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Civilized Elders and Isolated Ancestors: The Multiple Histories of Contemporary Amazonia

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Civilized Elders and Isolated Ancestors: The Multiple Histories of Contemporary Amazonia

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Introduction

As a dear friend, supervisor and colleague, Peter Gow had a huge impact on my life—both as an anthropologist and as a person. In what follows I attempt to describe what his friendship and writing have taught me about history, memory and Amazonian sociality more broadly. Specifically, I consider his contribution to making indigenous forms of history a key area of research in Amazonia. Building on his study of kinship as history on the Bajo Urubamba region in Peru in *Of Mixed Blood* (1991), his article “Gringos and Wild Indians: Images of History in Western Amazonian Cultures” (1993) presented a regional perspective on the dynamic social categories by which Amazonian people understand their own social universe in relation to other indigenous groups and white people. Gow’s attention to indigenous agency and modes of thought allowed him to reconsider these relations and images in ways that challenged certain lines of historical thinking that dominated anthropology at the time and in some ways continue to do so.

I explore how Gow’s decidedly ethnographic approach to questions of history has influenced a generation of regional scholarship, including my own research on memory and social transformation among Waorani people in Amazonian Ecuador. I look specifically at how his emphasis on indigenous histories can help contextualize the increasing importance of historical continuity and difference in contemporary indigenous politics. I suggest that, despite the tendency toward essentialism and static views of history in a global politics of recognition, the notions of social transformation and dynamic categories of difference that Gow described remain central to how some indigenous Amazonian people relate the past to their hopes for the future. Understanding this process requires his ethnographic sensitivity to radically different ideas of the past, as well as attention to the multiple audiences that Amazonian people engage with today in diverse contexts.

Personal Histories

I first met Pete through his writing, when I was an undergraduate student of anthropology in the US in the late 1990s. I had read his first book, *Of Mixed Blood* (1991) and later as a graduate student, in 1999, I read a draft manuscript of what would become his second, *An Amazonian Myth and its History* (2001). Even today they remain my two favorite Amazonian ethnographies. I came across these texts soon after my first trip to the Ecuadorian Amazon, where my Waorani hosts shared stories about their deceased kin, missionary settlement in 1950s, and the period they call “civilization” that came with it (High, 2015a). Inspired by Gow’s sensitivity to how reflections on the past figure in Amazonian lived worlds, and in what seemed to many family and friends at the time as a suspect decision, I left a PhD programme in the US to study at the London School of Economics, under Pete’s supervision.

From the first time I met Pete in his office in London I could tell he was no ordinary anthropologist, if there is such a thing. I remember our first meeting as much for his informal,

1. While Gow referred to these people as “Piro” in his own writing, I adopt Yine here to reflect what I understand to be the ethnonym by which they most often define themselves today.

unshaven appearance, wearing a white t-shirt and speaking through a thick cloud of cigarette smoke, as I do the genuine interest he appeared to have in my research. It was the Spring of 2000, and I was nearing the end of my first year as a graduate student in the US in which I was encouraged to focus on questions of ethnohistory. Upon meeting Pete, it was immediately clear that my praise for his books was of less interest to him than my plans to do longer fieldwork with Waorani people. Thus began a relationship that was nothing like what I ever would have expected of a PhD supervisor.

Upon my arrival to study at LSE later that year, Pete became not just my supervisor, but a great friend. Though I doubt he would have agreed, I prefer to think of those two years, before he left for St Andrews in 2002, as a kind of high point in his career—or at least second to the year he had recently spent as a visiting professor in Rio de Janeiro. He was an extraordinary intellectual force in LSE anthropology at the time—not a political heavyweight or someone who tried to dominate discussions at departmental seminars, but someone who always seemed to have the most interesting question, often taking the topic in some unexpected or seemingly obscure direction, only to bring it back to the very heart of a presenter’s argument. His lectures on kinship and Amazonian ethnography were similar in this respect. They often meandered into fascinating but seemingly disjointed personal stories, whether about the authors we read, his experiences in Peru, or what Marilyn Strathern taught him when he was a “wee lad” in Cambridge, only to be punctuated by a dramatic conclusion that somehow brought everything together beautifully. He was simply, like his Yine¹ hosts, an incredible storyteller.

His ability to tell a story beautifully is part of what makes his writing such a joy to read. He seemed to have read everything, but was determined not to let Continental philosophy or the latest theoretical fad in North American anthropology take center stage in his work. Every time I go back to his writing, I am dazzled by how his Yine interlocutors—and his interactions with them—become the source of analytical inspiration. Why let oft-repeated references to Foucault or the most popular contemporary anthropologists get in the way of these insights? The creativity and audacity of indigenous Amazonian lived worlds were what mattered, not the latest anthropological neologisms that students like me felt compelled to cite in our writing. The inspiration he took from Lévi-Strauss is indicative of his disregard for current fashions, as few anthropologists in 2001 would have imagined such an approach being so integral to understanding myth and history in Amazonian social worlds.

While I initially found Pete’s creative brilliance intimidating, he quickly made me and his other PhD students part of his extraordinary community of friends and intellectuals working in Lowland South America. It seemed as if every other weekend I would find myself at his house in Walthamstow dining on his wonderful cooking with another visiting South American anthropologist whose work I had read the week before. I realized that, like Pete, these scholars were just human beings, not distant intellectuals to write about in my research proposal. It became clear that, for him, the most important intellectual force for the future of Amazonian anthropology—and thus my PhD training—was among these people and my Waorani interlocutors.

I soon came to see Pete more as a friend than a PhD supervisor. At one point, when I had to give up my rented flat in London at short notice, he casually suggested that I move into his house. As a student in London inevitably short on money, I was shocked by such a generous suggestion, especially when he offered to have my girlfriend move in as well. What I found strange in all of this was how, between living with him and coming to share so much of our lives, Pete seldom gave me any concrete advice about my work. I often wondered whether he had even read the draft proposals and essays I sent him, only to hear him make reference to a particular point in my writing months later in a casual conversation at the pub. While I found this unsettling to say the least, particularly with the pressures of being a PhD student,

I have since come to realize that other PhD students have had similar experiences of a deeply caring relationship and seemingly light supervision from Pete.

His style of PhD supervision reminds me of what I have come to understand as typical Amazonian understandings of knowledge and its transmission. My Waorani friends, for example, expect people to learn skills not by discipline, coercive control, or being told repeatedly what to do, but by accompanying, observing and listening to those who have desired knowledge (High, 2015b). Such an understanding trusts that a person will, in a relatively autonomous way, learn what they need to do through a social presence that includes attention to and practice in adult activities from a young age. In a context where people rarely tell you explicitly what to do, ethnographic fieldwork can be as tricky as it is enjoyable. In perhaps a similar way, I think that Pete's "light" supervision was in fact reflective of his belief that his students would figure things out in our own ways. He could write clever books about Amazonian people, tell us great stories, and introduce us to many brilliant friends, but ultimately, anything important in our work would come from our own experiences in fieldwork. In this way, one could say that his approach was as anthropological as it was Amazonian. His often-frustrating supervision was borne out of respect and confidence in us as people. With all the troubles, frustrations, generosity and learning that came with it, he treated me as much as kin as he did a student or colleague.

In 2002, soon before I began my PhD fieldwork, Pete announced that he would be leaving the LSE for St. Andrews. Moving back to his homeland of Scotland, he would continue supervising several of us PhD students from afar. He told me this news while we were on the train to Paris, where we attended a workshop that led to the *Time and Memory* (Fausto and Heckenberger, 2007) volume discussed below. Pete had also arranged for us to meet with Lévi-Strauss at his office in the Collège de France. As a mere student at the time, this was an extraordinary experience, and all the more so with Pete. His generosity and care seemed to know no bounds, yet my friend—and the very reason I'd moved to London—was relocating to Scotland. Following my fieldwork, it was from my visits with Pete in St. Andrews that I came to know Edinburgh, his hometown, and a place I was immediately drawn to. When I finally moved there in 2013 Pete seemed determined to show me his homeland, taking me on walking trips to sites around the city he remembered fondly from his childhood. He also took me and other former students on trips to the Highlands, including Blair Atholl, where he told us about the lives of his ancestors and showed us their gravestones. It was among these same ancestors that we would lay Pete to rest last summer, in full view of the surrounding hills he so much loved.

From Ethnography to History

For me, the originality in Pete's writing is apparent in the context of history becoming a key facet of anthropological theory and methodology in his own generation and that preceding it. By the time I started studying anthropology and read Pete's books it was clear that anthropologists had, by and large, accepted the argument that historical considerations should have a central place in anthropological analysis. Whether in early arguments for recognizing the histories of non-Western people in terms of a shared global history colonialism (e.g., Wolf, 1982; Mintz, 1985), speculations about what "Natives" thought about their first encounters with white people centuries ago (Sahlins, 1985), or more general attempts to reconstruct historical processes in specific regions, history had become much more than just a brief background chapter to foreground ethnography. Many anthropologists had themselves long since turned to the archives, adopting methods similar to professional historians to gain new temporal perspectives on the people and places they studied. While this turn toward history was much more pronounced in US anthropology, it was clearly gaining momentum in the UK by the time I arrived to study at the LSE.

In Amazonia this trend manifested in a renewed interest in ethnohistory, as anthropologists and historians were increasingly drawn to archives, travel writing and other historical documents to shed new light on key social transformations, disappearances, and continuities since colonial times (Hill, 1988)². Often seen as a quintessential place of “people without history,” in Wolf’s (1982) terms, or an example of Lévi-Strauss’s (1966) “cold societies”—where myth appears to place events outside of historical time—indigenous Amazonian forms of history had previously received relatively little attention from anthropologists. So even if Gow’s work was preceded by a generation of international scholarship based on ethnographic fieldwork in what was then considered the world’s “least know continent” (Lyon, 1974), few scholars had linked this kind of work to questions of history in any substantial way. Ethnohistorians, archeologists, and other historically minded scholars have since contributed greatly to our understanding of the diversity of past Amazonian worlds and how much this region has transformed since the arrival of Europeans³.

I read Gow’s writing on history, kinship and myth as part of this new wave of historical thinking in Amazonia, but also an explicit challenge to it. I remember vividly the inspiration I took from reading “From Ethnography to History”—the final chapter in *Of Mixed Blood* (1991). In it he makes clear that, as an anthropologist, he is interested in history not as a way of establishing a more accurate or complete account of the past, or as a way of placing the experiences of Amazonian people within a wider “global history,” but to take seriously what the past is in Amazonian lived worlds. He argued that, for the Yine people he studied, history is kinship in such a way that indigenous people understand their past (and present) as much more than just another chapter in colonial history. For them, history is kinship in the sense that they understand themselves to be “of mixed blood”: it is in the collapsing of pure “kinds of people”—whether whites, “wild Indians” or specific indigenous groups, that people remember and constitute their communities as a historical product of “becoming civilized” (1991: 252-253). In challenging the vision of history that distinguishes “traditional” and “acculturated” peoples, he insisted on seeing indigenous Amazonian people instead as agents in their own history:

“Native people’s knowledge of the past is not simply impressive, it is also a form of potent historical consciousness... For native people, a narrative draws its power and veracity precisely from such relations of close kinship” (ibidem: 285).

Gow’s decidedly ethnographic approach to history—also evident in *An Amazonian Myth and Its History* (2001)—had a major impact on his own and subsequent generations of Amazonianists, not least his own students. With the strong emphasis on indigenous agency in regional scholarship (High, 2015c)⁴, alongside the attention to memory and temporality in the social sciences more broadly (Berliner, 2005), we should not lose sight of the originality in Peter’s approach. His writing is so central to my work on memory and history that I sometimes forget how much he has inspired and influenced my own. In what follows I explore specifically his work on how historical images of “wild Indians” and “civilization”—by which Amazonian people have been categorized and defined by outsiders for centuries—have become key points of reference in the way indigenous people understand the constitution of their social worlds in Western Amazonia. Drawing on my work with Waorani people—a group often referred to by other indigenous people and outsiders alike as “wild Indians,” I explore how Gow’s analysis can help us understand how indigenous people use and extend such categories in new and changing social contexts.

Gringos and Wild Indians

“If the colonial history of Western Amazonia has been articulated by images of “wild Indians” and trackless forests, how is the product of that history lived as a social reality by people in the region?” (Gow, 1993: 328).

2. See, for example, Hill (1996), Hill and Santos-Granero (2002), Roosevelt (1994), Whitehead (1993, 1994), among others.

3. A few examples, among many others, include Heckenberger (2001, 2005), Neves and Heckenberger (2019), Neves (2008, 2011) and Rostain (2013).

4. Recently, some scholars have challenged the focus on indigenous agency in regional scholarship. See, for example, Bessire (2014a, 2014b), Course (2013), and High (2012).

In posing this question in his early article, Gow provoked what he understood to be a somewhat uncomfortable theme for regional scholars: in our efforts to highlight Amazonian people as agents in their own histories, rather than merely passive victims of colonialism, what do we make of indigenous discourses that appear to reproduce such colonial imagery? Put another way, if indigenous understandings indeed challenge notions such as “acculturation,” why do they so often express themselves and their histories through images of “wild Indians,” *gringos* (white foreigners) and processes of becoming “civilized” through relationships with missionaries or white bosses?⁵ Gow’s answer, in my reading, is that Amazonian people make these images their own, such that they become integral to the formation and ongoing creation of local social worlds (ibidem: 328). As he writes:

“...for these Western Amazonian peoples, wild Indians and *gringos* form the twin poles of a continuum. The middle of the continuum is the social world of the Western Amazonian peoples themselves, a social world that is constituted as the historical product of intermarriage between different kinds of people in the past. As images of extreme otherness, wild Indians and *gringos* function to define the limits of the system, by opposing unassimilated difference to the assimilated differences which define life in the immediate social world” (ibidem: 329).

Gow’s analysis is ambitious in drawing not only on his own ethnographic research with the Yine, but also on numerous other studies of Western Amazonian groups in Peru, Ecuador and Colombia with somewhat similar historical experiences of contact, intergroup marriage, and conversion to Christianity. All of these peoples, he argues, appear to have parallel narratives of becoming “civilized,” whether through working for white bosses, “mixing” with other Native peoples, becoming Christians, or engaging in various forms of exchange. Central to his analysis is the observation, clear in the quote above, that for such peoples, *gringos* and “wild Indians” both lack the key feature of local sociality: namely kinship, and more specifically, a history of intermarriage between different kinds of people. That is, “wild Indians”—whether referred to as *indios bravos*, *aucas* or other terms—are not understood as “people” insofar as their isolation and refusal of contact with others represents an image of social closure antithetical to personhood. Similarly, *gringos*—those powerful white outsiders who seldom appear to have families, do not seem to work in any recognizable way, and refuse intermarriage with Native people—are not understood as “people” in this sense (ibidem: 335). In sum, people like the Yine locate their own social world, including neighboring groups with whom they do intermarry, in contrast to these anti-social images.

Gow would acknowledge that such a model no doubt fails to capture the full complexity and diversity of indigenous histories, ideas of personhood, and the social categories by which such peoples understand themselves and their neighbors in the region. Much has changed in Western Amazonia since Gow’s observations some 30 years ago, not least with regards to how native peoples engage with and imagine various others. Audiences have changed and expanded, as have their understandings of what it means to be an Amazonian Indian in the 21st century. While relations with outsiders have intensified, so-called “uncontacted” Amazonian people, those “wild Indians” living in voluntary isolation⁶, have become a more tangible presence in some indigenous communities. And yet, as I describe below, it is striking how indigenous people today are extending images of “wild Indians” or memories of “civilization” in new ways and in new contexts. Arguably, Gow’s suggestion that indigenous Amazonian people articulate such imagery of otherness as much as outsiders use it in reference to them remains as compelling as it was when he wrote the article.

Perhaps most importantly, his analysis was provocative in presenting an indigenous model of history that challenged conventional ideas of social transformation. Many anthropologists have been attracted to fieldwork in Amazonia not merely as an exotic object of ethnological study, but for specific political agendas around social justice (Conklin, 2020). Gow reflected openly in his writing about how he initially approached Yine history from a Marxist pers-

5. These issues of alterity and becoming that involve relations with non-indigenous people have become a key area of Amazonian research (Albert and Ramos, 2000; Bonilla, 2009, 2011; Vilaça, 2010; Viveiros de Castro, 2011).

6. While some governments, organizations and scholars adopt the term “voluntary isolation” or “uncontacted” groups to describe indigenous peoples who refuse contact with outsiders and the state, several anthropologists have written critically about the assumptions that often accompany these terms (Bessire, 2012; High, 2013; Kirsch, 1997). Rather than “naturally” isolated societies yet to be discovered, in most cases these groups struggle to survive in face of extractive economies, environmental devastation, often engaging in efforts specifically to avoid the political and administrative reach of the state. Some of these scholars contrast conventional Western notions of “contact” and “isolation” to Amazonian ideas of sociality and alterity that conceive of relative isolation as temporary and reversible (High, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2019).

pective, focusing on the exploitative economic relations they suffered with ruthless rubber bosses and the *habilitación*⁷ system. To ignore this history of exploitation, he noted, would be absurd. But his ethnographic focus on Yine history led him to understand these people not as disintegrated remnants of a once authentic, ancient Amazonian “culture,” but as a specific Amazonian social world that has incorporated (and come to value) certain aspects of this history. We thus read about the Yine not as mere victims, survivors, or an “acculturated” people, but as active agents in the making of their own history.

For me personally, this presented both the most challenging and important aspect of Gow’s work. I was initially drawn to do fieldwork with Waorani communities after reading about their famous encounters with missionaries from the 1950s and subsequent conflicts with oil companies operating on their lands. These are communities that, despite fairly recent contact with the outside world, had endured an extraordinary level of external intervention and injustice in recent decades. This is in part the result of their historical position as *aucas* or “wild Indians” in the national imagination, leading to hostile encounters with other Ecuadorians and intense interest from Evangelical missionaries. It also has much to do with the discovery, in the middle of the 20th century, of some of Ecuador’s richest oil reserves on their traditional lands. As I read newspaper articles about the expansion of oil fields in Waorani territory in the mid-1990s, I made plans to study the effects this multi-billion dollar industry was having on their communities. Admittedly, although I was centrally interested in Waorani experiences, my main concern at the time was with the prospect of their acculturation in the face powerful external forces.

In retrospect, it’s not clear how one would go about studying such a process of “acculturation” ethnographically, particularly in contexts where people do not typically understand themselves to have a “culture” to be lost or inherited (Gow, 1991: 285). As Gow noted, this would be a project more for Western historiography than a proper object of anthropological inquiry in a place where “Native people fear the loss of their children, not their culture” (ibidem: 286). While oil figures prominently in the social, political and economic lives of many Waorani people, it did not appear to have the same agency I had imagined in constituting their present lives—even at a time when many local men were employed in oil work. They seemed to define themselves less by their conflicts with oil companies than in terms of their place in a wider history of relations of violence with outsiders and between Waorani families. If they are victims of brazen missionaries and a belligerent oil industry, this is not the primary way most Waorani people understand themselves in history. Gow’s writing and supervision pushed me to think about the lives of Waorani people, and the stories they told me, in a different light. His work taught me to take their images and ways of remembering seriously, even (or especially) where they departed from our own narratives, logics and even political motivations.

New Histories and Old Images

Gow’s call for us to recognize Amazonian people as agents in their own histories is, of course, much easier said than done. Recent decades have since seen the proliferation of work in this direction, perhaps most notably in the excellent contributions to Fausto and Heckenberger’s (2007) volume, *Time and Memory in Indigenous Amazonia*. In describing a temporal revolution in Amazonian research, the editors identify *An Amazonian Myth and Its History* (Gow, 2001) as a key example of an emerging emphasis on ontological continuities in indigenous lived worlds, even in contexts of intense social change (Fausto and Heckenberger, 2007:15). Specifically, they acknowledge how the authors in their volume follow Gow in focusing on how Amazonian people “*set about constituting* the specific historical situations in which they find themselves embroiled” (ibidem: 16, my emphasis), observing how indigenous histories

7. This system of *habilitación* or *aviamento* refers to how the rubber economy was articulated through relations of debt, by which urban commercial houses would advance goods to workers as debt, to be repaid in the supply of rubber (Gow 1991: 38). Gow describes how the *habilitación* system came to control agricultural production in the Ucayali region through the control of indigenous labor through these debts (ibidem: 46).

challenge Western regimes of social memory and historical action. The attention to time and memory in Amazonia, exemplified by Fausto and Heckenberger's volume, has contributed much to our understanding of indigenous histories. And yet, few if any anthropologists have matched his unique brilliance in engaging such histories on their own terms.

In my own attempts to grapple with Waorani engagements with the past, it quickly became clear that the images of "wild Indians" and processes of "civilization" that Gow described were also key facets of Waorani memory and personhood. In relation to his writing, the Waorani case is interesting for a number of reasons. Though located in Western Amazonia, the Waorani are quite different from most of the ethnographic examples he discussed. In contrast to the Canelos Quichua (Kichwa) in Amazonian Ecuador, who he identified as an example of intermarriage generating kinship much like in the Bajo Urubamba, for decades Waorani have been identified as *aucas* or "wild Indians" (Rival, 1994). Prior to the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) establishing a Waorani mission settlement in the late 1950s, the Waorani were embroiled in an intense series of revenge killings between rival families. A previous attempt to missionize the Waorani in 1956 resulted in the spear-killing of five US missionaries along the Curaray river, an event that remains prominent in both Waorani social memory and popular narratives of Christian martyrdom around the world (High, 2009b). These events, and the relative isolation of Waorani people until the 1960s, consolidated their reputation as "wild" *aucas* in missionary writing, popular Ecuadorian imagination, and among their Kichwa neighbors.

Gow notes in his article how, in Western Amazonia, *aucas* function in this system as "unintegrated others" (Gow, 1993: 337), to whom Kichwas contrast their own way of life. He also notes a—then relatively recent—process of intermarriage between Kichwas and Waorani (see Yost, 1981). By the late 1990s, when I began fieldwork, these marriages were the norm, with Kichwas in most cases relocating to Waorani villages. While this process would seem to have incorporated Waorani people into the system described by Gow, most Waorani continued to evaluate Kichwa people in contrast to themselves, often associating them with greed, drunkenness, and sorcery attacks⁸. My Waorani hosts, who were very much aware of their reputation as "wild Indians" in the region, readily drew on both this image and what they described as their elders' "civilization" in the 1950s and 1960s as key aspects of social memory (High, 2015a). Alongside detailed accounts of how their kin were killed by rival Waorani families and *kowori* (non-Waorani people) in the past, elders and young people alike emphasized "civilization" as a transformation that led to their current way of life. In these accounts, "becoming civilized" involved coming to live at the Evangelical mission with former enemy groups, the cessation of revenge killings, and accepting relations with *kowori*, including white missionaries and Kichwa people. While this time is associated with the conversion of several key elders to Christianity, many Waorani today who do not identify as Christian continue to assert "civilization" as a key facet of their history and sociality (High, 2016).

In Gow's terms, we could say that Waorani people today have adopted a form of history—familiar to much of Western Amazonia—that locates the source of the current social world in processes of mixing with various others. But this is clearly not the whole story, not least because few Waorani would understand marriage with Kichwas to constitute their social world. Even as "civilization" has a prominent place in their history, Waorani personhood is most often conveyed in terms of either group autonomy, narratives of past violence, or conviviality between close kin—not exchange or mixing with others. This presents a form of memory that links past and present in ways that are very different from narratives of civilization, or even the emphasis on the victim's point of view in their accounts of past violence.

As Rival (2002) has argued, this victim's point of view—as prey rather than predator—is central to Waorani personhood. However, there are contexts where Waorani people emphasize much the opposite, asserting themselves or their ancestors as autonomous warriors prepared

8. In her ethnography of Kichwa people along the Curaray River, Reeve describes her informants making similar criticisms of Waorani (Reeve, 1993; Reeve and High, 2012).

to kill to protect their territory or avenge the death of a kinsperson. While such a predatory perspective is rare, such as in cases of extreme rage, in recent decades *auca* or warrior imagery has become an expression of embodied memory and ethnic identity in specific sociopolitical contexts (High, 2009a). In the early 2000s, this included local school events and urban festivals, where young Waorani adults were invited to perform as quintessential “wild Indians” in front of audiences that included other indigenous peoples and mestizos. In one of my first articles, I described how these performances at once reproduce a specific *auca* image rooted in colonial imagination and assert Waorani autonomy and strength in the face of powerful outsiders (High, 2009a). Here, again, we find Amazonian people adopting what appear to be external images of “wild Indians” for their own purposes. Such warrior imagery continues to figure prominently in the increasingly diverse sociopolitical contexts in which Waorani people find themselves today, whether in protesting the sale of oil concessions on their lands in front of Ecuadorian government offices, or appearing at the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Scotland.

Waorani history is clearly multifaceted, and probably increasingly so in the current context, especially if we take embodied forms of memory into account. This is because the histories by which people constitute their social worlds are always relational (Toren, 1999)—both internally and in relation to external audiences. This is as much the case in Western Amazonia as it is anywhere else. The multiple ways in which Waorani people constitute their social world in reference to the past emphasize both continuity and transformation. While accounts of the time of civilization evoke a powerful image of rupture and opening up to the outside, some narratives of violence and autonomy convey a strong sense of historical continuity and closure. Both, however, can be best understood as forms of memory that respond to new contexts and evoke possible futures. Elders do not tend to describe “civilization” as a utopian period of peace and abundance, as they remember the tensions, diseases and food shortages they suffered at the mission. But they also recount this period as a moment when their possibilities of social existence radically expanded. In this way, it has become a key form of memory for multiple generations of Waorani people hoping to engage in more secure and productive relations with various others.

Multiple Pasts, Possible Futures

As Gow observed on the Bajo Urubamba, “History is the narrative of the creation of contemporary kinship, *and* the source of native people’s response to new situations” (1991: 285, emphasis in the original). The relations that constitute these new situations, of course, continue to change. While I seldom hear young Waorani adults disparage or contest “civilization” as a historical period, other images of the past are becoming more salient and powerful in their public lives. For many Amazonian peoples, specific historical images and narratives of continuity are now integral to their political engagements with state institutions, the dominant societies of the countries in which they live, as well as a wider global sociopolitical sphere. Whether in a remote Waorani household or at an international climate change meeting in Europe, Waorani people engage the past in different ways in the presence of different audiences. While, as ethnographers, we appreciate accounts of Waorani “civilization” and Yine becoming “of mixed blood” as indigenous histories, these histories are unlikely to prove compelling to institutions and wider publics who understand history and indigenous peoples in a very different way. I suspect that this has become increasingly obvious to Waorani and other Amazonian peoples who in some contexts depend on engaging distant and powerful outsiders in productive ways.

Some Amazonian people have made important gains through various forms of indigenous political organization, whether in securing land rights or challenging extractive economies

and detrimental state projects. And yet, even the most successful indigenous political engagements tend to be encompassed by a politics of recognition that demands and rewards specific—and often essentialist—images and discourses of indigeneity⁹. Just as Gow and other anthropologists demonstrate ethnographically how indigenous histories challenge Western concepts like “culture,” these same groups today depend on their ability to engage these concepts and translate them across radically different contexts (High, 2020). Laying claim to a specific Amazonian “culture,” and in specific ways, has to some extent become a political necessity in response to the expectations of powerful outsiders. For some Amazonian peoples this is nothing new. Some 25 years ago, Conklin (1997) described how groups like the Kayapo in Brazil were achieving political recognition in part due to their use of colorful body decorations that outsiders associated with “authentic” indigeneity. The flip side of this, Conklin noted, was that Amazonian groups who fail to demonstrate these visual stereotypes risk being ignored, devalued and ultimately marginalized from key political contexts.

Perhaps it is obvious then, in this sociopolitical context, that histories of becoming “civilized” or “mixed people” tend to give way to narratives of autonomy and continuity with the past. This was already evident in Waorani performing as “wild Indians” in the early 2000s, when some were beginning to refer to specific practices and images associated with their elders and ancestors as their *cultura* (“culture”). What is clear is that most outsiders value Amazonian people (and their history) in a very particular way—one that sees discontinuity as evidence of “acculturation”, cultural loss, and ultimately inauthenticity. As the (once and future) “wild Indians” of Amazonian Ecuador, Waorani are subject to this process to an even greater extent than other peoples, and thus may have more to lose (or gain) in the politics of recognition.

In contemporary ethnic politics, imagery of a timeless Waorani culture of isolation and fierce resistance to outsiders tends to dominate. Whether in protests on the streets of Ecuador’s frontier cities, in popular newsmedia, or on the websites of international activist groups, we see, hear and read Waorani images and narratives of continuity as an explicit political statement of autonomy and resistance. In environmental politics, Waorani leaders have achieved a degree of success in asserting their culture—often represented by elders and ancestors—as one that has protected and conserved Waorani lands from the advance of oil. Here, the fragile “middle ground” (Conklin and Graham, 1995) constituted through alliances between Waorani people and foreign environmentalists is premised not just on “ecological Indians” who protect “nature,” but equally a clear image of historical continuity.

The remaining groups living in voluntary isolation within the Waorani territorial reserve—often referred to as Tagaeri or Taromenani—also figure prominently in this process. Known, much like Waorani elders and ancestors, for their long spears and violent resistance to outsiders, in some contexts Waorani (and outsiders) celebrate these groups as an image of Waorani historical continuity. Their enigmatic presence has become a touchstone in debates about environmental protection, oil development and human rights in the region. Some Waorani have been embroiled in violent conflicts with these groups for decades, resulting in several Waorani deaths and subsequent massacres of isolated groups¹⁰. For most of my interlocutors, however, they represent lost kin that became isolated from Waorani people who settled at the mission (High, 2013). Some Waorani describe their desire to reunite with possible kin they speculate could be living among them, and some young people describe the Taromenani as possible marriage partners. Some elders described to me their desire to “civilize” them, suggesting that, if attacks against these groups ceased, they would prefer to live among settled Waorani people.

To some extent, these “uncontacted” people have become the new “wild Indians” of Amazonian Ecuador. That is, for many Waorani, it is “civilization” that distinguishes their own history from their uncontacted neighbours. But we have also seen that this is a different

9. See, for example, Conklin (1997, 2002), Conklin and Graham (1995) Graham (2002, 2005), High (2009a, 2015a), Jackson (1995), and Oakdale (2004), among others.

10. See Cabodevilla (2004, 2013) and High (2013, 2015a) for a detailed analysis of these events and historical relations between Waorani people and these groups.

image of “wild Indians” than what Gow identified as typical of Western Amazonia. Rather than an anti-social pole in a continuum that constitutes the Waorani social world, these groups present a source of identity and potential sociality. In this view they are not absolute, anti-social others, but beings who can, should, and may, under the right conditions, want to become “civilized” like their Waorani neighbors. In the wake of recent violence, these groups are also a source of curiosity and imagination. Young men in particular often take pride in admiring and identifying with the perceived strength, autonomy and bravery of distant Taromenani people, much as they do their elders and ancestors (High, 2010).

Some Waorani, such as those seeking revenge against these groups, clearly take a different view. But it appears that Waorani people, whether remembering past spear-killings or becoming civilized, performing *auca* imagery at urban festivals or drawing on imagery of ancestors defending their territory in new political contexts, are engaging history from multiple perspectives. Stories of “civilization” and those about Waorani conflicts with outsiders (whether as victims or perpetrators) are perhaps best understood not as entirely distinct histories, but instead parts of a single continuous narrative told in different ways, for different reasons, in response to different audiences. In this way, these seemingly contradictory perspectives are all part of a single historical narrative.

To say that these histories respond to new and changing contexts, as Gow would suggest, in no way implies that they are “inauthentic” or evidence of “acculturation.” Nor are they simply pragmatic responses that strategically situate Waorani people within external imaginings of Amazonia. I read these histories as indicative of how Waorani with different generational and gendered experiences define their social universe in multiple ways. The extraordinary generational differences between Waorani elders, some having grown up in relatively isolated households prior to mission settlement, and young adults who learn Spanish in school and regularly make extended visits to Ecuadorian cities¹¹, points to the diverse and changing contexts from which indigenous histories emerge and take shape.

Remembering the Future

As perhaps our most eloquent ethnographic observer of indigenous histories, Peter Gow demonstrated how indigenous Amazonia today isn't simply a leftover relic of colonial conquest or a place inhabited by people without history. It is a place where, often in the face of great suffering, people have made their own histories in ways that are intrinsically meaningful to them. These histories, as we have seen, are often constituted through images of self and other that both incorporate and challenge Western regimes of history. Like just about any rendering of the past, these indigenous histories, whether emphasizing continuity or transformation, can be understood as appeals to possible futures. For Gow's Yine interlocutors, being “of mixed blood” was as much to do with their own expectations of what social life should be like as it was a way of constituting their social world historically. This is also clear in Waorani stories about the past, where “civilization” is as much a way of thinking about present relations as it is a vision of the future marked by living together in villages and engaging productively with outsiders. This future orientation of memory is perhaps most explicit in ethnic politics, where Waorani leaders and protestors draw on the strength, autonomy and fearlessness of “the ancient ones” to convey a desired future of territorial integrity.

As Gow describes among the Yine, Waorani people—whether elders, political leaders or students—are busy constituting their own histories, often in ways that fly in the face of external expectations. But I hope to also have shown how these Waorani perspectives on the past are multiple and often closely intertwined with Western modes of historical thinking. Many of them, whether accounts of “civilization” and “wild Indians” or images of timeless Amazonian eco-warriors, draw in part on the imaginations of various others that have become

11. In recent years, an increasing number of Waorani families have relocated to frontier cities in Amazonian Ecuador, even as they maintain strong links to their home communities within the Waorani reserve.

part of indigenous lived worlds. What becomes clear is that people express multiple—and seemingly irreconcilable—visions of the past in different contexts and for different reasons. And this multiplicity in no way indicates a lack of “authenticity” or a process by which indigenous histories are simply being replaced by more politically expedient ones. As we see with in the case of “uncontacted people,” for Waorani these are not the same “wild Indians” as they are for most outsiders. They are not “naturally” isolated people but part of what constitutes a Waorani history and a desired future of strength and autonomy. Such examples illustrate how, even in contexts very different to those described by Gow, indigenous histories continue to challenge Western regimes of history.

Pete’s ethnographic sensitivity to history places us well to understand such multiplicity. In his final book, *An Amazonian Myth and Its History* (2001), he explicitly combined Lévi-Strauss’s (1981) comparative approach to the study of myth, as a particular kind of historical object that denies the passage of time, with a Malinowskian emphasis on looking “over the myth-maker’s shoulder at the myth being created” (ibidem: 28). This combination, at a time when structuralism had long since fallen out of favor in general anthropology, illustrates both his originality and irreverence to disciplinary fashions. It is indicative of the creative brilliance in Pete’s writing, which was already evident in *Gringos and Wild Indians* (1993). It should be no surprise that Lévi-Strauss, Pete’s intellectual hero, was impressed by Pete’s engagement with his work. Recently, as I joined members of his family and other friends in sifting through the mountain of academic papers Pete left behind in his home office, we found a faded smoke-stained letter, dated March 9, 1999, in a stack of old lecture notes (Fig. 1). Though I don’t remember him ever showing it to me, this letter was already becoming the stuff of myth among LSE colleagues in the early 2000s:

Dear Dr Gow,

I did not write immediately upon receiving your kind letter of February 18th together with your manuscript. The reason is I wanted to read it first. It is a splendid book. So far, I believe, the recent history of a South American community was never so thoroughly explored. That you succeeded to reconstruct it and made the reader relive it through the changes that did occur in the mythology is a telling proof of the potentialities of myth analysis.

I have nothing against adding what you call a Malinowskian dimension to my own. Quite the contrary. It has enabled you to demonstrate that even a mythological corpus as degraded as the Piro’s, and likely to be neglected as such, can be fruitfully exploited and given an unsuspected meaning by approaching it from a different angle. Needless to say I am deeply grateful to you for understanding so well what I have been trying to do and for dispelling many misconceptions about my work.

With thanks and regards,

Yours sincerely

Claude Lévi-Strauss
Honorary Professor
College de France

Writing in his 90s, Lévi-Strauss appeared to appreciate how Pete brought myths and their transformation to life as part of an Amazonian lived world in ways that his own structural analysis of myth could not. But Pete’s work was also about much more than this. The most impressive thing to me about his writing is how he evoked the affective meanings in how Yine personhood and kinship is constituted in everyday life, while at the same time locating their histories, myths and lives within a broader regional perspective. Often identified as a proponent of “the moral economy of intimacy” analytical style (Viveiros de Castro, 1996: 189), Gow’s fascination with comparison and Western Amazonian “systems” is an important example of how we can combine multiple analytical approaches to Amazonian lived worlds. It is perhaps why his writing has inspired subsequent generations of Amazonianists—from multiple continents—who increasingly look to transcend specific schools of thought and na-

tional traditions that have characterized regional scholarship in the past. This ability, alongside the generosity and care he has shown to so many of us, is part of Pete's legacy.

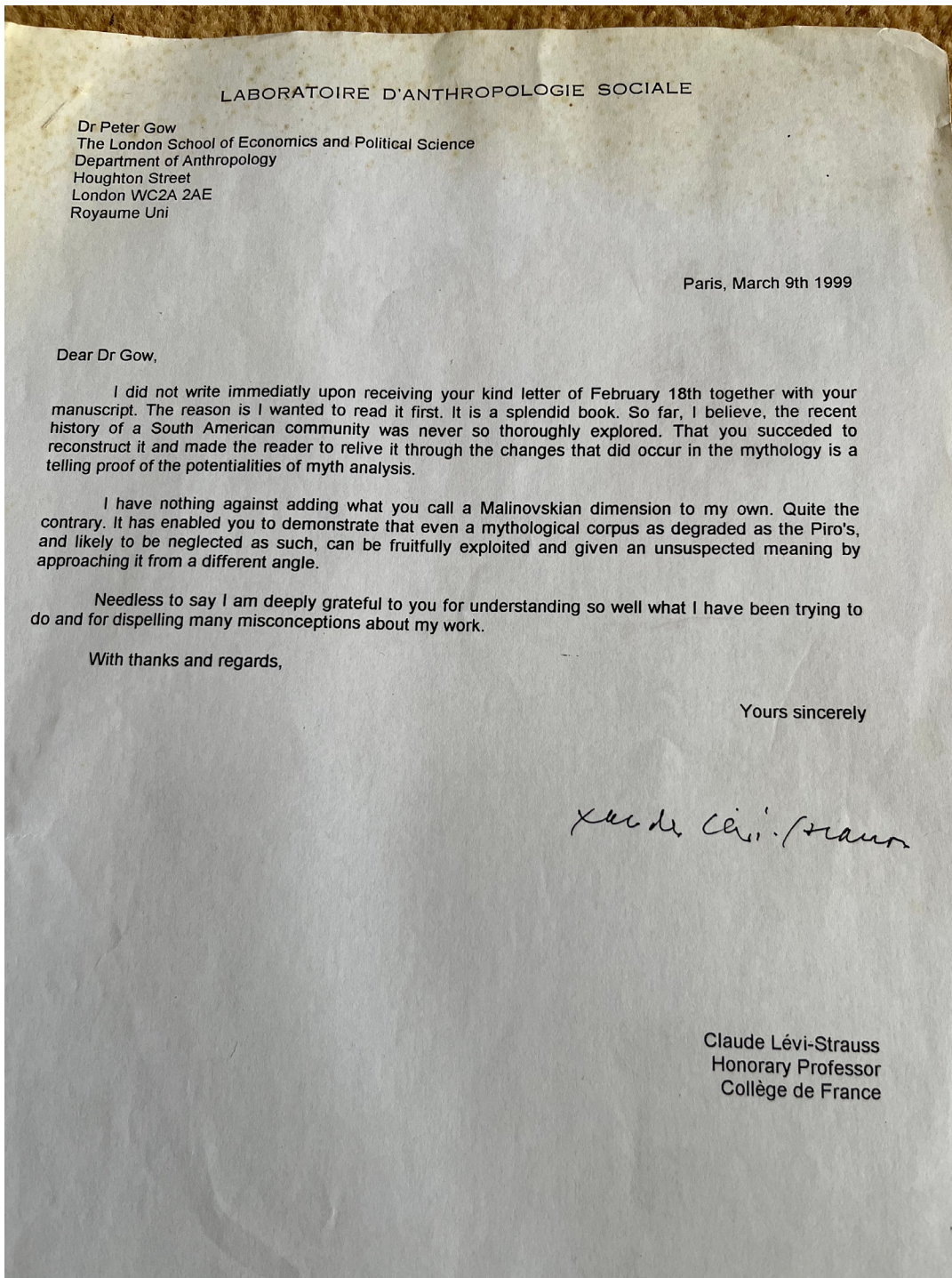


figure 1. In March, 1999, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote a letter to Pete upon reading a draft of what would later become the book, *An Amazonian Myth and its History* (Gow, 2001).

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