

Anthropology of the Amazon – on-line open course resources

Module II:

Indigenous Cultures of the Amazon

The modern situation of the people living in the Amazon region is in close connection with the history of colonization. Of course, the history of people living in the South America is much longer than that. The earliest settlements are dated 13000 B.C., and the first agricultural practices evolved around 6500 B.C. The groups of the region were varied – some of them were egalitarian, some developed complex social structure and functioned as chiefdoms. The contacts between different groups was quite common. In 1492 Christopher Columbus came to the Caribbean Islands and over time it caused many changes. The North American continent was discovered by Europeans in 1497, and South American in 1500. These dates mark the end of the indigenous era in this part of the world and the beginning of colonial expansion of Europe. During the course we will discuss the outcome of the colonization but will not go into details of its history and events.

The colonization ended with the war of independence. It was the time of Napoleonic wars in Europe and the focus of Spanish and Portuguese crowns was diverted from its colonies. During the years 1800 to 1830 all of the South American colonies gained their independence. Hundreds of years of colonization had an influence on almost every aspect of modern life in the Amazon as well as in other parts of the continent. One of the effects was spreading the diseases that were not known to people in the region previously. It is estimated that over one third of the indigenous population died after the initial contact only due to lack of resistance to viruses and bacteria that were common in Europe. In some cases less than half of the population was left – only to be exposed to other threats, such as removing from the lands, famine, poverty and so on.

One of the most significant legacies of colonization is the structure of societies in the postcolonial countries: the upper class consists of Caucasians; indigenous people, as well as people of African descent are at the bottom of the social ladder. The divisions do not end there – discrimination based on ethnic identity, language, social class, age, gender, or political beliefs are also common.

The influence of colonial times on religion is obvious: Christianity introduced by the conquistadors is most common and widespread. Belief systems of the indigenous are restricted to small local ethnic groups and are not as complex as they used to be. For a very long time the Church had power not only over the spirituality of the people but also the economy and politics of the country. Exploitation and making profit off social inequality was common in colonial times and in modern times has been replaced by corruption. Since the beginning of colonization land was owned mainly by Spaniards or their descendants, who made an income off the many Indians working for them. These conditions were ideal for the development of corruption.

The exchange of various animals and plants also can be counted as an effect of colonization. Most of the vegetables that we eat today originated in the New World. Actually it may even be quite

challenging to give an example of a vegetable that was grown in Europe for centuries and still is widely eaten today. One of the examples might be the rutabaga, but – honestly – how many of us are using it in our kitchens?

As for animals, the most interesting are the cases of the horse and the guinea pig. The horse was brought to the Americas by the Spaniards and soon became the important part of indigenous cultures. The guinea pig was adopted by Europeans as a pet whereas in South America, where it originated, it is a wild animal that can be hunted and eaten.

Despite the history of the colonization and later globalization there are still indigenous groups in the Amazon. The number of them is estimated to be around 400 and many of them speak specific language and have separate traditions and customs. The groups count in total over one million people. Some of them live in the forest, some moved to the outskirts of the cities or live in the city. Their situation varies in many aspects. Many of the indigenous people had their contact with western culture as early as 400 years ago while some of them only in recent years. There still are some of them that refused contact and live in voluntary isolation. Most Indians live in settled villages by the rivers, and grow vegetables and fruits like manioc, corn, beans and bananas. Only a few Amazonian groups are nomadic; they tend to live deep in the forest away from the rivers. They grow some crops but rely more on hunting and gathering.

Almost all of the Indians' problems revolve around land: outsiders either want their land, or something on or underneath it. The key threats are a massive boom in oil and gas exploration, rampant illegal logging and the rapid spread of ranching and farming.

Amazonian indigenous economy is based mostly on plants grown in the family gardens as well as on hunting and gathering. The most common plants that can be considered the staple food of the region, is manioc and platanos. The vegetables are grown in most of the gardens and provide the basic nutrients for the people. They are also the base for *chicha* – brew that is made of masticated cooked manioc or platanos. It serves as the main source of nutrients and has a use in many ceremonies.

Indigenous groups use all sources of proteins that are offered by the forest. During the ant swarming season these insects are often eaten. Another popular protein source is the *mayun*, the larvae of the *Rincophorus phoenicis*. The larvae can be found in the palm trunks and can be eaten raw, cooked or grilled. Indigenous people also fish, using plant-based poisons to stun the fish or using fishing rods. Fish are an important source of nutrients and nowadays also a way of earning money as they can be sold on local markets.

Hunting is an important part of life for people living in the forest or close by. Some groups use shotguns for hunting, others use bows and arrows, spears, or blowguns with darts tipped with curare. Mammals and birds are hunted with great skill.

Even though all Amazonian indigenous groups live in a more or less similar environment, their cultural adaptation to it differs in many aspects. The good example of it is the idea of a shelter – the

houses built by the groups are very diverse even if they use the same – or almost the same – materials provided by the rainforest.

Some houses, as the one shown here, are extremely big and can house many people. This type of a house is called *maloca* and the term usually refers to big, round or oval houses that are occupied by extended family or serves as a gathering place for the whole group.

The Xingu Indians of Brazil build houses on the oval plan with a thatched roof placed on a construction made out of bamboo poles. A very different house is used by the Yanomamo of the Venezuela and Brazil border. It is called *shabono* and consists of one long round roof that encompasses the living space of the village. All people living in *shabono* are related and every small family unit occupies part of the construction.

The Huaorani of Ecuador live in big houses called *onga*. The construction is almost five meters tall and used to be inhabited by extended family.

The house of the Quichua group of Ecuador was built on the oval plan with half-walls and thatched roof. During the colonization the missionaries promoted the model of the Western house – square or rectangular one, divided into separate rooms. What is more, missionaries stressed that only one nuclear family (meaning parents with their children) should occupy every house. It was odd for the indigenous people to live separately – they tend to live in bigger extended families where everything was shared.

Nowadays Indian live in smaller houses that are usually built out of wooden boards with the roof of corrugated iron. Needless to say that this type of construction does not work well in the hot and humid tropical climate.

Other type of idea diversity can be noticed in the handicrafts. Indigenous people of the Amazon produce a wide variety of these and some of them are still in use. Women can craft many different types of ceramics – some of them were used for cooking and storing, like the big bowl on the right, but to this day mostly ceremonial decorated ones are created. Some also are made for personal use and some for selling on the local market.

The fiber of a *chombira* palm is used to weave hammocks, bags and necklaces. Various beads are used for decoration – plastic or natural ones from seeds. Basketry is a handicraft that is still made for everyday use. In many villages all types of baskets can be found – for storage, for transport or just for decoration. Baskets are woven out of vine stems and many technics are used for getting specific shape of a final product.

One of the handicraft rarely practiced is the woodcarving. Different types of seats could be carved out of a block of wood – the ones shown here have the shape of symbolic animals of power – a turtle and a jaguar. This wooden bowl is used for preparing *chicha* – women spit masticated manioc into it. Some people still prefer to use traditional wooden bowls instead of plastic or metal ones.

In some cases two different sets of skill are needed in order to create some tools. What you see in the picture is actually a clay pan for frying the manioc pancakes with the wooden spatulas for turning the pancakes upside down.

One of the things that is shared by the indigenous people of the Amazon is the shamanistic practices. Shamanism has to do with the belief that there are spirits in the supernatural world that is parallel to ours. The spirits can get into our reality and harm us – our souls and bodies but people cannot get into the spirits' world. Shaman is the only person who can do it in the given group. He has to reach a state of trance and then his soul travels to the supernatural world and can negotiate with the spirits or fight with them if the need be.

The practices for reaching the state of trance as well as the way of curing the patients depends on the culture and this will be further explored in the next part of the course. There are some aspects of the modern shamanistic practices that are more or less similar regardless of the specific culture.

All of the indigenous people of the Amazon have access to Western medicine (except for the groups staying in voluntary isolation). And some of them go to the doctor if the need arises. Nevertheless some of the traditional medicine is still maintained – this applies mostly to using medicinal herbs as well as curing by the shamans.

People will often use herbal remedies on their own. There are many natural methods for curing some simple discomforts. Yet quite often indigenous people are sending for the shaman – he can usually cure more serious diseases by going into trance state and finding the solution for the health problem in the supernatural world. Many shamans in trance can see the sickness in the body of a patient in the form of a shiny blue substance and they symbolically suck it out in order to cure the patient. The indigenous people consider shamans to be very effective. Usually they are respected and people also turn to them for help in other issues than ones considering health.

These and other issues will be elaborated in the next part of the course.