Life on the Amazon

Dr Mark Harris, *Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews, uses two forms of ethnographic writing to explore the historical and social identity of a village of fisherpeople who live in Parú on the banks of the Amazon. He intersperses analytical chapters with narrative sections that describe more freely what people do and how they do it. In the following edited extracts, he considers the importance of kinship.*

The houses in Parú are spread out in a long line along the river bank. Some are closer together than others: some are gathered in groups of two or three and others in groups of seven or eight. No two houses are identical in design and all use a variety of construction materials. All have a wooden structure. The walls may be clad with wooden boards, or thatch. The roofs are either thatch (cool and cheaper), or clay tile (rare, because more expensive, but cooler), or asbestos sheeting.

Almost all houses are part of a 'cluster', which I define as a dense network of multi-family houses, organised around a parental couple. Houses in a cluster tend to be closely spaced together, a few metres apart or even joined by a bridge. They may lie in a straight line or be in front of or behind the central parental house. The next cluster will lie on the next piece of land. A fence often separates one cluster from another, the main purpose of which is to prevent cattle from eating neighbouring gardens, and not necessarily to mark off one cluster from another. Thus, occasionally there are fences within clusters. This happens when the parents have already divided up their land between their children and some children own cattle and some do not.

Clusters are peaceful places. Children play in front of the houses or in the water, young girls and older people sit on the veranda chatting, young men gather under a tree drinking or mending something, and there is constant movement between houses. People are relaxed, and there is rarely any shouting or crying. Pigs, chickens, dogs and cattle roam freely within the fenced areas, forever picking at the grass or scratching the

Mending nets hung from a tree

ground. Around the houses there may be some flowers and plants in raised containers, which are normally old canoes with too many holes to be repairable. Great stress is placed on keeping the area around the houses clean, which means clearing the land of long grass and making sure the place looks attractive. This creates good morale in the community, since a sure sign of internal conflict is not caring about the place in which you live. Beautiful flowers and clean spaces are said to be things to make you happy.

Most economic activities are organised within a cluster. Fishing and hunting teams are chosen from men who live together, and cattle-raising is a similarly co-operative venture. Dairy products such as milk and cheese are shared between women in different houses in a cluster. Women's gardens are mostly grown on an individual basis, though groups of men within and across clusters may clear the land ready for planting. Raw food (mostly fish) is shared between residents in a cluster on a daily basis, but a person may also access food outside the cluster through his or her unique links.

Clusters are intimate and informal places, characterised by the constant activity. The concept of people helping one another is often expressed as a key practice between co-residents. The principle of *ajudar* extends further than simply help or helping out; that would imply a casualness that belies its importance. It means a co-operation and harmony of people who are sharing their daily lives. Between kin 'work' is conceptualised as help, whereas between strangers and non-kin it is evaluated in terms of the product and its value. Also, central to the idea of *ajudar* is the informality of relations based on mutuality, where no tabs are kept on who does what and when.

Most clusters have a social focal point, normally the most senior couple in the cluster. Throughout the day groups of people can be found chatting on the veranda of the parents' house, making sure that the needs of the old people are taken care of, and that there are constantly people to talk with. Old people in such situations command intense respect, and are the authors of lively stories of the past and various folk tales, which is why they have the constant company of young children who come to listen to them. In the cluster with which I was most familiar, the children of the elderly woman, Clara, whose husband had died, used to take it in turns to provide her with food, since she could not cook. Each meal-time, one of her grandchildren used to bring a plate of food to her

Horsemen herding cattle

house on the orders of a parent. Clara lived with one grandchild who looked after the house. On either side of her house lived five of her eight children, all of whom had their own houses. She was considered exceptionally fortunate to have such a large number of her children living nearby.

Social organisation in Parú is constituted through clusters related by kinship and marriage. Parúaros do not state a residential rule, but they say they prefer to live amongst close kin. A person's close kin primarily includes parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles and aunts. As the person grows older and marries, the cluster will come to include the spouse and his or her primary close kin, nephews and nieces, co-parents. The cluster will then become more complex or heterogeneous

because the children of the parental couple (the focus of the cluster) start to develop their own links.

The term *parente*, kin/relative, and *parentes* its plural, is applied in at least two different contexts. The first usage includes both affinal and consanguineal kin, where the category of relative and gender is irrelevant, and kinship and community are synonymous. This sense of *parente* implies prolonged co-residence and mutuality, and a shared everyday life, through networks of labour or the exchange of food and visits. Through participation in such activities the in-marrying newcomer is easily integrated into this meaning of *parente*. The kin universe is a realm of reliability, unity, fairness and generosity; while outside these boundaries relations can be hazardous and aggressive, as evidenced in the fights that sometimes occur at *festas*. Some qualifying terms are used in conjunction with people considered kin. Two words which often appear after *parente* are *chegado*, literally meaning 'arrived at', and *ligado*, 'linked'. Both these terms indicate closeness (residential and genealogical) and convivial relations in day-to-day life, thus making the claim to be *parente* stronger. The extent of the people who are kin depends entirely on an individual's (ego's) recognition of his collateral ties. Here lies the importance of the cousin (*primo*) relationship, in particular between men.

The category of people recognised as cousins has an importance for linking together people in the community, and in some cases across different places. Parúaros say that 'cousins join kin together'. I once asked Jose-Maria what I thought was a rather silly question: if it was possible to say that a particular category of kin is more important than all the others, what would it be? To my surprise, he understood the question better than I had. He answered straightaway, continuing to salt the fish he had just gutted, that it is the *primo* who is the most important. He added that each person has so many cousins, and that they are considered cousins until fourth grade, from there on the link becomes too distant to be a relative. I then asked him to justify why cousins are so crucial. He replied 'Cousins unite kin who live in different houses, this is our understanding, for others it is something else.' In this way, the clusters of closely related kin are connected to other clusters through cousin links.

The term and category of *primo* is a crucial one in communal relations. Its importance derives from the fact that it has the potential to be an expansive and inclusive category, more so than any other kin term. It encompasses a large number of people. Cousins are said by Parúaros to link houses (in the sense of people) together. The following examples demonstrate the adaptability of the category of cousin. First, the relationship between ego and his or her parent's first cousin is sometimes the same as the one between ego and a parent's sibling. The second is the classification *primo-irmão* or *prima-irmã*, literally cousin-brother/sister. The term is applied to people who are genealogical cousins, but were brought up together by the same parents. This is reinforced by the incest taboo: brother and sister cousins should not marry.

Aside from the extensive nature of the term 'cousins', there is an ambiguity in the cousin relationship that helps explain why cousins are seen as a crucial link between sets of co-residential kin. This ambiguity is between the cousin as affine (or spouse) and the cousin as sibling. The sibling relationship is one of respect and solidarity, whereas the sibling-in-law relationship is more relaxed and congenial. The cousin relationship incorporates all these elements. One hypothesis that might explain why the cousin relationship is sibling-like is the sliding of relationships from one generation to the other. Where there is a solid co-residential sibling set, there is a corresponding unity amongst the children of the siblings. These cousins form a large group of men whose daily lives are often spent together. These relations then become sibling-like, although this is never a definite or necessary outcome and the cousins would need to be living in the same cluster for this attachment to be created. The affinal nature of the cousin category derives from the number of cousin marriages that brings together men and women not only into conjugal relationships but also into in-law ones. One explanation for this feature of the kinship system is that it allows for the creation and re-creation of dense and close connections. In turn this means that material resources are conserved and occupation of land by the same family is maintained over generations.

Cousins give identity, in the sense that they locate a person in a field of communal relations. This identity, though, is not intrinsic to the relationship, but depends on a host of local factors such as co-residence, parental generational solidarity, land holding, labour cooperation and intermarriage. With the interaction of these elements the linking of clusters and houses, the cousin relationship of either co-working male cousins or intermarrying cousins, becomes the dynamic principle of social organisation of floodplain communities.

Dr Harris's narrative passages provide a more informal account of life among the inhabitants of Parù.

It was so hot I went down to the river to bathe. I saw the agitations of a group of about five boys in the water. It was midday and the sun pounded ferociously. They saw me approaching, and immediately rushed towards me. They spoke with such excitement I had no idea what they said. One grabbed my hand and asked if I could swim. I said I could and was led to the water. 'What about stingrays?' I asked. And they showed me how to avoid standing on a stingray. You either had to punch a stick in front of you, as you walked in the water, or shuffle your feet along the bed of the river. In any case, one added, the bed here was too hard for stingrays to settle down on. One boy asked if I wanted to join in the game they had been playing. It was a game of tag, where you had to swim under the water and avoid being caught by the 'it'. The river-bed was indeed hard and sloped gently downwards. I did not quite expect to feel so safe. The water felt cooler than the air. It was a light relief in the midday sun.

I was happy to play. Lost in these new sensations, someone immediately touched me. I became the pursuer. The half-submerged bodies disappeared into the muddy water. I realised why the game was so attractive. Once under-water, you could not see a thing. Even the sun could not penetrate. Successful evasion and pursuit came down to a fish-like agility and speed. I dived in, aiming for where I thought a body had gone, but found nothing but the force of the water against my hand. I stood up and looked for more bodies. The river current pulled against my legs, as if to trip me up. I dived again, trying to be as graceful as the young boys were. I discovered that they would pretend to go one way, but once under the water would reverse or change their direction. An outsider adult like me had little chance. After many tries I managed to touch someone by jumping on them from a short distance. Splashing, glistening water, screaming, goading dominated above the water. Silence, darkness, voluptuous bodiliness, deft swimming characterised the world below the surface. The boys seemed in collusion with the river.

Playing in a pond on a floodplain lake