AMAZONIA: SOCIAL ADAPTATION, CHANGE, AND IDENTITY

AMAZON TOWN: A STUDY OF MAN IN THE TROPICS. By CHARLES WAGLEY. (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. Pp. 336.)

WELCOME OF TEARS: THE TAPIRAPE INDIANS OF CENTRAL BRAZIL. By CHARLES WAGLEY. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Pp. 328. $12.95.)

XINGU: THE INDIANS, THEIR MYTHS. By ORLANDO VILLAS BOAS and CLAUDIO VILLAS BOAS. (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1973. Pp. 270. $12.95.)

The works examined in this review offer broad insights into the problems of social adaptation, social change, and ethnic identity in the Amazon. We would like to discuss these problems from an anthropological viewpoint, setting aside the purely economic, political, and technical side of development and concentrating on the humanitarian issues involved when a culture is changed either deliberately or as the result of circumstance. Our interest is not so much in the material products of technological development as it is in the less tangible, but equally important, social and cultural implications of these changes.

The first interaction between Europeans and the indigenous people of the Amazon Valley marked the beginning of an almost five-hundred-year process of complex social adaptation—the voluntary process by which one cultural group adjusts its traditions, social institutions, or economic system to new environmental conditions resulting from the influence of another cultural group. For the most part, this cultural adjustment in the Valley has been sporadic and haphazard; it has also been largely a one-sided process—the aboriginal population adapting or responding to the continuous expansion of Europeans. War, enslavement, and, not least, western diseases were responsible for the annihilation of thousands of Indians. Severe depopulation disrupted the functioning of social institutions: tribes were in disarray, gardens were neglected, and, not surprisingly, hunger and starvation ensued.

Unlike the politically centralized populations of the highland areas, the native inhabitants of the Amazon Valley were rarely able to adjust successfully to the spread of European culture. By the mid-eighteenth century, the surviving highland Indians of Central and South America had become immune to western disease, they had adopted new tools and crops, and, in fact, their numbers had grown in comparison to 1500 levels. In the Amazon Valley, the opposite was the case: most lowland tribes remained isolated and susceptible to foreign diseases, and, most importantly, their population continued to decline. Yet, these tribes were not "the victims of a gigantic conspiracy of the Brazilian nation to be rid of them, or any conscious genocide. They were simply the victims of a process of history" (Wagley 1977, p. 48).

During the twentieth century, this "process" has largely remained the same: although truly isolated tribes are scarce, alien diseases continue to pose a

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threat to many Indians; and complex and unfamiliar land rights enable specula-
tors to evict many tribes from their territories or at least reduce their land to the
point where it is too small to provide even a substandard food supply. In spite of
these familiar patterns, the problems of social adaptation in the Amazon Valley
have also taken on a new character. First, the emergence of the Amazon fron-
tiersman as a cultural and social entity parallels in many ways the plight of the
Indian. Migrating from northeastern Brazil, these *caboclos* have adapted their
western background to the new lowland environment and absorbed many ele-
ments of Indian culture. At the mercy of commercial land companies and out-
side private investors, these squatters, like the Indians, face eviction from lands
for which they have no legal title.

Another factor that has significantly changed the nature of social adapta-
tion in the Amazon Valley, indeed throughout the Third World, is the tremen-
dous surge of interest and investment in organized development programs.
Governments, private foundations, religious orders, and international organi-
zations have all contributed immense sums to provide better health care facili-
ties, techniques for increased food production, and the conditions for improved
living standards. As Wagley states in *Amazon Town*: "Never in its history has the
best of Western technology been available to the people of the Valley. Never has
the Amazon man had the use of knowledge and skills available in more ad-
vanced regions for the exploitation and control of the physical world" (p. 289).
The 1976 edition includes a new final chapter by Darrel L. Miller. Its significance
is not so much that it updates Wagley's earlier research, but that it verifies the
hypothesis put forth by him over thirty years ago.

In the new preface, Wagley says: "It should be clear that my book on Ita
. . . is not a study in the vein of modern social science, although it uses the
framework of social anthropology. As I look back, I know now that I am essen-
tially a humanist; and I realize that this was a humanistic book with a humanistic
message." Undoubtedly, it is due to his approach that *Amazon Town* has become
a classic in anthropological literature since its first appearance in 1953. This is
not to say that his fluid writing style or his perceptive analyses of social prob-
lems deserve less praise. On the contrary, so much in *Amazon Town* warrants
recognition that it is indeed a challenge to be selective. Within the context of this
review, however, two major points demand particular attention. First, it is nec-
essary to contrast Ita society of 1974 with the assumptions made by Wagley in
1953 concerning the barriers against and opportunities for social development.
Second, while dealing with development and change, it is worthwhile to dis-
cuss the philosophical and moral issues facing social administrators as they plan
the strategy for improving living standards, factors responsible for both the
inadequate food supply in Ita and the difficulties in initiating social and eco-
nomic development programs there. First, the economic system in the Amazon
Valley and indeed throughout much of the colonial world is oriented towards a
foreign market. It is an extractive economy, which directs efforts at procuring
new materials for the international market rather than food for one's own con-
sumption. With minimal agricultural assistance from outside, the inhabitants of
Ita could easily have produced an adequate, year-round food supply; instead,

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they devoted considerable time to collecting and selling rubber. The profits they received went towards importing expensive processed food. Occasionally, such exportation of raw materials can lead to tremendous profits, as it did during the rubber boom at the turn of the century. During periods of low demand, however, profits are minimal and poverty or even starvation can ensue. By relying primarily upon unstable foreign markets, there can be no guaranteed or consistent means of securing an adequate food supply. Wagley stressed this in 1953. In 1974, Miller found that Ita continued to maintain an extractive economy, although lumber had replaced rubber as the export commodity. Not surprisingly, Ita's food supply is still insufficient to feed the entire community. As a result of the world decline in lumber prices at the end of 1974, landowners cut back on production, awaiting demand increases. In Ita this meant fewer jobs and less money to import the necessary foodstuffs.

The second factor responsible for economic backwardness in Ita had little to do with environmental limitations or technological inefficiency. Rather, it was the attitudes of the Ita upper class that prevented any great strides in social and economic development. Both the slave system of colonial times and the extractive economic system of the rubber-boom years have contributed to a rigid class system. In 1953, Wagley found great disdain amongst the *alta sociedade* for any type of manual work. In a position to take advantage of cheap human labor, they had little concern for labor-saving devices; they "are content with the status quo. They look with suspicion on any programs which might result in basic changes in Amazon society" (1976, p. 143).

According to Miller, this situation has changed in that the present class system is no longer based on family background but rather on material wealth. Unfortunately, he does not compare the social views of the new rich with those of the "old aristocracy." Nevertheless, Wagley's observation illustrates that the success of development programs largely depends on the ability of social planners to work within the social structure. There is no alternative but to gain the cooperation of powerful and influential individuals—and, if such individuals exist, they are largely to be found in the higher social strata.

Any attempt to alleviate social or economic problems in Ita will invariably bring about far-reaching changes in other areas of the society, both in a material and nonmaterial sense. Unfortunately, the extent of these changes can rarely be predicted with any accuracy. It is this uncertainty that gives rise to serious apprehension about and criticism of the effects of development programs, particularly on the part of anthropologists. In many cases these fears are justified. The introduction of advanced labor-saving machinery into an underdeveloped area can often disrupt the functional value of local social institutions. On the other hand, truly advantageous innovations can be rejected altogether if they should, in some way, conflict with local beliefs. As Wagley points out: "Man is not a rational being in the sense that his behavior is always motivated by his own absolute advantage—for his concept of what constitutes an 'advantage' is colored by the value of his particular culture" (1976, p. 18).

The elaborate and time consuming preparation for rural Amazon festivals illustrates this point. The festival season in Ita spans the same dry summer

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months during which gardens must be cleared and planted, and when rubber must be collected; and, although food shortages are serious throughout the Amazon Valley, the people of Ita divide their time between work and "play." To the practical-minded social administrator, such a division would, on the surface, appear extremely counterproductive. However, as Wagley discovered, the sponsorship of festivals has tremendous prestige value in the community. To earn money for these activities, an individual must work long hours to provide for more than his basic necessities. Since goods such as radios or factory-produced clothing are either not available or beyond the earning capabilities of the rural worker, material possessions provide little incentive. "When people are deprived of their own forms of recreation and hospitality, as they are in many Amazon communities, there is little desire to accumulate beyond their immediate physical needs" (1976, p. 214).

The anthropologists' concern over the unnecessary disruption of social and cultural patterns is understandable. The concept of "cultural relativity" expresses the belief that values such as inferior or superior, good or evil are all relative to the culture in which they are found. Certainly, this viewpoint is constructive when it shows us the importance of accepting and appreciating new customs and different lifestyles. But, as Wagley emphasizes, when the social organization or technology of a society fails to provide even the basic requirements for survival, this society must be seen as "inferior": "Change is an order in such technologically inferior societies" (1976, p. 295).

The real danger in development programs is not so much the initiation of irreversible culture change per se. Rather, it is the unnecessary destruction of a society's norms, customs, and traditional identity, and its relegation to a position of "second-rate participation in modern industrial and commercial society" (1976, p. 295). As "inferior" societies are integrated into the fast moving, mechanized, and urbanized world, the loss of traditional cultural elements can only serve to make the transition more difficult and the end product considerably less rewarding. Without respect for or even knowledge of one's past and heritage, few individuals can be expected to confront and participate in the new environment with a sense of confidence and pride. "The world has seen many cases of primitive and peasant groups turned into miserable agricultural laborers, miners, and factory laborers—into people deprived of their traditional institutions and values without the possibility of full participation in the new society" (1976, p. 292).

Wagley recognized the need for outside technical assistance in raising living standards, but at the same time he warned of the dangers involved in destroying the traditional identity and cultural values of a society. In *Welcome of Tears*, he brings to light this warning by contrasting the difficulties facing both the Tapirape Indians and the caboclos in their efforts to survive as cultural entities. The greatest single hazard threatening them both is insufficient land on which to live and secure an adequate food supply. From a population of over 1,500 in 1900, only fifty-five Tapirape Indians remained in 1953 when they were resettled at New Village. Traditionally, the Tapirape have relied largely upon slash and burn agriculture for their food needs. Therefore, every five or ten

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years, they would move the site of their village to within easy access of fertile, unclear forest. Although resettling at New Village greatly altered their ecological adjustment, the small population was no heavy burden upon the environment. in July 1967 the Servico de Proteçãoa os Indios managed to secure approximately 2,400 acres from the Taperaguaia development company, on whose land the Tapirape were resettled.

Unfortunately, as the population continues to grow, it has become apparent that 2,400 acres will not be sufficient for the Tapirape to continue their slash and burn technique. New Village has been located on the same spot for over twenty years and, as a result, the Indians must travel greater distances to farm new forest areas. Not only is there a limit to the area that may be feasibly maintained from New Village, there is also a limit to the territory in which they may search. Further attempts are underway to acquire 35,000 more acres surrounding the Tapirape reservation; however, its use will be restricted to hunting and not planting. In time agricultural production will suffer and undoubtedly the Tapirape will be forced to recast their economic system. This, in turn, will alter other institutions and eventually transform their society.

The Brazilian frontiersmen face similar problems. Although not a cultural group in the same sense as the Tapirape, the caboclos are united in their economic activities and backwoods lifestyle. In recent years, development companies have been buying up large tracts of land throughout central Brazil; on much of this property, the caboclos have lived, farmed, and hunted—some for several generations. As the companies seek to develop this land by building hotels and holiday resorts, the frontiersmen are forced to move. Occasionally, there have been armed confrontations with company officials, but this is hardly the answer to their problems.

In many ways, the Tapirape are at a particular advantage in handling their present difficulty. Although neither the Indians nor the caboclos have legal title to their land, the former are charges of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI). Once their land is registered with FUNAI, theoretically it becomes inalienable except by consent of the Foundation. The caboclos, on the other hand, have no special protection and must prove squatters rights. A second advantage, which may prove to be most profitable in the long run, is that the Tapirape form an ethnic group with a functioning social system and a strong cultural identity. But state protection alone cannot ensure the survival of the Brazilian Indian. Policies affecting their future may be introduced by those alien to native customs and values, and without the advice of the people themselves; state protection can also confine Indians to reservations, to live virtually as "endangered species or living fossils."

In Wagley's opinion, "it was the arrival of the Little Sisters of Jesus and of Padre François Jentel and their residence in the New Village that saved the Tapirape from total disorganization and, probably, extinction" (1977, p. 289). Not only did they provide education and technical assistance, they persuaded the Tapirape to continue their traditional subsistence activities and, most importantly, gave them pride in their heritage and cultural identity. Without strong leadership and the support and cooperation of the village as a whole, it would

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be impossible for the Tapirape to confront the problems brought by contact with the land companies, the Brazilian government, and the outside world. Without a sense of pride and confidence in their own cultural value, it is not likely such leadership or support will emerge.

The theme of ethnic identity, integrity, and dignity is best exemplified in the third book under review, *Xingu*. This volume is a clear and comprehensive portrait of the environment, character, history, and myths of the fifteen tribes of the Upper Xingu region by the brothers Orlando and Claudio Villas Boas who, since 1943, have dedicated their lives to preventing the tragic demise of the Indians of Central Brazil. They succeeded in petitioning the Brazilian government to establish a reservation at the headwaters of the Xingu River, the Xingu National Park. In this significant volume, the authors record thirty-one myths "relating the origins of Light and Darkness, Sun and Moon, Man and Woman, explaining the acquisition of culture and personality, and describing the final cataclysm that will end the world."

Crucial issues are raised in efforts to change "primitive" lifeways: What right does one have to alter cultures in the name of "modernization," "development," or "progress"? How and for what are changes introduced? Are these tribes "inferior" because of their crude technology? Who is to judge that their basic values and affirmations as reflected through myths and legends are inferior or superior? Should one force the "integration" of these tribes for "national planning and development"? These and other questions have intrigued many social scientists.

The Villas Boas brothers' response to "integrating" the Indians in Brazilian national culture is to oppose the isolation and marginalization of minority groups and to "wait until there is a place for [them] in the structure of Brazilian society." They ask: "What is more valuable to our country, 100,000 healthy, self-sufficient, dignified Indians or another 100,000 illiterate, frustrated, marginalized peasants?" This is amplified in the foreword to the book: "The true defense of the Indian is to respect him and to guarantee his existence according to his own values. Until we, the 'civilized' ones, create the proper conditions among ourselves for the future integration of the Indians, any attempt to integrate them is the same as introducing a plan for their destruction. We are not yet sufficiently prepared" (p. vii).

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