The birth of Brazilian Amazonian cultures

Mark Harris looks back to the 17th century to find the origins of societies along the Amazon

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Amazonia presents the contemporary scholar with challenges. For example, what does it consist of and what are its limits? Seen as a place apart from the rest of the continent of South America, its historical connections with the Andes or the Guianas, to name two neighbouring regions, are hardly examined. Studies on the environment emphasise the positive or the negative: the destructive power of development projects, or the way humans have made the natural world more productive. Anthropologists and geographers provide analyses of one group or another, such as indigenous people fighting mining companies or poor fishermen on the edges of large cities. Rarely are these diverse approaches and different people brought into the same frame of reference. Perhaps for good reason: new migrants searching for gold do not have the same histories, cultural values or political status as the Kayapó or Munduruku Indians defending their lands from hydroelectric dams. Yet the contemporary Brazilian Amazon is all these people, struggles and more. Indians frequently encounter miners and illegal loggers invading their lands. Few analyses try to explain how these threads come together to make the region a historical place like any other.

My proposal for a British Academy/Leverhulme Senior Research Fellowship sought to meet some of these challenges by going back to the beginning. To return to a time when Indians and Europeans first had to deal with each other, which for the Amazon was the early 17th century. The objective was to address the origins of modern Amazonia, and how this beginning gave rise to resilient social and cultural forms, such as peasantries. At the heart of this project were the survivors of traumatic episodes in the colonial and early national periods (c. 1650–1850), for these individuals had created enduring riverbank societies as the Portuguese established an insecure domination over most of the region. The rivers enabled this colonial control, but they also shaped cultural and material life in a manner that privileged those with regional knowledge and skills. By analogy with Braudel on the Mediterranean, we may think of the region's history and anthropology as those of 'the deep Amazon'. This development unifies the different historical societies, and allows us to understand the re-emergence of indigenous identities and status in the contemporary period. The aim of the fellowship was to conduct research and write a book that would be of interest to an anthropological and historical audience.

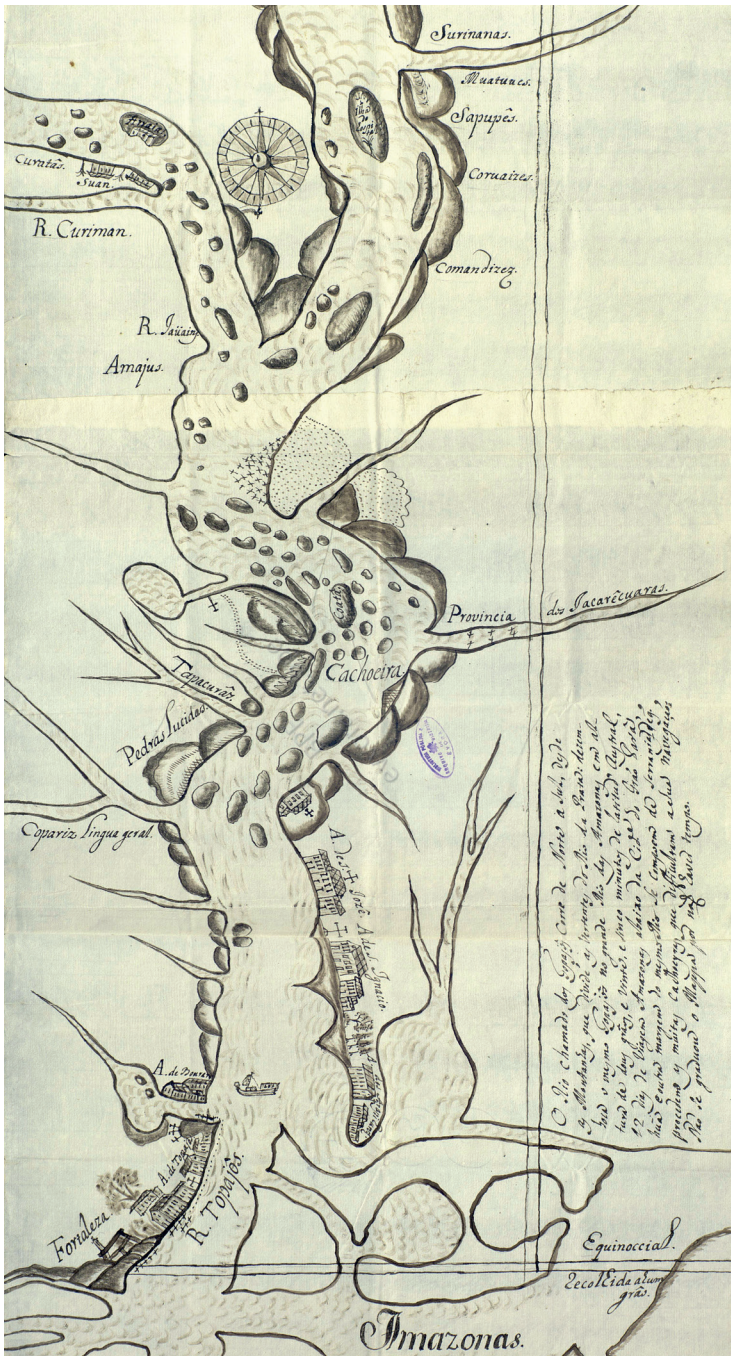
Approach and archival sources

In previous work I have used my training as an ethnographer[1] to understand the historical documents I

1. Dr Mark Harris was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, 1996-99. His monograph *Life on the Amazon: The Anthropology of a Brazilian Peasant Village* was published by the British Academy in 2000. See Mark Harris, 'Life on the Amazon', *British Academy Review* (July-December 2000), 32–5.

was reading. This helped me appreciate imaginatively the participant's point of view, even when I could not access it directly. My research has identified bundles of cultural practices that were transferred from one generation to the next in conditions of turbulence and upheaval. This continuity of knowledge and skills, gifts from the past to the present, was central to survival.

The sources consulted were left by missionaries, Portuguese officials, European traders, church officers, and by visiting scientists and artists. Many of these documents were written in Portuguese, though some are in Latin, Dutch, French, and English. They are spread out in archives in Brazil, the United States and Europe, and cover various levels of correspondence, administrative, religious, military and commercial. Of most interest to me were letters or reports from writers who worked with Indians face to face. These documents, which occasionally relay Indian phrases or their reasoning for acting in a certain way, provide an invaluable record of the voices from the past, as Carlo Ginzburg says with regards to the value of the inquisition testimonies. Unfortunately, and unlike Spanish America, there are very few documents written by the Indians themselves. The book will cite a number of these sources for the first time, indicating how poorly the history of the Amazon has been investigated.



A 1740s map of the Tapajós, a major tributary of the Amazon.
PHOTO: EVORA.

As I worked with these sources, and read about the fears of slavery on behalf of Amerindians, their anger at having their communities broken up and their impoverishment at the hands of the Portuguese, I was made aware of the limitations of applying an anachronistic understanding. Unwittingly, I was interpreting these experiences from the perspective of the present. Somehow I had to undo my view that the individuals identified in the documents knew the future of Portuguese colonial rule. While they felt its immediate force, they were only vaguely aware of the world beyond and what they were up against. Nevertheless, Indians came to participate in the colonial sphere and sought to influence the course of events, which they occasionally did by persuading officials to pursue different polices, or leave them in peace and obtain their Indian slaves elsewhere. For these reasons I focused on parts of their world where they could have a degree of control over such as river-based activities (boat building, navigation and piloting) and livelihood making. These were areas of regional life where Europeans depended on the superior acquaintance of Indians with the environment.

The genesis of new Amazonian riverine societies

Community formation proved to be just as important to building the new world in the Amazon. To explain why, I need to go back to the period just before Europeans came to South America. Archaeological evidence from the Amazon indicates there were many different kinds of societies, some large, living in villages of a few thousand, differentiated into classes of warriors, ritual specialists, secular leaders, farmers, fisher people and so on. These

The importance of the Amazon River and its produce are illustrated in this print showing turtle collecting.

societies received tribute from nearby ones. In return they were offered protection by the ancestors and from enemy attack. These arrangements were likely to have spread out along the main Amazon, up its tributaries, into the forest, over watersheds, and on to the Caribbean islands, and probably to North America, creating a series of regional networks linked by the exchange of precious goods, marriage and war.

What happened to these societies in the Amazon following European arrival, which was minimal at first? Some helped the whites get food, look for riches, drawing each side into new alliances and divisions. Others moved away from further contact, impacting those places in turn. My research found that those Indian societies who made close friends of the whites lost out the quickest, because the pact was with a certain leader and was always precarious. Those who resisted the whites had a longer colonial life. By the late 17th century, there remained few powerful societies along the main Amazon River. Colonial policy was focused on making settlements and obtaining labour, enslaved and free, for domestic service and agriculture. Amazonian plantation farmers did not make enough money to import African labour until the mid 18th century when the state provided subsidies.

Jesuit, Franciscan, Mercedarian and Carmelite missionaries had primary responsibility for contacting Indians and bringing them into new places. The correspondence here is particularly helpful in portraying an alternative view to the one most historians and anthropologists have of this process. Many missions of late 17th century were established on old Indian towns, rather than new locations. After all, familiar hunting grounds were nearby and fields of anthropogenic soils well established. Did this make them more Indian or colonial? If new ones were set up, the Indians invariably dictated the location, finding the best land for planting, avoiding burial grounds, and so on. In cases where Indians were prepared to leave their up-river homes and move to main river missions, similar demands were made: to have no more attacks from white soldiers looking for slaves, to choose their own leaders, and to have ample provision of tools and cloth. If these were promised, then families of 50 or so people would relocate to a mission and make their livelihoods there, while remaining in contact with former homes. These are the moments I identify as the birth of Amazonian cultures in the modern period.

The main part of the book examines the formation of the villages along the main rivers of the Amazon from the 1650s onwards. Each one had its history of settlement, composed of the forced or voluntary relocation of indigenous groups, and their subsequent relations, which varied between antagonism and support. The durability of these villages depended on the quality of relations, including those to whites, soldiers, missionaries and officials, and to indigenous societies in the neighbouring spaces. Investigating the precise character of these situations has been a major accomplishment of the research. It has meant piecing together documentation from dispersed archives. The chronology of each place has to be understood in the context of Portuguese and missionary policy on contacting Indians. But the practical realities could not be predicted from these policies, and even the best of intentions. For indigenous reactions to contact

with whites depended on specific cultural and historical factors, not to mention recovery from outbreaks of disease. Some fought amongst themselves to gain access to whites, and their goods. Others sought more limited access. These positions often reversed as Indians struggled amongst themselves and with outsiders. A critical element in the fate of family assemblies was the degree of unity a leader could generate. If there was dissent about a course of action, people moved away, which led to division at first, but then reconstitution, if they joined another group. The destruction of riverbank indigenous societies was less a fragmentation than spatial reorganisation. Charting the making of these relations and their values is the core preoccupation of the book. For in the transformation of indigenous societies in the colonial period we have the birth of riverine peasantries, Brazilian Amazonian cultures. Overall, I have sought to reconstruct some of the main regional networks to show that the large-scale and long-term connections provide a framework for the sharing of fates in the future of the Amazon. At the time of writing this piece, a draft of the book is almost complete and will be submitted, with the same title as this project, for consideration to Cambridge University Press in the summer.

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Amazonia in a world historical context

The Amazonian Indian historical experience of displacement, disease and slavery shares some of the characteristics of African-American cultures. The title to this project alludes to Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's book on African-American societies, first published in 1976, which argues that the roots of African-American culture lie in the shared efforts of the enslaved to create a new society. Moreover, there was no single culture that enslaved Africans took with them across the Atlantic. The new societies they made in the Americas were 'forged in the fires of enslavement', their shared understandings and collective experiences of facing a white oppressor. To do so they drew on their past memories, skills and adapted them to the new challenges. This action produced a generally open character to their cultures, able to absorb new influences quickly. There were continuities that stretched across the Atlantic, Mintz and Price argue, especially around ritual observances; these need to be understood at a deeper cultural grammar level, or what they call cognitive orientations.

Another feature that bridges these diverse historical experiences across the Americas is their peasant character. This broad concept provides a common analytical framework to compare South Americans and to reflect on the world-historical position of the Amazon. It refers to semi-independent, marginal communities connected to a state and market, which can be composed of ethnically mixed people, some with an indigenous past. They keep a measure of autonomy by maintaining their hold on land and waterways. This resilient character can be found in many South American countries and beyond. The settlements that were built along the Amazon River in the late 17th century were peasant in the sense their inhabitants became tied to the state through labour obligations and taxes on the sale of goods. They were also ethnically indigenous, kept contact with those from similar ethnicities, worked their own parcels of land and lived in villages with their own kinspeople. Over time this peasant nature remained strong. But apparently their ethnic distinctions as indigenous grew weaker, as much to do with social prejudice against being Indian as losing contact with fellows elsewhere. This story of assimilation and acculturation is familiar to 20th-century scholars of Brazilian indigenous people, who assumed that the transition of becoming peasant was at the expense of being Indian: a person could not be both at the same time. But in other areas, such as the Andes or western Mexico, being peasant and being Indian were not differentiated.

What I think makes this research compelling is the re-emergence of Indian identities in the present in the Brazil, though they are not challenging their peasant status. Some of the descendants of the first modern Amazonians are now reviving their indigenous status and seeking alliances with existing indigenous people. That means the numbers of indigenous people are growing. They want to demarcate their own lands and defend them from large development projects, road building, logging, mining, and protect the environment on which their livelihoods depend. This is by far from a uniform process in the Amazon, but it is one that is gaining ground. This phenomenon cannot be understood without an historical perspective and reconstruction of the subterranean networks of ethnic identities. This research contributes to analysing contemporary revitalisation movements not as recent inventions, but as part of a longer history of seeking new prospects and remaking communities in adverse conditions.

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