FROM SMOKE CEREMONIES TO CYBERSPACE: GLOBALIZED INDIGENEITY, MULTI-SITED RESEARCH, AND THE INTERNET.

by

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Abstract

It is arguable that the "gloom and doom" phase, particularly in North American Anthropology, could not have come at a more inopportune time. The motivation in making this observation stems from the transformation of the realities that ethnographers research into more complex subjects, requiring new methods, broadened analytical frames, and taking us into new fora of communication and cultural and interpersonal interaction. Ethnography has become more challenging and promises richer insights than ever before as a result of phenomena such as community building in cyberspace and the transnationalization of putatively local, Indigenous communities and issues. In this paper I examine these subjects through reflections on my twenty-one months of field research among the Caribs of Trinidad (still underway), by moving back and forth between the description of a reconstructed indigenous ritual, and the field methods that are used in gathering the data necessary for the description. In this ritual I see a renegotiation of symbolic capital that spans local, national, regional and global levels. The field experience in itself, and the data that is uncovered by multi-sited means, stimulates questions that have some impact on anthropological theory. In particular, I will discuss the Smoke Ceremony, as practiced in this newly "reborn" community of people who are emerging from a creole and capitalist society and claiming an indigenous identification. This
identification is developed and defined in and through a local-global network of resurgent indigeneity. I thus highlight the extensive web of local, national and transnational cultural brokers linking this small Carib community to the Trinidadian diaspora, internationalized Indigenous symbols and resources, and American Indian movements, with the revelation of the multiple interests being vested in the reconstruction of local indigeneity. In the process I hope to provide a further assessment and elaboration of the value of multi-sited research in stemming perceptions of the demise of the discipline.

Arima, Trinidad: Point of Entry or Point of Departure? Platform or Gateway?

For a twenty-one month period I have been engaged in field research in the Carib Community in the city of Arima, on the Caribbean Island of Trinidad. At first glance, the focal elements presented in this paper seem simple: a shaman, a small community, a ritual, and an island in a small region. This seems simple enough until we recognize that we are dealing with individuals emerging out of a creolized and capitalist society, reclaiming or just claiming an indigenous identity in a region long presumed to be lacking Amerindian peoples. In addition we find these individuals relating to other resurgent or “restorationist” indigenous groups elsewhere in the Caribbean and the Americas, and drawing on their symbolic resources in order to enhance their own indigenous identity and legitimacy, with the Internet only recently entering as means of facilitating communication between these groups.

The research that I have been doing has thus become increasingly multi-sited, to use George Marcus’ term, in terms of actual and cyber territories. This realization also brought with it an understanding of the local as multi-sited within itself, incorporating what are assumed to be global level institutions, agents and trends, and helped me to see the local and the global as melting into each other along a continuum of practices and relationships, with the organization and transmission of symbolic and material resources occurring along that continuum. It also helped me to see the production of locality (to use Appadurai’s concept) as an inherent feature of the cultural globalization process. I thus decided that the Smoke Ceremony I discuss here, and the Internet, are both worthy metaphors and actual sites of practice highlighting these ideas and notions.

To place these issues in context I will begin by describing the main themes of my research project, my own involvement constructing an Internet presence for the Carib Community, and provide some background on the community in focus. I will then attempt a brief description of this “reinvented ritual” (to use Handler’s term) referred to as the Smoke Ceremony, how it is constructed and conducted, and move into the more multi-sited aspects of the research project, including the cyberspace domain. All along, I will allude to the extent to which research on the Arima Caribs cannot stop in Arima and instead acts as a point of entry or perhaps departure into larger domains of investigation and analysis, Arima thus serving as both platform and gateway.

The Research Project

Briefly, the nature of my project involves an examination of how diverse traditions are maintained, reworked, created and publicly presented by the Carib Community in conjunction and/or conflict with a variety of local and global institutions and agents. The focus of the study is the renegotiation of the symbolic capital of indigeneity, and the purposes, processes, and outcomes of this renegotiation. How this symbolic capital arose, and how the value of Carib traditions is determined and by whom, is a major part of the historical aspect of this study. I am thus keenly concerned with the work of culture brokers and gatekeepers both within and without the Carib Community, including the foreign and local media, the Ministry of Culture, tourism bureaus, schools, the Roman Catholic Church, United Nations and foreign diplomatic missions resident in Trinidad, and indigenous organizations across the region and North America. Patterns and processes of networking,
across a variety of sites, are therefore key elements of this study. In the articulation of indigeneity I look at how the brokers also act as bricoleurs, forming a local-global bricolage of indigenous symbols and meanings. Value, inevitably, is a key concept of this study – remembering Immanuel Wallerstein’s observation that, "when groups seek to reinvent their histories they always select those elements of the past which are most congenial.” I thus try to discover and understand exactly why and how some elements are seen as "congenial," i.e., valuable.

My own data was derived from: interviews and conversations; the filming of key rituals; newspaper and television archives; multi-sited research following leads into Dominica and the Assembly of First Nations in Canada; interviews with government officials and politicians; and from collaborative projects such as aiding my informants in the creation and construction of websites. As a result, these methods took me in and out of Trinidad in a variety of ways.

The Anthropologist as Co-Constructor

It would be a fairly unethical falsification of my own data if I presented this is as a straightforward case of an Indigenous community constructing its own Internet presence and getting itself connected, of its own volition and by its own means, to the Internet world. They do not even own a computer, and some cannot afford to have telephone connections. The idea of creating an Internet platform was plainly my own. However, where the entire exercise becomes valuable, and attains some measure of validity, is in the recognition that just because I suggest the idea (as a gesture of reciprocity toward my host group and as a means for research collaboration), this does not mean that they will accept it. Indeed, they had to first see and discover what the Internet was, to begin with, before they ever took to the idea of having a website created. The fact that other Caribbean Amerindian groups already had websites was a further incentive.

Of the six websites that I constructed that deal with the Carib Community in some shape or fashion, it is only two websites that I refer to here which involved collaboration between myself and my informants and required co-construction of their chosen type of representation. These are the websites of the Santa Rosa Carib Community, and that of the Los Niños del Mundo Parang band. These websites required research in advance, on my part, sitting down and discussing what should be shown and how, what should be said or not, and what the scope and goals of the sites should be. As such, the websites represent collaborative writing exercises, emerging from meetings, conversations, and interviews. While it is true that I took a leading role, as a virtual agent for the Internet among the Caribs, it is also true that without their interest and sustaining efforts these projects could not have come off the ground, and might not even have been legal for that matter.

The Carib Community of Arima, Trinidad: From Santa Rosa to Katayana, from Arima to the World.

The Santa Rosa Carib Community is a formal organization incorporated as a limited liability company in 1976, started in 1973 by a return migrant from the United States. It consists of related individuals that first came together to ensure the maintenance of a traditional Catholic festival held annually in Arima, the Santa Rosa Festival, which, the Carib Community members insist, depended traditionally on the work and preparations made by the former Mission town’s Hispanized Amerindian inhabitants. It was, basically, not a tradition of or by the Amerindians but for the Amerindians and is upheld by the Carib Community as helping to bring all the members together each year as one group. From this tradition, leaders began to learn and rediscover their Carib heritage, as my informants’ accounts state, and eventually they began a deliberate Carib cultural revival effort that has
lasted nearly twenty years. Soon they began to appeal for a state land grant, making the argument that “Indigenous Peoples cannot survive without land,” and this effort led them to formal incorporation as a business, with an internal bureaucracy, a defined set of objectives, and an intent to build a network of international partners. This network has grown to include Guyanese Amerindians, Carib communities in St. Vincent, Dominica and Belize, resurgent Taino organizations in Puerto Rico and the US, American Indian groups and Canadian First Nations organizations. A Caribbean Organization of Indigenous Peoples was also formed in 1988, founded by a Garifuna anthropologist and by Canadian First Nations partners.

The leadership of the Santa Rosa Carib Community states its projects and aims, as an organization, in very brief and basic ways. As a group, the three stated goals of their efforts are: 1) The maintenance of retained traditions such as the Santa Rosa Festival; 2) The preservation of more marginalized traditions such as the making of cassava bread and weaving techniques; 3) The "retrieval" of Indigenous traditions, rituals, and other cultural elements, such as: Indigenous forms of worship, dress, and the Carib language. These goals of maintenance, preservation and revival, are to be achieved by four basic means: A) Greater recognition by state and society in Trinidad; B) Institutional support in terms of funding by state authorities and in the grant of land to the Carib Community for the construction of an Amerindian Model Village; C) Research support, to identify former cultural practices that can be revived in the present and to outline the extent of their contribution to the construction of Trinidadian culture and society; and, D) Assistance in financing what they call cultural "interchange" activities: meeting and exchanging with Amerindian communities elsewhere in the Caribbean, and further afield even, in order to learn and adopt Carib and other Indigenous traditions that have survived elsewhere. The Internet dimension is only the newest and latest tool that is being used to foster contact, gain attention and greater recognition, and facilitate the sort of communication that helps to perpetuate cultural interchange between the various resurgent Caribbean Amerindian groups.

In 1999, Cristo Adonis, what some might call a “neoshaman” branched off and founded a new organization named Katayana. According to Cristo Adonis, Katayana means “spirit of the tobacco” as found in the Dominica Carib Dictionary written by the early French missionary, Father Raymond Breton. He chose this word for its shamanic tone and states that the inspiration of the group is what he calls, “Indigenous Peoples’ Spiritual Consciousness.” In the process, Cristo has drawn sustenance from what we might call a New Age Generic American Indian culture that is reshaped and presented in Trinidad as “indigenous,” yet, he states, “not necessarily Carib.”
**Katayana, the Shaman, and the Smoke Ceremony: Sending Signals**

Cristo Adonis was in fact one of my key informants. Cristo’s main interests have been the performance and continual updating of the Smoke Ceremony, and the development of closer ties with the Taíno Nation of Puerto Rico and New York. He describes his sense of aboriginality as one that is spiritual, ecological, and global -- one that is not tied down by vain and unnecessary preoccupations with "racial purity," one that is not constrained to doing only what the ancestors did, nor one that subordinates future possibilities to merely reenacting a distant past. While Cristo cherishes the traditions that have survived, he is also wont to experiment, innovate and gain new knowledge -- that is to say, to try to pick up where the ancestors left off, and thus move forward. His definition of Indigenous Peoples is not those who are racially distinct but rather those he calls "Earth People": lovers of the earth, committed to maintaining nature’s patrimony, feeling a close spiritual and emotional bond with the earth itself. Cristo has spearheaded the construction of Amerindian dwellings and works with an important new Eco-tourist project. Cristo has also been active in reinstituting what I call a "neo-Amerindian aesthetic": favouring styles of dress inspired by various Amerindian designs. Given that Cristo has a fascinating ability to make numerous friends around the world, both Indigenous and not, he has been the one most interested in pursuing the perceived benefits of electronic communication, to keep in regular contact with his friends, and to facilitate the sorts of exchanges of information from which he benefits.

The Smoke Ceremony, is just one example of an important ritual being developed by some of Trinidad’s “new Caribs” that plugs them into the world of internationalized indigeneity, a process that has eventually led them into cyberspace and thus into new fora of communication and personal interaction. The ceremony itself, held on whichever public occasion is deemed to be important, is not usually a private ritual. Amongst the specialists involved in performing the ceremony there is even disagreement whether it was ever practiced before 1992 when they came into greater and more regular contact with delegates of visiting Amerindians from abroad.

The Smoke Ceremony is designed as a series of offerings and invocations with the intent of praising the earth and protecting its spiritual and physical integrity, remembering the ancestors, blessing the families of the Caribs, and asking for the blessing and guidance of the "Great Spirit." Special prayers and offerings may even be made to St. Rose, which some of the older individuals see as the patron saint of Arimians. Incense is burned. Corn and cassava bread is offered to the fire. A feather is used to fan smoke onto participants as part of a cleansing process that also involves corn and water. Tobacco is burned and a cigar is smoked by the Shaman who then puffs smoke onto the participants. The Shaman will also hold the heads of those he has participating and press his forehead into theirs and close his eyes. Cassava bread and water in a calabash are spatially and symbolically central features, in a ceremony that embraces the elements of earth, air, fire and water. Recently the centre of the ceremonial square has come to be occupied by an effigy of a deer’s head. The Carib participants carry special spears. Feather headpieces are worn, chests are bare, and loincloths are donned. Maracas are regularly rattled during the ceremony. Necklaces made of seashells and Job’s Tears beads, made by the Shaman himself, are also worn by the participants. Lastly, four stones are placed around the fire, symbolizing the guardians of the Four Corners of the universe, usually seen as taking the form of different wild animals native to Trinidad, and these can be surrounded by another seven stones. Those familiar with “smudging” and other smoke ceremonies in North America, as also displayed on various sites of the Internet and printed in widely-available books, will note the similarities.
In this case the local is produced, in part, with globalized resources. According to the relevant Carib specialists, some of the maracas are from Suriname and Mexico (maracas are also made in Trinidad, and Cristo himself is adept at making them, but the maracas I refer to here have special meaning as they were brought from ‘foreign’ friends). The feather headpieces were gifts of visiting delegations of Amerindians from Suriname and Taïnos from New York City. The use of the cigar, and the subsequent development of a Cigar Ceremony, are acknowledged as adaptations of what they learned from a visiting delegation of Taïnos. (Sometimes, Christian, Orisha and Hindu elements can also be found in the ceremony.) More importantly, however, is the source of the Shaman's overall Amerindian knowledge and his larger repertoire of Amerindian and other Indigenous cultural items, which includes zemis from Puerto Rico, dream-catchers from North America, a bull-roarer from Australia, and items of clothing from New York's resurgent Caribbean Amerindian groups. The Shaman also reads heavily, especially books by or about modern day American Indians of the U.S. provided by a close friend and spiritual adviser who lived in the U.S. for many years and spent much time with the Sun Bear Tribe. He also reads books on medicinal and shamanic traditions and rituals in South America. I have followed him in reading many of these same materials, and assisted him in obtaining some of these materials through Amazon.com, merely simplifying his reception of these items, Trinidad already being awash in US cultural products.
An Indigenous Site Under Construction.

Much of what I have addressed concerns what we may metaphorically term an “indigenous site under construction,” where events ‘on the ground’ are still determining the shape and form of the group’s emergence onto the Internet. They began this engagement with relatively clear and simple purposes and goals, and with those in mind they are now constructing the directions they would like to take on their Internet platform. For the Santa Rosa Carib Community, having an electronic brochure, that does not require maintenance, suffices. Their website serves to essentially tell people “we are here,” and thus goes toward their effort to achieve recognition. For the Los Niños del Mundo Parang band, headed by the shaman Cristo Adonis, the website is more ambitious: the intent is not just promotion and achieving recognition, but also involves educating the public, fostering a network of contacts and seeking business opportunities. To date, Katayana does not have a website of its own, but is represented on other sites.
resultant increase, however incremental, in the legitimacy, value and importance of their identity and traditions, especially in a society such as Trinidad’s, that values foreign appreciation, global exposure, and international connections. This Internet exposure thus feeds back into the local politics of cultural vale, and from there we can expect to see, in actual and metaphorical terms, an indigenous site under reconstruction in the future.

This Internet Indigeneity is important, to a limited extent, to the leading members of the Carib community in how local cultural politics are played out. They are not “going transnational” just for the sake of it, but with well shaped and still narrowly defined local goals and strategies in mind. This might in fact be a case of thinking locally and acting globally, something that the Internet readily permits. The Internet also acts as a globalized medium utilized in the production and redoing of the local.

This case offers us a minor glimpse of part of the widened field of investigation that anthropologists have to contend with, and opens up some new avenues yet to be explored. Ironically, while the world witnesses rapid change, the old universal-particular duality that anthropologists have contended with, refuses to fade.

![Left Photo: from left to right -- Cristo Atekosang Adonis of the Arima Carib Community, Kacike Cibanakan of the Taino Nation of the Antilles, Ricardo Kapaeupana Cruz of the Arima Carib Community. Right Photo: Cristo Atekosang Adonis with Dabiel Waconax Rivera of the Taino Nation of the Antilles. Both of these photos were taken at the Carib Centre in Arima, Trinidad and Tobago, in November of 1997. These photos were provided courtesy of Cristo Adonis and may not be copied or used without permission.](https://example.com/)

**The Transnationalized Neo-Carib.**

The Internet has become, as I mentioned, only the newest and latest dimension in the transnationalization of almost generic, symbolic resources of aboriginality. The Internet has not been at the centre of my field research or one of the primary methods I used to gather information, but it has been one part of it, and this fact alone signals a broadening and diversification of the research scope involved in ethnography. The Internet has not only become one locus where information on one’s subjects can be found, thus now a necessary part of a comprehensive research effort, but it also affords us insights as to how individuals choose to represent themselves to wide audiences, and permits us to also follow leads coming out of our field research sites and taking us to new contacts. The co-production of a website, between a researcher and his/her informants, not only permits the co-production of knowledge but also enables us to gain greater insights into the world-views of individuals and groups whose own cultural reproduction depends heavily on public recognition. The Internet thus acts as both tool and practice: as a site for theorizing and as a method of research.

The emergence of Carib indigeneity onto the Internet parallels its resurgence on the ground. Comparing the making of a website and the making of the Smoke Ceremony is very challenging, and perhaps also contentious, but they both afford their practitioners the ability to gain recognition and to represent themselves in certain manners. Similarly they both act as smoke screens, in part, somewhat obscuring the origins and processes of the
reconstruction of Carib indigeneity.

The uses made, by certain Carib practitioners, of both the Internet and the Smoke Ceremony exemplify how they define themselves as Indigenous as being defined in and through a local-global, personal and electronic, network of resurgent indigeneity. Much like when one is on the Internet, supposedly moving between and among countries, yet without really moving and thus gaining the sense that the Internet is itself one single country, so we find the confluence, convergence, and interchange between Indigenous symbols and representations on the Internet. Perhaps this may also represent a narrowing of diversity insofar as only certain Indigenous groups, especially American Indians, seem to culturally infuse others in a unidirectional manner.

Multiple interests, both locally and globally, have been vested in the reconstruction of local Carib indigeneity. This web of local, national, and transnational brokers have linked the small Carib Community to the large international Trinidadian Diaspora, internationalized indigenous symbols and communication networks, and a variety of indigenous bodies. In the process we may be starting to witness a pattern whereby the network itself becomes the Indigene, with the many local groups serving as almost or potentially interchangeable platforms.

References


