).

If this hypothesis is correct, this engraving is a remarkable example of the disjunction between visual perception of cultural facts and their knowledge and understanding. Le

Moyné de Morgues, the artist who made the original drawing for the print, witnessed this scene in Florida without understanding it. The fact that the Timucua were simultaneously grinding on a millstone, making holes in the ground, throwing the half prepared food on the ground, and boiling it, did not escape his attention. If his perception is correct, in spite of his faulty judgment, the different operations of leaching as performed by the Timucuas may be inferred from this print. In contrast with the method described by Cabeza de Vaca for leaching mesquite, the grinding of the plant is made on a millstone and not directly in the hole with a wooden stick. The meal ground from the acorn was also put directly in contact with the earth and then covered with water. Then it was cooked.

CONCLUSION

Structural analysis of pictorial documents supported by a corpus of ethnographic facts may uncover unsuspected truths about the people observed as well as about the observers. It may also sensitize the investigator to discord in the evidence that otherwise might go unnoticed. This is all the more important when dealing with peoples now extinct. Here the ethnographic literature depends a great deal on the early accounts of travelers who were the last witnesses of a vanished tribe. The only new reliable evidence comes from

Conviviorum apparatus.

XXVIII.



Figure 4

archaeological studies. Pictures, however, can contribute to knowledge of the past by posing new questions to ethnologists and archaeologists alike.

Moreover, even if we grant that images can express mythical thought as well as words do, structural analysis may help us discover our own unconscious systems of classification and, more importantly, how they were formed historically. However, in order to successfully apply the tools of structural analysis to nonverbal messages such as pictures, there is one prerequisite: analysis must make use of a set of images, large enough to show recurrences and constants. It is only through examination of variations that systems of oppositions can become meaningful through transformations. This is why it is hardly possible to condense in a brief paper the actual steps of such an analysis, whether of myth or iconography.

NOTES

¹Most of the volumes were published in Frankfurt-am-Main, a few in Oppenheim.

²In the first volume, the engravings were copied from John White's watercolors. Sturtevant (1964) has studied them from an ethnographic point of view and the second volume engravings, copies from le Moyne de Morgues' watercolors on the Timucuas will receive the same treatment.

³De Bry obtained a great many of his texts for the collection from Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*.

⁴For Panofsky, one tries to grasp, at this stage "those basic principles which underlie the choice and presentation of motifs, as well as the production and interpretation of images, stories and allegories and which give meaning even to the formal arrangements and technical procedures employed" (1955:38). On the conventional character of visual signs see also R. Arnheim (1954) and E. Gombrich (1960).

⁵These prints are to be found respectively in Pt. IV, II, and IV.

⁶My translation from the French edition by Bandelier (1922).

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CAPTIONS OF ENGRAVINGS

Figure 1 – Depiction of Tupinamba cannibalism. Engraving published by Theodor de Bry, 1590-1634.

Figure 2 – Indians offering fruit to the Spaniards. Engraving published by Theodor de Bry, 1590-1634.

Figure 3 – Timucua method of preparing the ground and planting. Engraving published by Theodor de Bry after lost original by Jacques le Moyne who visited Florida in 1560s. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 57561.

Figure 4 – Timucua preparations for a feast. Engraving published by Theodor de Bry after lost original by Jacques le Moyne who visited Florida in 1560s. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 57558.