Chapter 4
‘Sempre Ajeitando’ (Always Adjusting): An Amazonian Way of Being in Time1

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Abstract This article argues that the modernity of caboclo societies is characterised mainly by its constant renovation of the past in the present, a strategy that has given them great reproductive (social and biological) success and that was critical for their adaptation to unstable economic and political conditions and to a scenario of socio-cultural collapse. Resilience and flexibility are, for the author, the riverine populations’ main features. In the text, Harris dialogues with two previous forms of referring to the genesis of these populations: the “caboclization” process by Eugene Parker, elaborated in the mid-1980’s, and the mercantilist theory, formalised by Stephen Nugent in the beginning of the 1990s. For him, as one imposes abstract categories and concepts with the aim of building collective entities such as caboclo “culture” or “identity”, one misses out what is richest in the analysis object: the heterogeneity, the ambivalence, the ideology of “mixture” and the “opening” before the unknown, which emerges with the analysis of specific biographies in their respective socio-economic contexts.

Keywords History · Historicity · Caboclo identity · Religion · Shamanism · Kinship

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Caboclos and History

Caboclos, like many other peoples throughout history, often contribute to the demise of their own culture’. (Parker, 1985, p. xli). ‘Caboclos have neither identity nor supporters. They deserve both. (Parker, 1985, p. xliv)

It is difficult to generalize about caboclos. Cleary (1993, p. 335)

For Eugene Parker the caboclo is an outcome of the colonization of the Amazon by the Portuguese invaders. It is a category of people who share similar cultural patterns, such as the way they exploit environmental resources and their beliefs in an enchanted environment; and lives, or lived, in predominantly rural communities of kinspeople. Caboclo culture and society emerged some time before the Cabanagem rebellion (c. 1835–1840) in a process called by Parker ‘caboclization’. At the time of the publication of his edited volume (1985) Parker argued there was a breaking up of this traditional way of life following the ‘second conquest’ of the Amazon by the Brazilian military government in the 1960s and 1970s. This resulted in the decaboclization of the rural population as they migrated to towns and abandoned the adaptive strategies characteristic of caboclos in the past.

Parker’s achievement is to have developed an historical framework for contextualizing caboclo lives, a project initiated by Eric Ross (1978), Eduardo Galvão (1979) and Stephen Nugent (1981). Nevertheless, this took place from the perspective of a cultural ecological framework (introduced through Charles Wagley and developed by Emilio Moran) which could not fully incorporate complex political and economic transformations (Harris, 2000; Nugent, 1981). Thus the deforestation encouraged by road building and logging, and land clearing for cattle pasture was seen in apocalyptic terms, as a second conquest, rather than as another key moment in a series of interventions, and accompanying resistance, whose effects were not entirely predictable and, given the heterogeneity of the region, unlikely to have homogenous consequences (Cleary, 1993, p. 336). In this chapter I shall explore an Amazonian way of being in time which is not about gain and loss of cultural traits. I argue there is no caboclo culture, as though it had an ontological reality as a web of beliefs and procedures with an immobile legacy. Similarly, there can be no caboclo identity, in the sense of an ethnic boundary separating the caboclo way of life from another (Lima-Ayres, 1992, 1999). Both these positions create false problems. How can we understand the history of riverine peasantries (i.e. caboclos) without falling into the trap of reifying culture?

The answer I offer here is that aspects of Brazilian Amazonian history have produced a mode of being which has become characteristic of the communities living on the floodplains. Two aspects of an historical approach are examined: (1) economic history and relations of kinship (2) the role of popular Catholicism in various ideological transformations. The intention is to arrive at some general remarks on the particularities of modernity in Amazonia which began with the conquest of the Americas. This framing of the study raises many important questions.