

## PETER RIVIÈRE'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMAZONIAN AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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PETER Rivière, who in 1967 taught the first fully fledged course on the indigenous societies of Lowland South America in a British university,<sup>1</sup> officially retires in September 2001 from the University of Oxford, where he has been teaching since 1971. With this special issue of JASO,<sup>2</sup> we wish to honour and acknowledge his considerable theoretical and methodological contributions to anthropology.

Rivière's scholarly practice has been fundamental in both establishing the intellectual outlines for anthropology in the Guianas and demonstrating the impor-

<sup>1</sup> Before his time, Audrey Butt-Colson lectured in 1956 on South American societies, mainly the Guianas, and with a particular emphasis on the Akawaio, at the Department of Ethnology and Prehistory at Oxford University. Francis Huxley, who was at Oxford for his training in anthropology before following Meyer Fortes to Cambridge, and who came back to Oxford on a three-year Junior Research Fellowship at St Catherine's College, also taught on Lowland South America. Before them, Miss Béatrice Blackwood (of the Department of Ethnology and Prehistory at Oxford University) gave a few lectures every year on Lowland South America as part of her two-term course on 'Lands and Peoples' for geography and anthropology students. This was followed in the third term by a course on the archaeology and prehistory of Latin America, which was mainly dedicated to the study of Highland civilizations.

<sup>2</sup> See also the volume edited by L. Rival and N. Whitehead, *Beyond the Visible and the Material: The Amerindianization of Society in the Work of Peter Rivière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001).

tance of this region to the overall anthropology of Amazonia. He was a leading member of the first generation to set new, professional standards of ethnography in Amazonia. These contrasted strongly with the generalized uses of indigenous cultural and social materials that had mostly been collected second-hand or by naturalists and explorers, whose descriptions of Amazonian Indians were based on a combination of observation and recording techniques inspired by museum and botanical inventories, and whose typologies were relied on strong assumptions deriving from cultural diffusionism and environmental determinism.

It is with an intense interest in the empirical data and ethnographic facts that constitute the *materia prima* of comparative analysis and a pronounced distrust of predetermined theoretical models that Rivière has dedicated his professional life to the analysis of the kaleidoscopic variations in indigenous society and culture. His Malinowskian interest in the 'imponderabilia of everyday life' stems from a clear appreciation of the ways in which social and cultural variety may be structured, patterned, and limited, despite its expressive and performative complexity. This is thus not an abstract interest in the 'particular', understood as a theoretical commitment in the manner of the Boasians, nor does it have much in common with the hyper-particularism of more recent American cultural anthropology. Rather, the particular is important as a means of connecting theory, methodology, and context, so that interest in the particular results from an appreciation of the necessity for accurate scholarship.

Eager to examine the indigenous perspectives and local theories through which ethnographic facts are ordered and acquire meaning, Rivière has also pioneered cross-cultural comparisons in various ways. He understands comparative studies to be intensive investigations limited to a particular region or a homogeneous group of societies. And the new hypotheses he has offered on marriage, kinship, and the constitution of the person, as well as the dialectical relationship between cosmological schema and forms of social organization, have avoided the shortcomings of both idealist sociologism (for example, Clastres) and empiricist sociologism (for example, Chagnon)—two forms of sociologism that mirror naturalism and fail to identify or explain the cross-cultural variability of Amazonian social systems.

In *Marriage among the Trio* (1969), the monograph based on his doctoral dissertation and the first extensive and rigorous ethnographic work entirely dedicated to Amazonian kinship systems, Rivière explored all aspects of post-marital residence arrangements, a crucial social institution throughout Amazonia. Having carefully distinguished prescriptive marriage rules from descriptive ones, he insisted that expressing these rules in genealogical terms was misleading, because such expression did not correspond to the indigenous point of view, which expresses relationships in categorical rather than genealogical terms. Trio social philosophy works at conceptually blurring genealogy and co-residence. He concluded that prescriptive alliance does not necessarily operate between enduring groups.

In *Individual and Society in Guiana* (1984), he generalized from his own data and from the ethnographic insights of other specialists to draw a clear and forceful picture of the kinship logic of Guiana societies, which is that, ideally, a settlement is composed of a group of bilaterally related kin, with, given the preference for settlement endogamy, the added fact that affines also form part of co-residential kin groups. The ideal settlement is composed of a set of siblings co-residing with their spouses and children who do not differentiate, terminologically or otherwise, between the fact of consanguinity and the fact of co-residency. Its endogamous nature is often based on a peculiar combination of polygyny and the brother-sister relationship. The challenge in writing this sober comparative study outlining the structural features specific to Amazonian societies was to develop conceptual tools for the positive characterization of societies which are intrinsically amorphous and highly individualistic, and lack formal social groupings, such as the clan, moiety, lineage, or age-set. Rivière's characterization of kinship system and social organization in the Guianas illustrates his talent for delineating the field of investigation in a way that continues to influence the development of social anthropological research in Amazonia.

Discussions of Amazonian social classifications, in particular the meaning and practice of affinity, could hardly begin without Rivière's seminal contribution on the Trio. Both his stress on the fact that 'throughout the region it is the affinal relationships that are politically important because they contain the potential for expressing hierarchy' (1984: 73), and his contrast between affinability (i.e. the potential for becoming an affine) and affinity, or between related and unrelated affines (ibid.: 56), have directly influenced the current thesis regarding potential affinity, which detaches the notion of affinity not just from the genealogical referent of cross-cousin, but from kinship altogether (Viveiros de Castro and Fausto 1993).

His famous Malinowski lecture on the *couvade* (Rivière 1974), which elaborates the fundamental Amazonian discontinuity between the body and the soul, constituted an early attempt to provide a theory of the created person in Amazonia. While stressing the 'detachability' (or the 'unconfinability') of the soul, it placed the human body at the very core of a form of politics that renders the management of social distance extremely difficult in the region, and mediation, or some form of solidarity with outsiders, hardly possible at all. Furthermore, Rivière's seminal idea that what he called, for lack of a better sociological term, individualism in the Guianas resulted from the fact that 'societal and individual relationships remain[ed] at the same order of complexity' (1984: 98), anticipated Seeger *et al.*'s thesis (1979) that Amazonian societies are not structured by sociological units, but in terms of the circulation of symbols and substances which guarantee social continuity and reproduction more effectively than the lineal transmission of physical substances. And when new ethnographic work on the central Gê and Tukanos became available in the late 1970s to 1980s, he was then able to confirm his intuition

that no distinction can be made in Amazonia between the reproduction of society and the reproduction of the person, for social structures relate to the construction of the individual and the fabrication of the body, rather than to the definition of groups and the transmission of goods, as, for instance, in Africa.

Like other Amazonianists, Rivière has welcomed and fully embraced the major turn in social anthropology by which people are no longer viewed as recipients of the environment, culture, social institutions, or past events, but recognised as active historical agents. He readily and unambiguously traces the move from considering history as happening to people to fully admitting that people make their own history back to the influence of feminist theory on anthropological thinking. This move has made him even keener to establish a clear separation between Western historiography and indigenous ethnohistories. He therefore accepts that historical sources on Guyana should not be used as uncritically as he did in his B.Litt thesis (1963). Names of tribes are not purely objective historiographic data, and European history is not native history. In the recorded interview conducted while this introduction was being written, Rivière clearly separated what he writes as a historian (see *Absent-minded Imperialism* [1995] and his forthcoming biography of Schomburgk) from what he writes as an anthropologist.

Whereas Rivière accepts the fundamental shift in anthropology from structure and meaning to agency and practice, and welcomes the new interest in historical agency, his ethnohistorical approach does not lead him to attempt to understand the historical experience of those who have undergone domination and colonization, or what these historical events mean today. His historical lens is not so much focused on the colonial encounter, but rather on temporality from a native perspective. For example, generational continuity, he reminds us (Rivière 1993), is often articulated with reference to the principles of substitution and replication, and expressed in botanical metaphors. Rather than a rapprochement with history, which leads anthropologists either to take a historical perspective or to treat historical material anthropologically, like Lévi-Strauss and all Amazonianists influenced by French structuralism, Rivière prefers to explore indigenous understandings of time and space. He has long reflected on Amazonian notions of time, in particular the ways in which 'time is embedded in and represented by space' (1984: 99). Amazonian ethnohistories represent the diversity of ways in which, or the degrees to which, these societies incorporate notions of time and space. In all these cultures, there is a continuous, non-linear time, which is always there and is indistinguishable from the cosmos of which it forms a part. This continuous time, he says, is just like space; temporal discontinuities are located in continuous time just as settlements are dispersed throughout the forest, for these rather amorphous societies exist within a narrow time scale. Not only is the settlement formed by co-ordinates of time and space, it is also constituted by a network of social relationships which are ordered by a system of classification that is self-perpetuating. It is a system that not only allocates people in this generation, but also ensures appropriate realloca-

tion in the next. It is the combination of these factors that gives meaning to the present and assurance of continuity. It is because many Amazonian societies exist in a narrow time scale that the present contains proof of the past and promise of the future, that minimal differences exist between synchronic and diachronic perspectives (*ibid.*: 102), and that the settlement (or the house) as a process becomes the relevant level of social analysis. This also explains why social determinants and historical factors are more important than ecological ones in explaining the size of settlements, and why village history is political history (*ibid.*: 31).

The articles collected here are based on papers that were given at a conference organized at Linacre College, Oxford, on 17–18 December 1998 to celebrate Peter Rivière's life-time contribution to anthropology. Carlin's essay discusses from a linguistic point of view the highly transformational world of the Trio also studied by Rivière (1994), in which men become jaguars or eagles and vice versa by changing their skin or clothes. She shows that, linguistically speaking, the relationship between external appearance and inherent reality is always clearly stated in Trio by means of morphemes that chart the differences between 'being X', 'being like X' and 'having the appearance of being X'. Heinen's contribution takes as its starting-point a remark by Rivière in his 1984 work on Amerindian social organization on the ambiguity of cross-cousin terms for members of the opposite sex in the Guiana highlands. By focusing on a single Pemon group, the Kamarakoto, Heinen endeavours to show that the apparent absence of terms for opposite sex cross-cousins is not systemic, but an artefact of the dispersed settlement pattern of the Pemon and the ensuing tendency to redefine some children of opposite-sex cross-cousins as marriageable 'nephews' and 'nieces'. Mentore engages three sources (the state documents of Guyana, the scholarly literature on the region and the oral discourse of the Waiwai) on the interpretation of Amerindian death, and, in particular, the Taruma/Kuase demise. Hoefle takes inspiration from Rivière's work on the cattle-ranching cultures that developed during the colonial period on the frontier between Brazil and the former British Guiana and his early work on sorcery accusations to analyse the cultural construction of violence among the ranchers of the Sertão of north-east Brazil. In the final article, Ossio bases his discussion of Andean pre- and post-Columbian funerary rituals on Rivière's (1974) analysis of the typically South American trusting of the soul and the body of individuals to different persons.

These five tributes from colleagues and former students of Peter's who have worked in the Guiana Shield and Andean Peru areas clearly invoke Peter's considerable regional expertise and the varied contributions he has made to anthropology. By locating the analysis of individuals within dynamic regional structures, and through the range of topics they cover (descent and affinity, death, ritual and shamanic discourse, the human person, power and reproduction, modernisation and social transformations), these essays contribute to showing how, in Peter's

own words, 'a society collaborates in the production of a particular type of ethnographic writing' (Rivière 2000: 42).

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