



Tempo

ISSN: 1413-7704

secretaria.temp@historia.uff.br

Universidade Federal Fluminense

Brasil

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Tempo, vol. 23, núm. 3, septiembre-diciembre, 2017, pp. 508-527

Universidade Federal Fluminense

Niterói, Brasil

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=167053642006>

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Revisiting first contacts on the Amazon 1500-1562

Mark Harris[1]

Abstract: This article revisits four well-known accounts of the first European encounters with Amerindians in the Amazon. The sporadic character of these encounters make the impact on Amerindian societies irregular and uneven. My analysis is directed to the present condition as encountered, especially the variety of contacts. This approach obliges the text be treated as a whole, rather than being read selectively. Maintaining the integrity of the text allows us to see the different kinds of relations in their contexts. My intention is to use these reports to search for the bridges across cultural separations. Each drew the other towards them, in their own ways. These steps opened the way for the “refounding” of indigenous riverine societies in the seventeenth century.

Keywords: Amazon; encounter; Indians.

Revisitando os primeiros contatos na Amazônia, 1500-1562

Resumo: Este artigo analisa quatro relatos bem conhecidos dos primeiros encontros europeus com ameríndios na Amazônia. O caráter irregular desses encontros torna o impacto nas sociedades ameríndias desigual. Minha análise é direcionada à condição presente, especialmente à variedade de contatos. Essa abordagem obriga o texto a ser tratado como um todo, em vez de ser lido de forma seletiva. Manter a integridade do texto nos permite ver os diferentes tipos de relações em seus contextos. Minha intenção é usar esses relatos para procurar as pontes entre as separações culturais. Cada um atraía o outro para eles, em seus próprios caminhos. Essas etapas abriram o caminho para a “refundação” das sociedades ribeirinhas indígenas no século XVII.

Palavras-chaves: Amazônia; encontros; indígena.

This article examines the accounts of four Spanish expeditions that encountered Amerindians. Its purpose is to draw out the reliance of whites on the indigenous people. For the progress of the European was only possible by obtaining food from settlements, which they managed through a variety of strategies including bartering, stealing, and killing. These expeditions are generally well known. Historians have examined them to understand the process of conquest (Sweet, 1974). Ethnohistorians and anthropologists have mined them for information about their chosen people or topics (Porro, 1992). Archaeologists have used them to compare and contrast with their finds in the material record (Schaan, 2012). My aim here is different again. I build on Kennet Pedersen in his essay on first encounters in the south of Brazil in the early sixteenth century. There he takes the reports at their “face value, intricate textures of perceptions and conceptions within the observers of a specific observed present” (Pedersen, 1987, p. 385). That means he does not bother to use the texts to find evidence of an authentic society unaffected by European presence. His analysis is directed to the condition as encountered, especially the variety of contacts between the parties before they became more strained and simplified. I would add that this approach obliges scholars to treat the text as a whole, rather than reading it selectively.

Maintaining the integrity of the text forces a perspective on a range of relations in their contexts. My intention is to use these reports to search for the bridges across cultural separations. Each drew, or repelled, the other towards them in their own ways. These steps opened the way for the refounding of riverine societies in the seventeenth century, when interethnic relations were not reduced in scope, as is assumed with the establishment of missions and slavery, but continued in all their complexity and diversity, albeit in a transformed manner. Indian experiences of the early to mid sixteenth century provided them with an understanding that shaped future generations’ attitude and practical engagement.

The irregular character of these encounters make the impact on Amerindian societies uneven. First contacts happened in different places at different times. Moreover, it would be nonsense to talk of the Amazon as a unified region at the time. Taken at face value these chronicles deliver a riverbank view of Amerindian peoples at the time of each expedition. The forays of whites on to land permit a closer view of the place and people. If we knew anything of the commercial and ritual pathways between places and peoples at the time we would know if the news of Columbus’s ships amongst the Tainos, and other landings, had been distributed across the continent. We should adopt such a continental view until we know more about the regional boundaries at the time. There may have been other significant events to report on from an Amerindian point of view, hardly any of which we can know about today.

One possible occasion was the movement upriver of Tupi people from the Atlantic coast, as we will see, passing by the same places as Orellana’s ships but a few years earlier. These people were in search of the land-without-evil (Gandavo, 1922; Clastres, 1995). Their presence caused a heightened state of alert. In other words, part of the contemporary condition of these riverbank societies was their experience of Tupi messianic migration, which produced its own violent

interactions. My speculation is that the expeditions of the 1540s onwards came upon a world at war. There is clear evidence that Europeans were perceived as a part of these battles. The Indians along the river who saw the ships flowing down did not know the crew were Europeans. They may not even have known they had white skin. Did the Indians see these people as variants of themselves: allies or enemies? I think they did.

Analyses of this material have hardly touched upon these questions and interpretations. The characteristics of war practiced by Amerindian societies at the time is striking if the chronicles are read together. The parties that attacked the whites were large, disciplined, well provisioned and aggressively relentless. These were people used to war on the river. They may have been defending a perceived threat to their way of life rather than attacking European outsiders.

In modern times, first contacts are confused and tense episodes (Vilaça, 2010). Often, isolated and independent people make new contact with whites after they have been threatened in their villages by gold or oil prospectors and illegal loggers. The fact that the label and the experience are still relevant today shows the power of these stories to reveal both cultural difference and human pity and compassion. For all that separated the people on the boats and on the land, a great deal brought them together, even if they did not want to recognize it. So while the encounters occurred, and the texts were written, in a particular cultural and historical moment, the relations were not defined completely by that situation.

1500: The Coming of Strangers from the Eastern Sea

Vicente Pinzón and his crew were probably the first to make landfall on what is today the contemporary Brazilian Amazon— and for someone to have it written a document that has survived. There are three versions of Pinzón's voyage by Peter Martyr (Teixeira and Papavero, 2002, pp. 13-28) and a much shorter, uninformative testimony from a crew member (Parry; Keith, 1984, p. 181). Pinzón had been a captain with Columbus in the Caribbean (Thomas, 2004) so there is no initial moment of wonder that one finds in the first letter from Brazil by Caminha. Around the time of this voyage, Alonso de Hojeda and Deigo de Lepe also made attempts to settle at the mouth of the Amazon. In the next few decades there were more Spanish efforts, Diego de Ordaz in 1531 being the most noteworthy. All came to nothing. Soldiers who had played a formidable part in the conquest of the Andes, Caribbean and Mexico were unable to penetrate the Amazon from the sea. Their ships were unsuitable for the intricate maze of waterways and their navigational knowledge was not developed enough to negotiate the reefs, shallows and currents. Moreover without friendly relations with native people they were unable to replenish stocks so they could not explore endlessly (Parry and Keith, 1984, p. 177).

The Spaniards made their landfall on the Atlantic coast on 28th January 1500 south of the present day Recife city in northeast Brazil, now known as Cabo de Santo Agostinho. There were

no people, only burnt wood and footprints. Soon bored, the whites sailed northwards, observing firelight in the distance. As the sailors approached they could see people milling around. Not wanting to disturb the Indians, the Spaniards waited until the morning to approach them. Forty armed men went ashore but did not succeed in communicating with the thirty or so Indians. The Indians, who were armed with their bows and arrows, made threatening gestures, perhaps indicating a wish to see the whites return to their ships. The whites offered presents and spoke kindly, but the locals seemed uninterested in these gifts and possible new friendships. Given the Indians were of huge stature with tough looking faces, the newcomers went back to their ship, only to return the following day. But they found nobody, only their large footprints in the sand.

The Spanish boats moved on quickly to the north coming to a river where they found friendlier people. We, on the other hand, can pause a moment on the beach with that first encounter and its precious few details, where two peoples met on the Atlantic coast. These Indians were indifferent once again. They wanted them out of their way and rejected their goods. Had news of these mad, clad and small people with metal weapons and inexplicable objects — hawk's-bells, knives, scissors and mirrors already reached them? Had a strategy of keeping a distance been decided upon as they observed the parade of boats and bodies from the horizon? Likely they had other priorities to attend to. After all, their beach camp was temporary accommodation. They may have been on a hunting expedition or on the way to a celebration.

The triviality with which these thirty men of impressive and athletic appearance treated the people who arrived by sea is suggestive of a conservative, if astute, response to novelty. The Europeans were unable to break into their world by means of barter. This was a theme that continued as Pinzón and his men continued up the coast to the Amazon. If the offer of goods did not get a reaction, the whites may have thought, provocation would.

Further up the coast the caravelles came to a mouth of a river, too shallow for them to enter. So they sent some shallops ashore with armed men. The whites could see a great crowd of Indians coming down from a bluff. So a young man was sent to the group with some trinkets, including a hawk's-bell. In turn, a club with a golden top, surely a symbol of a chiefly authority, was thrown down. As the white man went to pick it up the Indians surrounded him. And started to attack. With his sword he kept them off until a contingent of his fellows came to save him. A skirmish followed in which eight whites died from arrows and spears and a large number of Indians were slaughtered with swords and lancets. The written record says they were naked so they had nothing to protect them, nor a fortress to hide behind. Surely they were unused to these kind of metal weapons and not expecting them to wound as they did. The fight ended with the fearful Spaniards running away. The Indians managed to hold on to one of the shallops.

This episode affected the visitors deeply because Pinzón no longer wanted to lose any more men. Having witnessed events in the Caribbean however he should not have been surprised by the lack of a positive reaction. They continued, reaching muddy, brown and sweet water they could drink, which went on for many leagues. This was the Amazon River. Indians with painted bodies lived

on the islands here. Fruit trees could be seen along the banks. It was clear the place was looked after. These people were much more accepting of the Spaniards, who wanted to make their way through the islands to seek the source of the rivers. Although the written accounts say nothing about the kind of contacts had, it is clear there must have been some depth to their communication. One source related that in these islands there were “many painted people who flocked to the ships with as much friendship as if they had conversed with us all their lives” (Hemming, 2012 p. 14).

The whites even managed to learn some local geographical terms and see strange animals as they were given a tour by locals. The land was known as *Mariatambal*, a possible source of the word, *Maranon*. To the east it was known as *Canomora* and the west, *Paricora*. Some of Pinzón’s sailors could have picked up Arawak or Carib words from their previous expeditions to the Caribbean. When it came to revealing the source of gold, the Indians had to use sign language. They directed the whites to the gold upriver in the west. But Pinzón feared for his men and his ships if he followed these indications.

Having learnt that there was no gold in the immediate vicinity, Pinzón must have allowed his frustrations to boil over. He ordered his men to seize a quantity of Indians so they could be sold in Cadiz to pay back his debts for the expedition. Thirty-six people were taken on board. The accounts tell nothing of their fate, but most would have either died en route or in Spain. Few made it back to their homes on return voyages to assist in the micro-navigation of new expeditions.

These thirty-six Indians may have been kidnapped as proof of the land Pinzón had touched for a few days. The accounts do not mention they were taken by force. A likely scenario is that they were tricked into coming on board and the ship promptly left. Pinzón then steadfastly continued north along the Atlantic coast, coming to the Oiapoque river, and then back to Paria, the island of Margarita. Ultimately, the land of sweet water held little attraction for the outsiders who only wanted gold and precious stones. Not for the last time would this disappointment be felt.

From these brief encounters, what stands out is the diametrically opposed reactions of the two groups. When the Indians want nothing to do with the whites, the whites only want affiliation and trade. When the Indians appear overly friendly, the whites react with indifference because there is no gold and merely kidnap thirty-six natives. The meaningful interactions are violent ones—here the men come up close to each other, exchange blows, spit, sweat and blood. They would have felt that the other party had bodies much like their own. In this regard, violence is less a break down of social relations, but a development of them and an exchange of a cultural expression (Whitehead, 2004).

1541: From the West to the East: Being led by the River

If travelling up the river from the east proved impossible, the Spanish just managed to descend it from the west. At the time they could not have connected up the sweet water sea at the mouth

with their coordinates in the foothills of the Andes. Yet it must have been suspected that the east flowing river would have ended in the Atlantic Ocean after crossing an interior landmass. The expedition of Captain Orellana was the first white descent. It too stole an Indian or three along the way, for the purposes of retrieving information. Orellana could converse in Tupi, and devised ways of communicating in new languages. Thus some of the information about Amerindian societies comes from the captain's questioning of these informants. What drove these travellers down river and to communicate with Indians was the need for food. They were incapable of providing for themselves.

Carvajal's account is the most detailed we have of these riverbank societies in the sixteenth century. It has been rejected in the main for its confusing textual references and what some see as exaggeration of the scale of indigenous societies (Meggers, 1996). However, this way of writing was common at the time (Barber and Berdan, 1998). This prescientific way of writing seems so unfamiliar to us now that we can hardly make sense of it. There is still much to be gained from a close reading of the text for considering what were the Indians' first experiences of the European presence.

The seasonal calendar is crucial to appreciating the perception of plentiful food in native stores. The expedition took place as the flooding of the river had already begun in February. The river was at its widest and highest as the Europeans left the main trunk and moved into the delta area in June 1542. The rise in water made fishing more difficult. Food was hoarded for consumption in this period to sustain natives until the dry season. Given the large numbers of people to feed, these supplies were probably at their most bountiful in the early part of the calendar year. People's residential movements were also affected by the river height. Some floodplain villages had been abandoned for higher land. Equally some villages may have been had more populated as the flood squeezed people into smaller spaces.

Tales of gold and cinnamon were the original motivation for Pizarro to lead an expedition from Quito, as it was for Mercadillo and Nunes to start from Lima, Peru (see below). Riches had been found so why not in the unexplored region of the forests and rivers? The expedition soon collapsed with lack of provisions and knowledge of the environment, and the unsuitability of rivercraft. Reluctantly, Pizarro allowed Orellana and 57 hand-selected men to depart in one brigantine in search of food in December 1541. As they rowed away, for there were no masts or sails on their boat, they stole a number of Indian canoes to make riverbank access easier (Medina, 1988, p. 170).

No riverside houses were seen for the next nine days. With nothing to eat they started to cook their leather belts, shirt buttons and the soles of their shoes. At this point they were travelling about eighty miles a day. Then on New Year's day 1542 drums were heard, but not for another two days did the crew meet humans. Carvajal said the drums were calling the country to arms, after four canoes were spotted paddling away. Hunger forced the ship to make a stop at a riverside village. At first the Indians stood guarding their village but as the whites moved to land they melted away. This absence of contact was similar to Pinzon's experience with the Indians keeping well

away. The whites helped themselves to the food lying around in storage. After a few hours the Indians returned. Orellana managed to communicate with them and asked to see their overlord. A man, possibly *Aparia*, appeared shortly in full chiefly attire. The leaders embraced. The captain offered *Aparia* clothes, and the Spaniard received copious quantities of food, partridge, turkeys, fish and manioc. That evening nearby other chiefs came to greet Orellana, though we don't know what they talked about. Except that one, *Aparia*, an old man, told them of wealth further down river and of the women who were warriors. He also informed them that there was another grand province inland from the river that had much gold and was ruled over by *Ica* (Medina, 1988, p. 177).

In this town, Orellana expressed the need to build a seaworthy boat. This intent reveals the hope that the river would soon lead to the Atlantic. But the crew lacked any skilled craftsmen. Eventually two men came forward and offered to make nails, "and other things". With the captain's guidance, bellows were made and charcoal prepared. Carvajal does not tell us if the Indians were involved but does say generally that they did not stop offering aid. They were likely to have directed men, guided them to the right kind of tree, helped chop them down and dug the charcoal pits. Apart from general cooperating the new methods, skills and tools must have fascinated these newcomers to the world of metal. And the chance to get close to the workings must have seemed like pleasure rather than a chore.

In the end, Orellana decided to continue work in a more suitable riverbank location (Medina, 1988, p. 178). They swept downriver for seventy miles away, seeing at least one settlement, this time belonging to *Irrimorrany*, who arranged for more food to be brought to them. This time they ate turtles and parrots in great quantities. A longer sojourn was not possible because of the fast flowing waters. The next stopping point was in another great overlord's domain, apparently with the same name as *Aparia*, except that this region was more extensive and ran along both riverbanks for about four hundred miles, including about twenty villages, each with fifty malocas. The arrival of the whites in this domain was greeted by Indians in canoes with food. But the visitors were told to seek accommodation in a pleasant looking, but vacant, village on the other side of the river. Their sleep was much disturbed by swarms of mosquitos. So the Spaniards moved to another village where more overlords were met, and they heard news of the *Coniapuyara* (women without men, grand mistresses, Medina, 1988, p. 181-183).

In one large village, near present day Iquitos, they were welcomed by paramount chief *Aparia*, and given generous supplies of food and offered houses to sleep in. Their diet consisted of manatees, fish, partridge, and monkeys. Here Orellana was moved to deliver a speech on the value of the Christian faith and to inform the Indians that King Charles V of Spain was the overlord of this place now. He had no trouble making himself understood and the Indians listened carefully. Orellana said the king had ordered him to report on what he found in this new territory. In response, chief *Aparia* warned them that downstream they would encounter fierce warrior women. *Aparia* also wanted to know more about what was being told to him, so he asked Orellana to speak further about his people and country. Here Orellana appeared to develop his story to reach

out to the Indians on their own terms. Having seen in the village a massive carved piece of wood and learned it was dedicated to the sun, their god, called *Chise*, Orellana replied to Aparia that his people were also the children of the sun and their purpose was to go down the river. At this revelation, the Indians were most joyful, and for they now saw the whites as “saints or celestial beings”. And the Indians would serve them as they wished (Medina, 1988, p. 182-183). This oral discourse is the most detailed and lengthy one presented in the whole account. On both sides there is an attempt to engage with the other.

On the next day twenty-six more chiefs assembled to meet Orellana, suggesting they lived no further than a day's journey. No doubt more conversation was had exploring the anthropological and philosophical nature of the different parties. Though it is easy to see Orellana growing impatient with such talk and asking about gold. He told them all—again—that his King now possessed these lands and as a mark of that rule he erected a tall wooden cross.

When the second boat was ready at the end of April, the whites departed. Soon they would come to the domain of Machiparo, who played an important role in future accounts. In Orellana's however they were unable to make an alliance and replenish supplies. They stopped at villages on the periphery of Aparia's polity but felt the Indians were less friendly, to the extent they did not want to leave the boats. Then for a week there were no villages, evidence of a “buffer zone” in between warring societies (Medina, 1988 p. 187; De Boer, 1981).

Machiparo lived in a hill top fort around which lay a network of neighbouring settlements. This province had an alliance with the Omagua people and were both at war with groups of people from inland. As the boats drew nearer to the northern riverbank they were dazzled by the spectacle of a village brilliant in the sunshine and gleaming white. But they were welcomed not by receptive hosts but aggressive warriors in over one hundred gaily painted canoes and shields the size of a man made out of the skins of different animals—alligator, manatee and tapirs. A naval battle ensued. After a while it moved to land. Finally the Spaniards forced the villagers out from their homes and they stole all the food (Medina, 1988, p. 190).

From this point the whites spent little time on land. Carvajal's writing becomes more observational, taken up with the impressive looking towns, their abundant stores when they raid, having cleared natives out. Their main tactic was to find a small place and plunder. Yet there is enough communication from two people they abduct to hear more about the women without men and the names of the provinces.

Their escape from one of Machiparo's riverbank villages with food did not mean an end to the fighting for the ships were followed and attacked day and night. In one large movement of hostile Indians of “numbers beyond count”, Carvajal described seeing four or five shamans standing on war canoes. Their bodies were painted white and they were smoking large cigars, spewing smoke into the air. In their hands they had an instrument for sprinkling water on the river, which they did as the canoes circled the brigantines. Having made one round, the shamans summoned their

warriors, who proceeded to blow their wooden trumpets and beat their drums. This was the prelude to attack. Carvajal sensed their desire to wipe them all out. The Europeans could see their “captain general” standing on the bank, “distinguishing himself in a very manly fashion” (Medina, 1988, p. 198). This posturing did not last long for one crew member took aim and felled the leader immediately. The shock of their leader’s death forced the warriors to halt their attacks. This pause gave the ships time to pull away from the banks and move on.

They continued past what Carvajal thought to be the most populous settlement on the south bank of the river; it stretched far to the interior along highways. This was the land ruled over by *Ica*, who had gold and silver and possessed a great wealth of natural resources. The next province was that of the *Oniguayal*, protected at its westerly end by a military outpost on a bluff. Here some Indians came to the side of the ships and tried to communicate with the whites. But no common understanding could be found. As night was falling they spied a small village that looked so pleasant Carvajal thought it might be a “recreation spot of some overlord of the inland” (Medina, 1988, p. 200). They repelled the Indians living there, and laid their hands on great quantities of food. Some Indians remained in the village, with whom some communication was possible. The men entered a “villa” where porcelain was kept. This ceramic ware was so beautiful and well crafted that it was considered better than the best material from Malaga (a judgment confirmed by Francisco Vasquez who travelled with Ursua 19 years later). There were all sizes and shapes, including plates, bowls and light-holders (like Tapajós pottery). Elsewhere, Carvajal noticed some costumes, “two idols woven out of feathers” the size of giants. On their arms and lower legs were bands to hold an instrument, similar to that of the Indians of Cuzco. Like other villages, fine highways fanned out into the countryside. Orellana decided to follow one of these roads but after about two miles they became ever grander, more like royal roads. So he returned fearing he would get distracted from descending the river.

The domain of the *Oniguayal* continued with more populous villages. After a gap, they entered the province of *Pagauna*, who were quite a civilized people and friendly according to Carvajal. Then they came to the Negro river, at present day Manaus. Here lay a fortified village on a hillside, enclosed with heavy timbers. A group of soldiers attacked, scaring off the Indians and finding stocks of drying fish. Down river and passing more impressive villages they stopped at a smaller sized one where the inhabitants allowed them entry. Here they came upon a public square, in the middle of which lay a most impressive structure. This object was a hewn trunk about two and half metres wide resting on two ferocious looking wooden jaguars, their heads turned forward, at right angles to the length of the tree. Their forepaws held the trunk in place. On this trunk was carved a miniature “walled city”, with a prominent gateway (Palmatary, 1966, p. 37-38). On either side of the gate were towers, each with a small door and two columns, facing the other. In the middle of this walled city was a round opening that had a hole through which libations were poured. Carvajal said that manioc beer was offered in honour of the sun, for they were worshippers of the sun. Orellana asked a captured Indian from the village what manner of an object the device was.

The man replied that it was a reminder of their rule by the *Coniapuyara*, since all under their rule had the same ritual object. The village supplied as tribute plumes of macaws and parrots to decorate the places of worship of the *Coniapuyara*. In the square was a sacred building in which ritual costumes made of cotton and bright feathers were stored. These regalia were worn when the villagers worshipped in front of the ritual object, also dancing and making sacrifices.

In the next and larger village, the ships stopped for food. Here the whites got to land and saw a similar carved trunk held up by jaguars. But the men left soon to avoid being attacked again. Now the Indians lined up on the riverbanks rattling their weapons and shields and shouting out to the fearsome Europeans “why are you running away? Why don’t you come and fight us?” This mocking and jeering by the Indians riled Orellana, that he ordered some men to shoot at the Indians. That way the Indians would at least be left with a small reminder of the damage the visitors could inflict if pushed. Orellana would repeat this impetuous and murderous reaction in the next village.

The next day they located a small village on the north bank, which was seized without resistance because the men and women were away. Here they found quantities of dried fish of many varieties prepared for trading with inland regions. The locals returned at nightfall, which wrecked the whites’ plans for a restful few days. Indeed the Indians attacked throughout the night with wave after offensive wave, trying to regain their invaded homes. Orellana was so upset that he ordered for three captured Indians to be hanged as a deterrent.

The two ships moved to the south bank and passed the Madeira River. Here more grand towns were observed on the riverbank. To get a better view, the ships shifted nearer the shore. Soon, thousands of Indians appeared shouting and challenging the whites to come to fight them. The noise was so great Carvajal says that it seemed as “if the river were sinking” (Medina, 1988, p. 209). What was also evident from the riverside was a change in the appearance of the places. Here was a break on the south side in the “race of people”, though its nature is not mentioned but must have been visually defined. This boundary could not apply to the opposite shore, which was the dominion of the *Coniapuyara* in between the Negro and Trombetas rivers.

As the rowers kept going, more dense settlements were viewed. It is likely that they now entered the province of the Tapajó people, or in Carvajal’s terms those ruled by *Ichipayo*. On a hill another prominent village could be seen. Moving closer the crew could identify seven gibbets to which human heads were impaled. Perhaps this was the local response to the white deterrent upstream. “Roads made by hand”, (Medina, 1988, p. 210) using stone and wood, led from the village to river. And orchards of fruit trees lay at the other end of the place. The next day, they saw a similar village and, needing food, attacked it without making any effort to come ashore peacefully. More pitched battles ensued, until Orellana once again lost patience. He ordered his men to set fire to the house where most of the Indians were holed up. Women and children lost their lives in the fire. The pause in fighting allowed the whites to plunder for provisions, where they found much food, including turtles, turkeys, parrots, manioc bread and maize.

With food for a few days, the ships moved to the north bank as the river meandered. Settlements continued and the Indians allowed the ships to pass peacefully. A canoe with two Indians approached one ship, but would not come aboard. The next day more came out to seek a violent confrontation, in which Carvajal says arrows were used for the first time since they started their descent. The rowers pulled the ships out of harm's reach. And for the next four days, life was quiet for the boats, until the men needed food again. Taking another village they encountered no resistance and laid hands on a "great quantity of maize" and "oats" used to make bread and beer (Medina, 1988, p. 210). They also took the opportunity to look around, they discovered a huge barrel of beer. There were also good quality cotton goods: clothes, costumes, bags and hammocks. Here a number of sheets were stolen and were later used to make sails for the sea faring part of their journey. A temple with sacred objects was entered. On a wall were two colourful diadems, well crafted out of some unidentified material that was neither cotton nor wool. Below these objects were military adornments, now familiar to the whites.

In the next few days they could see "a great deal of inhabited country on the left shore, because their houses were glimmering white" (Medina, 1988, p. 211). More houses downriver had a similar appearance. They stopped due to hunger in one village that ran for about 20km along one well-made street, with a square in the middle. Food was grabbed here before moving on. The next day they passed fishermen dwellings belonging to people from inland. The phrasing indicates their less substantial character. In contrast the next place had considerable white buildings; here was the province of the *Coniapuyara*. The natives were far from friendly and stood on the riverbanks laughing at and mocking the whites. Rather than continue, Orellana brought his ships to the shore and was met by an organized military advance of the natives. So many arrows were fired in the ensuing battle that the ships looked like porcupines, Carvajal noted.

This village was subject to the great woman chief whose capital lay deep inland. About ten to twelve of her women subjects lived in this place and joined in the fighting. Each one fought with much ferocity and skill. Their skins were white and their stature strong and tall, and they wore braided hair down to their waist. The battle went on for some time until the women fighters were felled that the men "lost heart" and retreated from the riverbank, even though reinforcements were arriving from the river in canoes. Here they captured an Indian trumpeter who went on to tell Orellana about the women without men and their customs.

After the fight the men were too tired to row, so the ships were carried by the river's current. On the south bank more large cities could be seen in the distance from the river. Their white-washed walls shimmered in the sun's light. Fearing more attacks Orellana placed his ships in the middle of the river. They approached an island that appeared uninhabited. But more than two hundred large dugout canoes, each carrying between twenty and forty Indians, emerged to fight the whites. These canoes were decorated in many colours and showed a variety of emblems. Their occupants were engaged in a prewar ceremony that involved an orchestrated sequence of singing, drumming, trumpeting, flutes and plucking of strings (recalling the shamans around the Negro River). On

land a further squadron of men were playing instruments, singing and dancing and shaking maracas. The whites were surrounded by the warriors in their canoes again. Somehow they kept their attackers at bay. They continued downriver, but were unable to dock because the banks were so dense with houses. His patience tested, Orellana resolved to make peace. So he tried to speak to his pursuers. And placed a large number of barter goods in a gourd on the river. The natives' reaction was to deride these foreign goods, throw them in to the river and keep up their pursuit.

After a while, the ships found a quiet place on the riverbank where they stayed the night. Orellana had managed to communicate with the Indian trumpeter. Using a list of words, perhaps made up from pointing to objects, it was learned that the overlord of this north bank region was called *Couynco*. And more about the women without men was learned using this broken language. Their villages were numerous and lay seven days' journey inland. Their great leader was called *Conori*. In their principal city there were five large ritual temples dedicated to the sun, which in their language was called *caranain*.

Hoping there would be rest from the native offensives, the whites only found the opposite: even more densely populated towns on the left bank "in the pleasantest and brightest land" they had seen the whole journey for it consisted of undulating hills and valleys. Here the brigs were set upon by large men with dark stained skins and short hair. Their boats were beautifully painted in a similar manner to others upriver. The Indian trumpeter informed the captain that the overlord of this region, stretching deep inland to the north, was called *Arripuna*, near the town of Alenquer. These people ate human flesh. Further north again was the province of chief *Tinamoston*.

Their next food stop was an Indian village that had plentiful supplies of maize. In the skirmish there one crew member was hit with a poisoned arrow and died within 24 hours, his skin darkening as his death approached. So the whites were keen to avoid more contact with Indians in these parts. Finding a quiet place within sight of populous places they set about spending the night. Soon there appeared canoes and boats carrying warriors. They stopped short of attacking, which Carvajal considered to be God's work for they were so fierce and numerous they would surely have all been killed. This is a strong statement given all the previous close shaves they had undergone (Medina, 1988, p. 226). Much to their relief they saw that a daily tide was evident here so they rejoiced they were close to the sea. This was still the land of *Ichipayo*, down river of modern day Santarém (though no meeting of the rivers was mentioned).

A few more skirmishes ensued as they tried to get food from various villages, mostly maize now. Further troubles assailed the crew as a plank from the hull of one of the ships broke when it hit a huge log floating downstream. Remarkably, they managed to spend a quiet eighteen days repairing the damage and making the ships seaworthy (and construct masts to give them sails). Those not working scoured the shoreline for shellfish and crabs. However, they remained hungry and unable to feed themselves from this apparently bountiful environment. Once ready they continued on their way through the maze of islands that lie at the estuary of the Amazon. Moving northeastwards they passed native settlements where they were able to get some food from the

villagers, maize and manioc (*inanes*, Medina, 1988, p. 232). The natives here did not attack the whites but they were not welcoming either. Indeed, it was apparent these people had come across strange white people before. In one village where Indians gave fish to the whites, two models of Spanish boats had been carved and left to swing on trees in the wind. In another a “shoemaker’s [awl] tool with thread and brass sheath that go with it’ were spotted” (Palmatary 1966, p. 50). These were the remnants of a past incursion. What traces would Orellana’s leave behind as they sailed into the Atlantic? The impact of this violent passage along the main course of the Amazon was shortlived for sure. On the other hand, the whites had covered much ground and touched in one way or another tens of thousands, if not many more, Indian lives. Some had died in battle, others were injured. Were diseases spread? Were women raped and were children of these short unions born?

Orellana returned home in 1543. Immediately, he set about organizing a return expedition. In spite of receiving lukewarm support from the king for the venture, he commanded five ships to sail to the Amazon, though only two ships would arrive with fewer than one hundred men. There were fears of competing with French and Portuguese interests along the Atlantic coast. He had a royal license to settle, build a town and trade in what was to be called *Nova Andalusia*. He was convinced enough of riches to take his wife. None of the original crew would return with him, though one did on a later trip down the Amazon. When Orellana and his ships full of men, animals and weapons arrived in December 1545, there were no other Europeans at northern side of the mouth of the Amazon (Medina, 1988, p. 358-361).

They located some friendly Indians in large settlements near the northern edge of Marajó island. Here they engaged in barter and were given maize, manioc, fish and fruit. With Orellana keen to move on against the wishes of his tired crew, the ships continued and got lost in the maze of islands. Finding no friendly settlements, they had to kill all the animals on board to avoid starvation. There were, however, hostile Indians who fired arrows at them, discouraging them from landing. One ship then crashed on a shoal. Luckily for the whites, Indians at this place gave them food in return for trinkets. Orellana was impatient to avoid delay. He left half his men to mend the broken ship, and took the other lot with him, including his wife. The only source we have for this return voyage is from Francisco Guzman, one of the men who stayed behind. Of this period in the village, he said that the “we applied ourselves so skillfully to establishing friendly relations with the chiefs of that country that they used to come and sell food to us by barter” (Medina, 1988, p. 360). Guzman added that the chief of the village asked the men if they would help in his own war against *Caripuna*, who lived upriver. This must be *Arripuna* in whose lands the Orellana has passed a few years earlier. The significance of this remark cannot be overemphasized as a window into the way in which Indians perceived the whites and the role they wanted whites to play in this early period of contact. The invitation to an alliance is suggestive of the potential to create kinship, in particular affinal relations between equals that involve the exchange of women. This

request shows that the Indians were not just active participants in the evolving drama but stage managing and writing the play.

Orellana's role however was to cease shortly. His ship made its way to Caripuna land. When some of his men went ashore in search of food they were killed with arrows. His wife then said that the captain died of ill-health and the upset at the failure of his mission. Extraordinarily, his wife and a surviving crew sailed downriver, out to sea and returned to the island of Margarita, where they were met by the other ship that had already returned, having given up hope of the others' survival. Guzman's last stop was at *Comao*, somewhere on the north bank of the Amazon before it debouched into the sea. This village had some sixty to seventy malocas and good food. Not only did they give away their last trinkets, six men decided they wanted to remain for "here it was a good country". So they ran off the boat into the village. In the next place, a few miles on, another four scuttled away, leaving their fellows impressed by their desire to go native.

David Sweet comments that the Indian experience of their first encounter with Europeans was one of unprecedented violence (1974). Equally, Indians acted to defend themselves where they could, rarely allowing the whites to land when they wanted food. Another Indian response to this arrogance was the jeering from the riverbanks. Carvajal understood the shouts to be an invitation to a fight, a questioning of virility. A powerful looking opponent refusing to engage in a fight with its opposition is a source of derision, wherever one is. These whites were not just thieves and murderers, they were cowards. To make matters worse, as they were being taunted, the whites took full advantage of the longer range of their weapons by taking pot shots from the ship. In North America, natives mooned in similar situations of cowardice (Mann, 2014 p. 46). The special category accorded to Orellana and others by Aparia as the children of the sun has its counterpart in the all too human status of scaredy-cats. Whatever cultural differences separating these humans, the message of the jeers from the riverbank was unmistakable.

Paradoxically, the jeers, and other perceptions of each other, provide the conceptual and practical bridge over which new meanings could pass. The items bartered and the weapons fired left traces that became incorporated in Indians societies. These objects are the beginnings of a new pathway forming between the people on either side of the Atlantic. Their impact was no doubt small. Still they reveal another complementary mode of perceiving whites: a bringing closer of their powerful technologies.

1538-1555: Tupi migration from the East coming upriver and Nunes's letter from the west

Before Orellana and Pizarro made their plan to find the land of the cinnamon and gold on the Amazon, a small team of soldiers led by Alonso Mercadillo made their way to Machiparo territory in the Upper Amazon. Their plan was to conquer lands and Indians in the eastern foothills of the

Peruvian Andes in 1537 (Jimenez de la Espada, 1895; Papaverro et al., 2002, p. 11-14). One member of this expedition was Nunes, a Brazilian who had gone to Peru in search of gold. Realising the Portuguese crown might be interested to hear of what he had witnessed and heard in his travels down the River Amazon he wrote to the Portuguese king, João III in 1555. His letter is relatively short but contains a number of significant details that support the other accounts presented in this chapter. There is clear evidence of complex and large-scale societies and long distance trade using the abundant resources of the Amazon. And with more direct relevance to my overall argument, there is more evidence of a common field of relations across the frontiers of ethnic identification. It is placed after Orellana's account because Nunes was writing in 1555 and included information on Tupi migration to Peru that happened after his 1538 expedition (Porro, 1992, p. 74-80).

Nunes says that the party travelled for 25 days on horseback in 1538, presumably across land and small creeks, until they came upon the Machiparo province. There was gold here for it was used as arm bracelets and on ceremonial clubs, recalling the one thrown down at the feet of the sailor during Pinzon's incursion on the coast of Brazil. Here, he reckoned, there were enough people to create 5 or 6 rich European towns. People lived on both sides of the river, a form of dwelling that was never made clear in the other chronicles. There were storage houses for fish that were transported along wide tracks much travelled because there was so much traffic (Porro, 1992, p. 32). The whites were met with hostility, since these people, according to Carvajal, were at war with Aparia. In Nunes, this conflict was caused by the Tupi who were progressing upriver. It is possible that the Tupi had an alliance with Aparia against the others.

The only act that Nunes mentioned was his abduction of some indigenous slaves from this Machiparo village. No resistance was made; Nunes said they stayed with him for fourteen years. He also indicated that both sides in the war took slaves, relating the practice of incorporating outside women and children into villages and the keeping of warrior men for ritual slaughter and consumption.

The soldiers moved upriver and out of Machiparo's area. Once clear of it they meet the remains of the large body of Tupi migrants. Nunes was told that they numbered about fourteen thousand when they started their search for the "land without evil". But now they had diminished to about three hundred men, women and children. Nunes also learned that the majority were killed in Machiparo's province. Those who survived had gone upriver. When the remaining Tupi recognized their comrades, that is the slaves that Nunes had taken, they were much relieved that more of their fellows had escaped. The remnants continued upriver towards Peru and eventually settled in the town of Chachapoyas in the province of the Motilones on the Huallaga River (Clastres, 1995, p. 49-57).

As we will see in the following section the alliance with the Tupi was to prove important for future expeditions. Whether it was information, kinship or military aid, this episode shows the building of a common platform between Indians and whites, even though each side had its own interests and perception of the situation.

1560-61: From the West Again. Lope de Aguirre and the Marañones

“... The stories are false and in this river there is nothing but despair...”. So Lope de Aguirre ended his letter to King Phillip of Spain in 1561. His lack of interest in the place is not surprising given his attention was on a power battle with his fellow crew, who he either murdered or ordered the murder of a fair number: “We went along our route down the Marañon river while all these killings and bad events were taking place” he relates in the letter.²

A series of reports of gold and other riches drove the Europeans to explore eastwards. Other intelligence came with the migrating Tupi people who had come from the east (Palmatary, 1966, p. 63). These Tupi Indians spoke of a great province called Omagua, which contained great wealth that was downriver. Some Tupi Indians were persuaded to form part of the crew for Ursua’s fateful voyage in search of this land. These people abandoned the Europeans somewhere in the middle Amazon, running ashore in a village they may have recognised. It is not clear why. Nevertheless, at this point in the European exploration of the Amazon, Indians have moved from being people on a distant riverbank, with the occasional informer, to participants offering practical information and aid. They had been drawn in, willing or not. For example, Ursua’s expedition started out with one hundred Indian rowers for there were no sails. Aguirre kicked them all out just before they went out to sea, saying there was no space for them.

We can rethink what the stories of gold (and about the women without men) might have meant to the Indians. The indications concerning gold may have been less descriptive than figurative and metaphorical. They directed attention away from the present to somewhere else. Rather than revealing the whereabouts of gold then, they concealed the here and now. This tactic passes on enquiries and avoids engagement.

Returning to the late 1550s Peru: What started out as an expedition for gold in 1558 from Lima led by Pedro de Ursua became an attempt to lead a conquest of Peru by Aguirre and a few score men in 1560 in the Upper Amazon. But the men had to return to Peru and resolved to do this as quickly as possible by descending the Amazon and going north to Margarita island and then to Lima via the Andes. The accounts make disturbing reading: the paranoia of Aguirre and the casual cruelty of the killings remain shocking to contemporary readers.

For these purposes the ethnic interactions can be separated into five episodes, each one corresponding with a period the Europeans spent in a village starting in the Upper Amazon. Ursua picked up his Tupi guides during a stay with the Motilones Indians on the Huallaga River; here they had stopped their search for the “land without evil”. Continuing downriver, the crew was able to fish for themselves. At some point around the Ucayali they landed at abandoned villages and took what food they could—maize, sweet manioc and manioc flour. In one village a chief

²Translated by Tom Holloway from the version published in Moreno (1961). Available at: <<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1561aguirre.asp>>.

came out to the boats and offered tortoise and fish (Parry and Keith, 1984, p. 224). In return he was given “beads and knives in order to satisfy him and keep him peaceful”. More food came from other canoes. And more knives were given out. Then the captain had had enough and told the crew to stop all trade. The houses in this region were large and square. The Indians wore painted shirts. There were also extensive areas of the banks where there were no villages. Only in these villages did Vasquez see Indians wearing gold earrings and necklaces, which they called *Carari* and *Macari*. All along the river, however, they saw fine and beautiful ceramic vessels in a thousand varieties, confirming Carvajal’s observation.

Then they entered in Machiparo’s province, which matches Orellana’s encounter with the same person, an area to the east of the current border of Brazil, Peru and Colombia. This episode starts with an armed stand off with Machiparo’s warriors in disciplined formation. The tension soon gave way and the crew was permitted to come ashore. Here the men spent thirty-three days, shortly after which Ursua was murdered. In the village, they found thousands of tortoises in ponds surrounded by fences outside each large house. Maize, by contrast, was stored inside the houses in great quantities. Nearby fields had sweet manioc growing. During this time, the village was attacked by enemies of Machiparo, with some “two hundred men, all equipped for war, in seventeen canoes to raid, plunder and capture them, as is the custom amongst them” (Parry and Keith, 1984, p. 226). With all the noise of the impending attack from flutes and drums, the village chief had time to request help from the whites, which they duly provided with fifty arquebusiers. The subsequent slaughter of the attacking Indians left none alive.

Here in Machiparo’s domain internal relations with Indians were reported to be generally peaceful. Amongst the leading whites however there was much more conflict, which grew with the realization there was no land of gold. Curiously, a survivor of Orellana’s descent of the Amazon, who was on board a ship, did not recognize any of the villages at all. What can we make of this? Possibly this was part of the generalized recognition that the region did not have gold in large quantities. Denial of past observations was the best option so as not to appear mistaken. It could also be the case the gold had been removed from view of Europeans in the intervening twenty years.

After a month, the ships left the large village of Machiparo and moved to a smaller one. It was here that Ursua, amongst others, was killed, and seaworthy ships were constructed, for Aguirre now planned to return to Peru via the sea. The whites were forced to move on as the villagers refused to barter for food after a fight that resulted in the killing of the sea captain and five others (Parry and Keith, 1984, p. 233).

The next province had few villages, which had been deserted prior to the ships’ arrival. Food, however, was procured from some of the large and square houses with thatched roofs. Their next major stop contains a few more details of the native ritual objects that so intrigued Carvajal. In one large and populous village there was much food, including wine, pigs, fish and manatees. The locals even “hired themselves out” for work. Yet relations were strained around exchange items. The Europeans used to barter with small and valueless items. The Indians were keen to have

these objects and sought to acquire them in any way they could, which sometimes involved stealing. Even when these acts were punished by death, the Indians were not put off. Vasquez said they were “extremely clever thieves” (Parry and Keith, 1984, p. 240). Traces from Orellana’s stop were in evidence here too in the form of metal objects, such as nails and a piece of a sword sheath.

In the central square of the village stood some ceremonial shrines. Each shrine had a door that lead to two sacrificial altars large enough to fit a human body. One altar had a wooden board on which was painted a sun and the figure of a man. On another board the moon and a woman were represented. There were ceramic vessels on the boards containing a liquid that was suspected to be blood. The whites could not communicate with anyone in this village, which means their Tupi interpreters were unable to work. It is difficult to tell from Vasquez’s account where the ships were at this point, though given these details it is likely they were in the Omagua or Oninguayal province of Carvajal’s account.

The next place where significant information is presented is where the Tupi guides deserted the ships. This jump was likely to have taken place in a Tupi speaking area of the middle Amazon, possibly the Paguana area of Carvajal, where palisades were in evidence. In one village, the whites found plentiful stocks of food, large ceramic vessels, nets for hunting and fishing, and large cotton blankets. There are even fewer details for the rest of the Middle and Lower Amazon. In one place there was a skirmish with Indians who lived in a stronghouse, which allowed them to shoot arrows through slits in the walls. The Indians were nevertheless a constant presence along the riverbanks for they would come out in canoes to take a look, keep their distance, and then retreat if contact was attempted.

The last intriguing detail comes from the mouth of the Amazon. Vasquez saw Indians wearing shoes of deer hide, tied with cords (Parry and Keith, 1984, p. 242). This could be an attempt to make moccasins with the tools of a past expedition. Recall that Carvajal mentions seeing a cobbler’s tool in the same region. This suggests that Indians saw whites with shoes and thought there might be some value in making some for themselves.

This shoe crafting presents evidence of the beginning of cross-fertilization of skills, technologies and material culture. Along the course of the river there were traces from the expeditions we know about, and there may have been others that were not recorded. We read that Ursua and his men had to fish for at least nine days when they saw no settlements. Did they catch fish they knew to be tasty from their Indian counterparts? Did the whites use methods picked up from observing best local practices? Survival would not have been possible without this kind of interlacing of knowledge, as Orellana and his crew discovered. At this moment there was a gradual accretion of learned practices on behalf of whites, bartered material culture, experiences and memories of violence, and other kinds of contact. This assertion is not to romanticise these encounters. Let it not be forgotten the Indian rowers were discarded at the mouth, as were one hundred Indian women servants, who were Christians and spoke Spanish.

Most of the time we see the distance that most Indian canoes kept, like the Indians on the Atlantic beach in 1500. If they were going to engage they would seek to do so on their own terms. They would offer food if they could get some new trade items to understand these strange people. And they would pull them into their own hostilities if it benefited their interests. The Indians treated the Europeans as special Indians, who could be connected through formal relations. The Europeans, on the other hand, did not have a stable prism to view these other folk. The Indians were also there to serve the whites, for they were totally convinced of their own superiority. Formally this perception did not change, but it would be challenged as a common ground developed and Indian knowledge was critical to white presence.

Ending

The Europeans entered into a world in upheaval that was likely the result of a periodic intensification of regional war. The archaeological record along the Amazon has at least one example of a massive and sophisticated social formation on the island of Marajo that had already collapsed before the first European footfall on that island (Schaan, 2012). Much of the time from the upper Amazon down to its mouth, the reaction of most groups was either to flee or to attack with their best troops. These reactions were not being acted out for the first time as they saw ships on the river. They might not have been commonly employed ones either. To be able to assemble thousands of warriors with short notice and adequate weaponry cannot be accomplished easily, if at all.

Of course, news may have spread down river weeks in advance of the coming of the whites. If however these were societies not used to amassing a great force they would not have appeared ready for combat and honour in death. Their discipline and strength provide evidence of their battle readiness. Of that, there can be no question. Otherwise, the arquebuses and crossbows would have cut through their numbers quickly, and whites would have reached the riverbanks and plundered the food stores. But the whites never managed to land when faced with the full force of a city's army. When it was not possible to gather a powerful army, the Indians made a strategic retreat.

Was this approach to war one of annihilation, another kind of messianic fervor, which necessarily involved a sacrifice of huge numbers. A cleansing to allow a new beginning? This period of upheaval lasted for the middle part of the sixteenth century. From the late sixteenth century onwards European reports indicate there was little appetite for large-scale war. This suppression might have been a result of the spread of European diseases and the reconfigurations of societies on the riverbanks, involving a move further inland and out of immediate sight. In the first few decades of the seventeenth century, the riverbank societies, while still impressive for their material culture, complex social organisations, multiple linguistic associations, were more spread out and less populous than we have seen here.

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