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On the Significance of Representations Concerning Indigenous People in Voluntary Isolation

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The terminology used in referring to indigenous people living in so called voluntary isolation and initial contact has been much debated lately. Such discussions are important since the concepts used in discourse guide the formation of representations of these peoples, which may have concrete – direct or indirect – consequences on policies and politics concerning them. Nevertheless, there is the danger that these mostly academic and journalistic discussions eclipse from view the variety of representations at work at the local level, which guide the actions of many local interest groups. These groups should not be forgotten because many of them have specific interests in regard to the indigenous peoples under scrutiny and their actions are not slowed down by institutional machinery. I will briefly address the question of why it matters how we talk about indigenous peoples. From here on, I will refer to these indigenous people as being in voluntary isolation.

My long term field site is located very close to the area where the Mascho-Piro people living in the Manu National Park in southeast Peru. They have also been frequently appearing by the Upper Madre de Dios River during the past years. The interactions in this 'contact-zone' have unfortunately (thus far) resulted in the death of two local indigenous men, Nicolas 'Shaco' Flores in November 2011 and Leonardo Pérez in May 2015. We do not yet know of any casualties of this interaction among the Mascho-Piro. There are many things to be said both about this extremely complex Mascho-Piro case and about the indigenous people in voluntary isolation more generally, but given the very limited space available, I will be brief in making three rather general points. I will focus on issues which have thus far received too little attention in discussions and which have the issue of representations as a common thread. These points are all related to the Mascho-Piro case, but bear significance to other cases as well. These are the policy of non-contact; the importance of understanding and taking into account local actors' representations and objectives; and the importance of ethnographic knowledge for designing contingency and action plans.

In regard to the Mascho-Piro peoples of Madre de Dios, I side with the critics of the 'hands-off' policy of the Peruvian government. They ban all contact with the indigenous people through voluntary isolation. Although in certain cases such policy is well justified, mostly because of the danger of transmittance of diseases, and in the case of the Mascho-Piro of Upper Madre de Dios area time has driven past it. In 2012, after having visited the Upper Madre de Dios area where the situation of uncontrolled contacts had already begun to escalate, I expressed my concern to the Peruvian *Viceministerio de Interculturalidad* or the Vice Ministry of Interculturalism (henceforth VMI) that the policy on non-contact did not resonate in any way with the local reality. Outside contact with the Upper Madre de Dios Mascho-Piro group was getting more and more frequent. They had already been given pots and machetes often enough to create a need for these manufactured items, the policy of absolute non-contact was no longer viable – especially as the government had practically no presence in the area and no efficient means or resources to enforce the ban. Furthermore, according to local interpretations the ban was the main reason leading to the killing of Shaco Flores, who thereafter had become unable to continue relating with the Mascho-Piro through material gifts. Nevertheless, it still took almost two more years and a large number of contacts between the Mascho-Piro and outsiders before some kind of government presence in the Upper Madre de Dios area could be secured and advancement made in regard to contingency and action plans. There are of course many reasons for the slow governmental action, ranging from the former presidential attitude negating the whole existence of the Mascho-Piro and other peoples in voluntary isolation, the VMI as a young government organ trying to establish its place among other ministries, and the complete under-resourcing of the VMI for handling these complex issues. Although the planning

process is now set in motion, VMI still works severely under-resourced and the policy of non-contact is waiting for an alternative to be designed and put into action.

One factor that is likely to contribute – however indirectly – to lack of urgency in action for these kinds of situations is the rhetoric used to talk about the indigenous people in question. For instance, speaking about the Mascho-Piro as being 'voluntarily isolated' or in more popular language 'uncontacted' may have partially directed the discussion towards the question of whether these people should be contacted or not (which works to legitimise the policy of non-contact), instead of encouraging plans on how to proceed in a situation where contacts, especially during the summer months, take place almost daily. The Mascho-Piro case, clearly demonstrates that we should find more varied terminology than the axis 'uncontacted – in early contact – contacted' to speak about these processes. Furthermore, we should not forget that within groups there may be various kinds of internal struggles and a number of different objectives and opinions concerning the outside world, which influence the processes of contact in different ways in each particular case.

In addition to government associated people, there are quite a few different groups of people that in the past few years have made contact with the Mascho-Piro: local native and non-native people, loggers, tourists, merchants and missionaries. As noted above, these groups may have deliberate aims at contacting the Mascho-Piro (tourist companies use them in marketing their products, local people may wish to help civilize or take revenge on them, etc.) and they do not necessarily feel bound by government policies. Therefore, in order to be able to control the unfolding of events at the local level, it is important to not only to know about the aims of these different groups and people, but also to understand their motives in regard to contacting the indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation. Although the actions of these local people are noticed and reacted to, their role in the processes of contact is often underestimated. Missionary activities in the Upper Madre de Dios Mascho-Piro case serve as a good example. In addition to some mainly US based missionary organisations intrigued by the possibility of delivering the 'Word of God' to those who have never heard it before, which occasionally visit the zone, there are two denominations, Dominican Catholics and Pentecostals/Evangelicals, that have more or less permanent presence in the area. These also have both taken action to contact the Mascho-Piro.

The Dominican missionaries have a long history of evangelization, which in modern times – especially after the II Vatican Council in 1962–5 – has been fuelled by the politics of inculturation. In short, inculturation means that all cultures are thought able to present and re-express Christian faith in their own forms and terms. In a way, Christianity does not have to be delivered, rather it can be carved out of different cultural traditions. In today's situation in Upper Madre de Dios this idea of common Christianity translates among the Dominicans into concern for the humane treatment of the Mascho-Piro. They negate the isolation of the Mascho-Piro as being a voluntary choice and view that the Mascho-Piro are citizens like all others and have a right to know and to benefit of social aid programmes. In order for them to know, someone has to tell them. The Dominicans urge both the local indigenous organization FENAMAD and the VMI to leave the local communities to take care of the contacts with the Mascho-Piro because in their understanding it is the local people who are best equipped to do this peacefully. Furthermore, this concern for the well-being of the Mascho-Piro (on modern society's terms) leads them also to prepare to take action: if the other people are unable to help the Mascho-Piro, they will take action, even if it means breaking the ban of non-contact or risking their own safety. (Martínez de Aguirre & Verde 2015; Rey 2006 and personal communication.)

Charismatic Christians have a different motive in regard to contacting the Mascho-Piro and other peoples in voluntary isolation. In particular, the Pentecostal churches, which in Latin America are together with different Protestant churches widely called *Evangélicos* (Evangelicals), are driven by their urge for salvation and the victory of Jesus against Satan. According to many Charismatic groups, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ marks the end of this world and the beginning of God's Kingdom. For them; however, the Second Coming will not take place before the Word of God has reached all mankind, every human being. Here, people such as Mascho-Piro hold a central role: they are the last remaining people to be evangelised. In the Charismatic Christian representations, once the people in voluntary isolation have been evangelized the world is ready for the Second Coming. Charismatic Christian missionaries thus place themselves in a special position: they are not just delivering salvation for the 'forest dwelling' peoples, but making God's Kingdom a reality in their lifetime. Therefore, the Charismatic Christian urge to contact the people in voluntary isolation will not be easily stopped. In the Upper Madre de Dios,

a non-native Pentecostal pastor with background in the Assemblies of God Church has already organised trips to deliver utensils and to evangelise the Mascho-Piro. When the pastor was eventually banned from doing this by the VMI, he sent the adolescent Yine activist at the local Pentecostal/Evangelical Church to do the work. The adolescents contacted the Mascho-Piro and showed them a picture of Jesus. Pointing up with their fingers they explained that the man in the picture is up there, in Heaven. In sum, local representations of indigenous people in voluntary isolation, such as those of the Dominican and Pentecostal missionaries concerning the Mascho-Piro, may have a strong influence on the actions and interactions taking place at the local level. The potential of such representations affecting the processes of contact should not be underestimated.

My third point is twofold and concerns the use of anthropological and ethnographic knowledge for analysing situations of the people in voluntary isolation and for influencing the popular representations concerning them. First, even though we need concepts such as 'voluntary isolation' to refer in general to people living in these circumstances, we need to be careful that such discourse does not veil the differences between groups. Rather, when possible we should try to deepen and diversify the knowledge about each group at hand. For instance, in the case of the Mascho-Piro, the different groups – in particular those that have appeared in Piedras and Upper Madre de Dios rivers – are generally referred to as Mascho-Piro without argument. However, the material available shows that they differ from one another in terms of material culture and there appears to be some linguistic differences between these groups as well. Although I am not suggesting that we should jump into conclusions on the basis of scattered information, we should be aware of the risks embedded in talking about these groups as similar, especially if it affects the contingency and action plans. Do these groups seek contact for the same reasons? Do they have shared objectives and plans in regard to the 'outside world'?

Second, on one hand we should seek more detailed information, on the other we should also not forget what we already know. It is surprising how little ethnographic knowledge on the cultural features common to indigenous Amazonia has found its way into the general discourse on these peoples. The discourse centred on reasons for the diminishing living space and possibilities for survival of these peoples does rightly keep the finger pointed at the activities threatening indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation such as illegal as well as legal extractive activities and health risks posed by uncontrolled contact. Similarly, the requests for pots, machetes, and food made by these people are rightly taken as signs of true needs. However, if we see their desire for contact and for manufactured items and food *merely* as signs of their diminished living space and hunger, and do not take into account and make visible the social and cultural meanings of these requests, we then contribute to keeping up the simplifying representation reducing them into beings driven by their desire to survive. Although we lack precise knowledge, we may assume that their culture is likely to resemble in various ways those of other Amazonian peoples, and in the case of the Mascho-Piro of Upper Madre de Dios the linguistically closely related Yine people in particular. Fortunately, in questions related to health, this kind of knowledge – understanding of Amazonian shamanistic worldviews – has emerged as an important topic. In many other questions, however, this is not the case. For instance, as we know, materiality and things, especially manufactured items, have an important place in establishment of social relations among many Amazonian peoples. Through these items, people may gain access to the powers of others, even become consubstantial with them. Given that sharing is an important socio-moral value at least among the Yine, the refusal to give items and to engage in social interaction may be interpreted as unsocial selfishness, even as hostility, or nonhuman action. Such views would certainly bear significance for the planning of the processes of contact. Therefore, we should use the ethnographic knowledge available to enrich general representations of the people in voluntary isolation so that they, in addition to being perceived as endangered, could also in popular discourse be talked of as humans with culture, beliefs, and social life.

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