Amazonian peasants, conflicts over land and the river in the Lower Amazon,
State of Pará, Brazil.

Mark Harris
(University of St Andrews)
(mh25@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Abstract: This presentation will discuss the general context in which an Amazonian historical peasantry emerged on the riverbanks in the early nineteenth century. It will address the development and transformations of this peasantry in the Lower Amazon area in early twentieth century and its contemporary character and fate in the early twenty first century. One set of themes to be addressed across these periods include the role of state policies in shaping the activities of riverine peasants and the role of town elites in determining what actually happens locally. Another set is the influence of economic cycles and the changing demands on land and labour. Above all this presentation will seek to identify the historical and anthropological specificity of the Amazonian peasantry; a task that is complicated by its lack of fit with Latin American, and other parts of the world, counterparts for it is neither a new peasantry made up of European migrants nor a poor indigenous peasantry. Agrarian capitalism in the form of plantations never developed in the region, at least until very recently.
1. Introduction

Amazonian anthropological and historical studies have traditionally investigated Indian and, less often, peasant societies. While this work has merit in itself, it has, on the whole, failed to capture the complex social landscape of the Brazilian Amazon. It has not accounted for the presence of the ‘new kinds of people’ who live along the riverways – descendants of Indians, enslaved Afro-Brazilians, and poor Portuguese men – how they relate to each other, and attach themselves to the places they dwell in, or the political, religious and intellectual frameworks in which they function. By examining the ‘peasant’ character of the Amazon this presentation seeks to bridge some of these divisions.

---


2 The phrase ‘new kinds of people’ is from Stuart Schwartz and Frank Salomon, ‘New Peoples and New Kinds Of People: Adaptation, Readjustment, and Ethnogenesis in South American Indigenous Societies (Colonial Era),’ in Salomon and Schwartz (eds), The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, pp. 443-501. A sample quotation that fits well with my argument is: ‘The divided and subdivided typology of mixed peoples as painted did not, of course, actually restructure the fluid practice of mixed people. Mestizos, mulattoes, zambos and the rest continued to seek their life chances pragmatically’ p. 494. Generally however studies in the Amazon have not been interested in the new kinds of people who played a central role in the colony. This neglect may also have been the result of a prejudice, in some quarters, which has little time for ‘degraded’ or ‘illegitimate’ Indians and mestizos – those who actively sought positions in the colonial hierarchy and became peasants. Yet the insurgents in the Cabanagem were from these groups, the reconstituted ethnicities of Pará.

3 Earlier historical studies of colonial Amazonia have investigated the specific character of Portuguese rule in the region, the political confrontations it created, and the impact of colonialism and missionary activities on Indians. Aside from the previously mentioned studies, see Arthur C. F. Reis, A Amazônia que os Portugueses Revelaram, Rio de Janeiro, Ministério da Educação e Cultura, Serviço de Documentação, 1957 and the two excellent collections by Mary Del Priore and Flávio dos Santos Gomes (eds) Os Senhores dos Rios: Amazônia, Margens e Histórias, Rio de Janeiro, Elsevier, 2003; and José Bezerra Neto and Délio Guzmán, (eds), Terra Matura: Historiografia e História Social na Amazônia, Belém, Paka-Tatu, 2002.
Studies of peasant social organization and protest have focused on the transition to capitalism in the countryside. On the whole the negative impact of agricultural modernization on peasant access to land and other resources has guided research. This has led scholars to examine the ways peasants have sought to defend their interests from these outside forces. While analyses of peasant rebellion have treated a wide range of topics, Steve Stern has argued that a limited number of assumptions and assertions shape this literature. The most important concerns the supposed destruction of a peasant society or livelihood as the capitalist world economy encroaches. Below I will address this issue in the Amazon as it will link my study to this Latin American historiography. Another pertinent assumption is the major influence of agrarian conflict in shaping national political debate. Yet for all the scholarly interest in agrarian politics, Stern argues, peasants are frequently depicted as reactors to external forces. They are rarely interpreted to act independently and articulate their own political consciousness. Each of these assumptions is not necessarily wrong but we need to be explicit about how they operate in particular locations.4

First, the term peasant can be defined as ‘subsistence oriented agricultural producers subjected to the authority and economic exactions of a state or landed class of overlords, or both’.5 This designation is problematic in the Amazonian context because of the reduced significance of agriculture there and the extensive nature of livelihood making. Still, lives were tied to the land and people did plant staples such as manioc and maize. This definition is also awkward in the Amazon because of the nature of the peasantry’s formation. It is generally assumed that aboriginal peasantries are only partially affected as the result of their contact with and subordination to Europeans. Even as they become integrated in a European dominated order indigenous societies maintain some of the pre-capitalist features of their economic and social organization. The outcome is a peasant society and economy, though never final and always locally conditioned, with a mix of different values and practices. The engagement with national and international forces can either act to reinforce or undermine its foundations. The difficulty of applying this common portrayal to Brazilian Amazonia is that there were no societies left intact, or even partially so, after conquest to be transformed into a peasantry. Instead, with a


5 Stern, Resistance, Rebellion and Consciousness, p. 4.
few notable exceptions, there were many displaced and enslaved family groupings and individuals. Disease, war and enslavement had depleted the riverbanks of indigenous societies.

In Spanish speaking Latin America scholars have used the terms Indian and peasant more or less synonymously. In the Andes the two Republics – of the Indians and the whites – allowed for different laws to regulate each sphere. Indian collective institutions were preserved, which meant group ethnic identity, access to land and political organization continued to have legal status in structures of colonial domination. This was not the case in Brazil. Indians incorporated into the Portuguese world were forced to shed their former identities – though informally they may well have kept them. In the large scale reforms of the mid-eighteenth century Indians of Brazil were given separate a collective economic and political position. Explicitly, all cultural affiliations were excluded. Moreover, while Indian agricultural plots, for example, were collectively farmed they were state owned. The collective institutions of Indian identity were imposed by Lisbon; they were not a continuation of pre-European forms. Indians, who resisted colonial rule, were able to maintain their ethnic identity, such as the Mundurucu and Mura. The separation of Indian and the rest of the Amazon’s inhabitants was abolished in 1799. At this point Indians in the colonial sphere became ‘peasants’ without formal collective recognition. So the term peasant in the Portuguese speaking Amazon is justified on the basis that people were producing for a market and organizing their own subsistence and subject to the state or a local power holders.

The heterogeneous Amazonian peasantry at the end of the colonial period did not have a cultural baseline that went back before conquest, as was the case in some parts of Mexico and the Andes. The peasantry in Brazil, and especially the Amazon, was constituted from Indians, Portuguese exiles and colonists and escaped and freed slaves. The peasantry, which contended aspects of agricultural modernization, such as the opening of markets to foreign goods and privatization of land holdings, was already familiar with externally induced transformation. They had been in their different ways been swept up into war, violence, slavery and long distance travel. The viability of a livelihood was already contingent to the world economy and colonial domination. This is not to say that some people did not maintain older ethnic affiliations, craft activities and techniques, and religious practices and gave them renewed significance in another context. New class and ethnic relations had overriding significance as will be seen. Stephen Nugent puts the matter in the following way: ‘The emergence of peasants in Lower Amazonia [Pará] did not depend on a forced transformation of indigenous societies... the Santareno [from Santarém] peasantry emerged from the wreckage of colonial efforts to extract wealth from the region; the peasantry was, in short, constituted by default’. Thus for Nugent contemporary peasant livelihoods do not represent a transition between precapitalism and capitalism but a suspended or blocked form, ‘a relic of a particular moment of capitalist transformation’ (Nugent, 1993, pp. 177-178). That ‘moment’ can be located in the late colonial epoch (Harris 2010)

The peculiar nature of the Amazonian peasantry leaves a problem with regard to peasant social organisation and protest. If they were not defending collectively held traditional values what were they resisting? If agricultural modernization had already had an impact, what was happening in the late colonial period? Taking the lead from the literature on peasant rebellions in the nineteenth century highlights patterns of land ownership, labor administration, the role of the élite, popular culture, interpretations of liberalism and the ethnic and racial dimensions as valuable considerations. The transition to capitalism in the countryside is one factor amongst

---

6 Nugent’s revisionist understanding and theoretical appreciation of the peasant issue in Brazilian Amazonia finds empirical confirmation in the present study.
others, including élite factionalism, the failure or breakdown of the state, and commercial blocks, raising of taxes and private and state demands on labour.  

2. The Lower Amazon in the late colonial period

The Lower Amazon, or Baixo Amazonas, is one region in the interior riverine network of Amazonia. Other major river regions include the Upper Amazon and the Rio Negro, Marajó, Tocantins and the Belém area. The Lower Amazon roughly runs from Parintins to Monte Alegre. In colonial times, as now, Santaréém lay at the hub. The image of a hub is useful, because there are major tributaries to the Amazon which more or less converge on Santaréém. To the south is the Tapajós River which leads up to Cuiabá, Matto Grosso and the centre of Brazil. In colonial times this was a long distance trade route of some importance (Bates 1969 and Monteiro 1994). To the north is the Trombetas River which leads into remote forests and eventually to Guyana. Indians and enslaved Africans used this route as a preferred means of escape (Gomes 2002). To the west and east ran the Amazon River. The Lower Amazon of the colonial era can be seen as a natural gateway. All river traffic had to pass through, especially since Óbidos lay at the narrowest part of the river. Many settlers came there, Indians were forced into missions and its floodplain land was coveted. Moreover, Mura, Maués and Mundurucu Indians lived in relatively close proximity to colonial villages, in the maze of streams on the south bank of the Amazon River between the Madeira and Tapajós Rivers (known then as Mundurucania). As a result the area assumed historical importance as the location of intense social and economic activity, experiencing its own wars, conflict and violence (Santos 1999). The Lower Amazon is part of what we can call traditional, pre-rubber boom Amazônia, where a riverine based way of life is dominant and livelihoods are gained from a diversity of activities. It is the Amazônia beautifully described by Inglês de Souza in his novels and short stories, especially O Cacualista (2004, ‘The cacao planter’).

The colonisation of the riverbank bluffs and floodplain was intrinsic to the success of Portuguese imperial domination. It was known almost from the beginning of Portuguese conquest as the rio-mar, river-sea. The Victorian naturalist, Henry Bates, provides a good overview when he writes ‘The whole Amazons valley is [...] covered by a network of navigable waters, forming a vast inland freshwater sea with endless ramifications, rather than a river’ (1969:20). Bates also considered the Portuguese to possess a ‘fair knowledge’ of this huge watery expanse by the early eighteenth century, about a hundred years after their expulsion of competitor Europeans and the disappearance of the large Amerindian federations on the Solimões and Amazonas (Bates 1969, p. 117). The novelty of the size and power of the rivers facilitated, rather than hindered, the settlers in their pursuits (Boxer 1962, p. 271).

Many of these missions, like Santaréém, Óbidos, Monte Alegre, and Alenquer remain the location of towns today – it is not clear whether they were also settlements in the pre-European period. Silves and Villa Franca were amongst the largest villages in the Lower Amazon in the eighteenth century, but now are much smaller. Parintins and Juruti, on the other hand, were insignificant and grew with the growth of river traffic in the second half of the nineteenth century. (Part of the explanation of the continued existence of places like Santaréém was the ongoing presence of relatively wealthy cacao planters from the early to the late nineteenth century. These people

---


8 The following sketch is concerned with the people who were a core part of colonial life – the workers, slaves, and planters. It does not address the early conquest period and any continuities it may have had with either the pre-colonial or late colonial era. Sources for the ethnohistorical study of the Lower Amazon can be found in Sweet (1974), Menendez (1992) and Porro (1993).
managed to maintain their activity despite the horrific violence of the 1820s and 1830s when there was the conflict over independence and the Cabanagem rebellion.)

Apart from the military and religious conquest, Portuguese colonisation of the Amazon involved the occupation of land as its central strategy. Outside the missions various kinds of farmsteads were established by Portuguese settlers and Brazilians. Basically these individuals were economically speaking peasants, making a living from a diversity of activities, including fishing, livestock raising, hunting and farming. They traded their goods by transporting them to Belém rather than local markets which were little developed in the eighteenth century. A fascinating insight into the life of these heterogeneous group of people is provided by the 1778 census of every non-Indian household in Grão Pará, its location and principle economic activity.

Taking Santarém as an illustration, we find that 56 households were listed, 7 of them headed by widowed women. Twenty households were situated in the village itself and the rest in rural areas. Araripxunna, to the northwest of Santarém, was the most populous with 15 houses there. Some of the domestic heads shared the same family names indicating family connections. This area comprised both low and high floodplain land and bluffs. Although it is not certain precisely where houses were built it is likely they were spread out along the riverbanks, occupying both seasonally flooded and higher land. In the middle of the Amazon River, and to the north of the Santarém, was Arapary where 8 houses were detailed. This is typical várzea with its ‘endless ramifications’ of streams and lakes. Nearby, Tapará and Aritapera had 5 and 4 houses respectively, also floodplain. Paricatuba, a bluff near the opening of the Igarapé Araripxuna on the Amazon River, was the only other site mentioned and had 3 domestic units. This information reveals that rural locations were generally more desired than the town. Moreover, it was the floodplain that was the preferred situation for making a living in this late colonial area. One explanation for the popularity of the floodplain was the increasing significance of cacao. Over 90% of these riverine households were listed as cacao planters.

The same residential and economic significance of the floodplain for non-Indians is found in other Lower Amazon towns. Yet there were fewer people planting cacao; more are listed ‘living from their agency’ (vive de sua agencia), i.e. they do everything. The largest ‘family’ by far in the Lower Amazon was headed by Manuel Correa Picanço, resident of Arapary, a widower with three married children (who worked in the local army and lived with their father), and 39 slaves. Picanço had a cacao plantation, and yet was remediado, able to provide enough to survive and just above poor on the scale used. This same economic value was accorded families with no slaves and similar numbers of children. On the other hand, there were some families who had a handful of slaves and were given as poor. Nobody was described as rich. Still, when the nineteenth century dawned, and cacao became ever more dominant and slaves were introduced in greater numbers, these distinctions became stronger.

Another source which informs us about the settling of land is the royal land grants (sesmarias) conceded in the Lower Amazon between 1740 and 1820. Using the land register in the Archive of the State of Pará it is possible to locate the sites of the grants in the region. Like the 1778 census the actual locales are not recorded, rather place names (e.g. Paricatuba) and general region (e.g. the town of Óbidos) are described.

In total, there were 49 land grants to 45 individuals (sesmeiros), i.e. some had more than one. These people were the richer section of the non-Indian peasantry listed in the 1778 census such as Picanço. They represented the local elite: they served as members on the local council and occupied military posts. Many sesmarias were on floodplain areas near towns, conveniently

---

9 See Vila de Santarém, pp. 151-153 in the ‘Census Tables’, Governor of the Rio Negro, João Pereira Caldas, to Governor of Pará, Martinho de Melo e Castro, 22nd June, 1785, Barcelos, AHU Pará Avulsos, Rio Negro, cx. 8, doc. 7509.
located for communication and transport. And cacao trees lined the riverside. Those individuals who did not seek a royal land grant may have been too poor to demarcate the land and employ a clerk and a lawyer to draw up the requests. By the early nineteenth century other prime floodplain neighbourhoods were occupied, around Ituqui for example. The occupation of riverbanks, including bluffs and várzea, was intensifying.

However, these people had to contend for land and resources with Indians. These Indians were the survivors of the colonial offensive. By the late colonial era, they were a fraction of the pre-conquest total. Nevertheless, according to recent commentators (Sommer 2000, Mello e Souza 2004, Roller 2014), their general resilience and negotiation of Portuguese policies secured themselves positions which belies the image of the defeated and miserable relics of once dominant Indian tribes, as represented by John Hemming (1978 and 1987). Like the whites and mestiços, they were not a homogenous group. They differed in terms of their experience of slavery, length of time in a mission, social and family position, and ethnic identity. In 1783 there were 696 Indian men, women and children in Santarém (Sommer 2000: 326). The non-Indian population for Santarém for 1778 was 328 whites and mestiços, and 148 slaves. In summary, Indians accounted for more than half the total (59%), the free just over a quarter (28%) and the enslaved for about an eighth (13%). These divisions were more or less the same for Óbidos and Alenquer, but Faro, Monte Alegre, Villa Franca, Alter do Chão had higher numbers of Indians and fewer slaves and free peasants.

Portuguese legislation, known as the Directorate, between 1758 and 1798, obliged all colonial Indians to work for the state. For this reason, their main domestic residences had to be in the colonial villages, that is the old missions, situated on bluffs. This meant they could not live permanently on the floodplain, though they were permitted private gardens and temporary houses there. Indians had to grow their own food in a roça comun, communal gardens, as well as supply soldiers (if there was a fort in the village) and passing dignitaries and their entourages. The location of these publicly owned gardens is not known for every village in the Lower Amazon. Yet it is very probable that traditional areas of high fertility were employed, that is the floodplain and the ancient terra preta sites. In Santarém the roça comun was to the east in the floodplain region of Maicá, on the Amazon River. It is also likely the terra preta soils were used. In Óbidos the roça comun was situated across the river opposite the town on the south bank, near the huge state owned cacao plantation. One may suppose that the household gardens were not far away. This pattern of seasonal movement between floodplain, or terra preta, agricultural location and bluff dwelling confirms Denevan’s model. However, it was not one that would last much longer in the Lower Amazon.

The Directorate was abolished in 1798. In legislation Indians were no longer to be treated differently from anybody else. The new policy involved the sale of publicly owned assets (except for the cacao plantation and various fisheries). Immediately the Indians no longer had the same forms of security and protection. They were thrown together with the rest of the free peasantry and left to survive. I shall examine what happened below. This moment coincided with the expansion of cacao orchards in the Lower Amazon and an influx of settlers looking for land in prime locations – in some cases where the communal and private gardens were.

Although we might like to imagine the riverbanks as empty in the late eighteenth century this was not the case in the Lower Amazon. Land demarcation was becoming increasingly combative. And the floodplain the locus of conflict.

So far this presentation has considered the different phases of colonising the riverbanks of the Lower Amazon. Following the destruction of the Amerindian nations in the early conquest period, small missions took their place, generally on higher non-flooded bluffs. In the vicinity

---

10 for an example in Porto de Moz see Sommer 2000, p. 123.
colonists settled on floodplain land in order to take advantage of Indian labour and trade and fertile land for cacao and pasture. By 1758 this residential apartheid ended but Indians continued living in villages rather than rural settlements. By the end of the eighteenth century the non-Indian peasantry was unevenly spread between the town and riverbank. The local elite moved into towns for administration, and town councils, markets, military posts and religious control. But the focus of their attentions was their farmsteads, where they spent most of their time. There was much greater interest in the floodplain itself, especially near to villages, rather than other ecological zones as its economic potential was more readily realised.

3. Economic activities and colonial conflict.

This next section will examine the range of activities undertaken in the colonial period and how they affected the social structure. Although the vast majority of people at the end of the colonial period lived next to the river, their work was not confined to that area. Seasonal collecting expeditions sought products gathered from the interior forests and up the tributaries such as wild cacao, sarsaparilla, turtle eggs, Amazonian clove, nuts, and various resins and oils from trees, as well as lard from turtles and manatee. Trade, marketing, visiting and participation in religious ceremonies involved travel to villages and towns, and sometimes to Belém.

Indeed, people moved constantly in search of better conditions which could mean escaping from abusive bosses or creating new opportunities. This mobility proved very troublesome for the colonial administration. It wanted to establish vassals who practiced agriculture and were tied to the land. The archive in Belém contains many letters by bureaucrats complaining about people packing up and being absent from military or work obligations. In most cases the individuals or families would turn up a few villages away looking for a plot of land. Such movement was quite reasonable as skills could be re-applied and the technology light. There may have been other reasons for moving on which I will consider below. For the relatively wealthy however such mobility (unless they were a trader) was a less attractive option. It was their goal to occupy land to plant cacao trees and raise cattle. This put them in conflict with poorer neighbours whose crops were in danger of being destroyed by cattle.

The free peasantry, which included Indians after 1798, pursued their livelihoods in a mixture of ways, much as they do today. There is no record of precisely the full range of each household’s production either for subsistence or sale. In the late colonial period markets for agricultural produce in the interior were limited. There were shops for goods from the outside such as alcohol and tools. This meant that most domestic units provided their own daily food needs or engaged in activities in exchange for food.

As mentioned above, the principle economic activity was the growing of cacao. Almost all cacao lands were along the riverbank. Since the 1730s cacao had been the most significant export from the Amazon. Then it was grown by Indians in missions, and following the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1757, production was overseen by the state who guaranteed prices and transport. By the end of the eighteenth century the state withdrew its control of the economy. In his study of the economic history of cacao production in the Brazilian Amazon from the time of the missions to the end of the colonial period, Dauril Alden concludes that:

> It was cacao that encouraged the settlement of the Amazon during the eighteenth century and that produced a large share of the crown’s income from that region. In the long run, however, cacao may have been disadvantageous to regional growth (because it was too dependent on a single crop). Certainly it did not bring about unlimited prosperity. As with staples in other production areas, prosperity for some, such as the merchants of Belém and Lisbon, meant misery for others, including the Indian paddlers, black slaves, and many marginal orchard owners. But who the people actually were and
how much they benefited from the cacao industry are questions to which answers still need to be discovered (Alden 1976:132).

What is relevant here is the agrarian characterisation and the effect of this cacao boom for local society. In the late eighteenth century, some Indians, especially the officer or noble class, had gained some standing in Pará’s colonial world, and could negotiate the terms of their inclusion in it (Sommer 2000). This was the case for those with large families who could control the labour of kinsfolk. But with the ending of the Directorate these people lost their special status in the colonial regime and became part of a differentiated and diverse riverine peasantry. Inevitably, simmering conflicts and prejudices erupted, as pressure on land and labour supply grew.

As part of the reforms at the end of the eighteenth century (in order to introduce liberal economic practices) there was an auction (arrematação) of some of the state’s assets. In some remote places there were few takers owing to the lack of private capital. The Indians who had worked the land to be sold off were in no position to compete with the better off individuals. This process allowed the elite to occupy the most important areas in the region. These were prize floodplain lands, suitable for growing cacao and not too low so they would flood every year. And previous users and inhabitants were pushed off the areas they had enjoyed.

The image below comes from the Portuguese empire’s Archives in Lisbon. It shows one man’s plot of land, a sesmaria, conceded in 1802 and situated downstream of Óbidos, on the north bank. The plot is entirely covered with cacao trees with the house in one corner. It is bordered on either side by other cacao planters. Faria, a Portuguese military officer, took early retirement in order to run his economic interests. He also was granted another piece of land on the other side of Óbidos. His application for that sesmaria does not mention what he intends to do with the land; most likely it would have been to raise cattle. As it happens neither of these plots were on old Indian lands or gardens.

---

11 José Joaquim Pereira do Lago to Governor, Alter do Chão, 10th December 1799, Arquivo Publico do Estado do Pará (APEP) cod. 575, doc. 48. See also ‘Autos de demarcação da terra’, Óbidos, 19th March 1812, APEP ‘Documentação Juridiciário’.
12 Biblioteca e Arquivo Público do Pará (1904), Francisco José de Faria, R. Paraná-Merim de Maracassú, and Francisco José de Faria, districto da Villa de Óbidos, p. 54.
Figure 1. Carta topográfica do cacaol do tenente Francisco Jose de Faria pelo piloto Joaquim Pedro Ribeiro, delimitado por Manoel Caetano de Oliveira, segundo os termos dos autos. Termo de Villa de Óbidos, 1814 (from the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon).

In the early nineteenth century the rise in production of cacao led to increased use of slave, rather than Indian, labour. From having no more than a few hundred slaves, the Lower Amazon and Tocantins areas came to have many thousands, mostly working in and around the cacao plantations. The introduction of African and Brazilian born slaves introduced a new set of problems for the elite. According to the regional Portuguese authorities, the flight of slaves from their masters was one of the most serious problems of the late colonial period. Escaped slaves used to establish their own communities (quilombos) in remote places up tributaries and would attack farms, burn houses, kill cattle, kidnap women and other slaves. Often they were armed and defended their homes with devices such as trenches and traps. In these ways the quilombos of the Amazon were no different from elsewhere in Brazil, and the Caribbean. There were some regional variations, such as the importance of Indians in helping slaves escape, the complicity of traders in supplying quilombos, and the network of rivers and dense forests that aided escape and obscurity.

Travellers in the early to mid nineteenth century described the monotony of the river banks in the Lower Amazon – the stumpy, wide branched cacao tree for leagues on end (Maw 1829; Edwards, 1847, pp. 105-7). The lands where Indian peasants once had their gardens and temporary homes were progressively being taken over by land-grabbing cacao planters. Certainly this happened in Óbidos and Santarém, where Indians complained that they were thrown off the land they were working. Planters responded by saying the Indians were not using it profitably. Plots near towns on the main trunk of the Amazon River were at a premium in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Grilagem (land grabbing) is nothing new in the Amazon and takes place with each new successive economic phase. The Brazilian priest André Fernandes de Souza worked with Indians as a missionary. Writing a report to Pedro I he stated that six kilometres above Manaus is a small river called Taroma: ‘At its mouth is the cacao plantation of the ex-governor José Joachim Victorio, in forming which he removed all the population, and obliged them to work on it with
no other payment than a very slender subsistence, which was the principal cause of the desertion of the Indians’ (Fernandes de Souza 1848). This was not an isolated incident, but indicative of a general pattern taking place. If an ex-governor was land-grabbing with impunity then others were.

By 1828 a memorial from the Lower Amazon asserted that in the municipal districts of Santarém, Óbidos and Alenquer, almost all land was covered by cacao trees. The only land which remained unplanted was where the risk from flooding was too high. The other towns had cacao but were more inclined to fishing and the making of manioc flour. As more and more land was swallowed up cacao, smallholders were pushed out to peripheral areas further away from towns, and in between plantations. So their efforts to create viable peasant households were constantly challenged. This sheds a slightly different light on the comment by a man from Vila Franca writing in the 1820s who said that the ‘Indians were dispersed in the districts’. They were not so much spread out as squeezed out. In the space of thirty years (1790s to 1820s) to the agrarian structure had become more divided: larger orchards worked by slaves, more small-scale peasant farms in the interstices and on the periphery.

The riverine way of life revolved around these rich and poor peasants and their struggles. Given the relative lack of wealth in Pará the division between economic classes was not as great as elsewhere in Brazil in the same period. The peasantry was heterogeneous because it was composed of various kinds of people: Indians, mestizos, poor Portuguese settlers, freed slaves and fugitives from justice in the other regions. Although the way of life was connected to the river it was also based on a plot of land that provided security of residence and subsistence potential. In this way, Amazonian floodplain peasants (ribeirinhos) have always accessed a diverse range of environments to sustain their livelihoods and moved across them with ease. Thus they have depended not on one or two activities but many and often these are performed together in a co-ordinated fashion. Such is the skill – indeed imperative – of living on the floodplain.

Although the poorer peasants had diverse origins, they shared similar experiences. One critical aspect of this formation was the sense of being squeezed out by the better off cacao growers who wanted more and more land to plant trees on. The Cabanagem rebellion of 1835-40 has various causes such as arguments over the nomination for provincial president, lusophobia and the accumulation of oppressive demands from the outside. One cause that has not been analysed sufficiently is the sense of grievance that some felt towards the local elite over losing their prime plots of land and thus their livelihoods. This conflict over land and resources helps explain why the Cabanagem spread into the interior of Pará and lasted so long after the fall of Belém in May 1836.

4. Conclusion

This presentation has sketched the general development of the floodplain peasantry in one Amazonian region in the colonial era. Yet this assemblage of people was neither exclusive to this eco-system nor homogenous in character. Although focused on the margins of the river, people moved between villages, towns and cities and the forests as they pursued their livelihoods and searched for new opportunities. The occupation of the floodplain involved conflict and was contested by individuals and families. Those who made a living on the floodplain in the late colonial era were not doing so because it was second best nor did they lack ambition or

---

14 The Cabanagem has been the subject of many studies in Brazil but few outside in English. See, for example, Raiol (1970), Hurley (1936a) and (1936b); Moreira Neto (1988); Di Paolo (1990); Salles (1992); Cleary (1998 and 2003); Chasteen (2000). Some parts of the argument in this chapter are elaborated in my book, Rebellion on the Amazon (in press, 2010).
imagination. Their choices were constrained by economic options, the structure of colonial society, its ethnic and cultural dimensions and transport availability.

One feature of the peasantry more generally is its domestic organization; work and economic life is channelled through the household. Since they are a ‘part-society’ within a much larger entity, there may not be strong social connections between neighbouring households. Of course, family links in the Lower Amazon did spread across domestic units, but sometimes they did not. Colonial Pará was not a structured and ethnically integrated society with networks across residential areas, as was the case in pre-conquest riverine Amerindian societies. It was not possible in the colonial era, and even later, to have gardens on the floodplain and houses on the river bluffs, that is to live and work separately. Each household was required to live next to its gardens, cattle, orchards and so on in order to lay claim to the land and to protect it. In other words, there was good reason, in the context of the times, to live on the floodplain and suffer the hardships of the place such as the seasonal inundation. We can see colonial floodplain peasant life as representing a hard won adaptation to prevailing conditions, and as a complex amalgamation of traditions. As such, periodization is extremely difficult. In spite of being a singular location, the place has been subject to multiple influences at different stages, each one with its own history.

Despite this violence, this history of the Lower Amazon reveals the floodplain’s significance today. Peasants living in floodplain areas are not recent arrivals; nor are they haphazardly making a living or simply accommodating external demands. Many of them are the descendents of those who settled there in colonial times. The resilience of their livelihoods over two and a half centuries suggests an ability to adapt not only to uncertainties in the regional markets, but also to internal needs. Much of this resilience is dependent on an ability to occupy floodplain land without fear of land grabbers, and to have access to non-valorized resources. Although the floodplain is a historical place, it is not one that exists independently. The floodplain has been incorporated into a nexus of other environments in the Amazon. Certainly it has not been possible to make a living from solely from the floodplain’s aquatic and terrestrial resources. The particular configuration and weighting has changed over time. The more ribeirinhos are prevented from exploiting a diverse range of environments the more pressure there will be on the floodplain.

In summary, there were different interests and forms of relating to the environment. The Lower Amazon and its valuable resources was as contested in the early nineteenth century as it is today. The kind of historical approach advocated here has had two objectives. It aims to overcome the presentism of some social scientific work in the Amazon. This body of work tends to see social problems as requiring technical solutions and proper management rather than seeing them as composed of different interests and outcomes of struggles over time (see Nugent 1993 for a critique). What is more, this present oriented perspective suffers from ‘chronic emergency’ diagnosis of Amazônia’s ills (see Alencar et al 2004). Each crisis produces another which has a human and environmental impact. One does not doubt the significance of increased road paving, soya farming and illegal logging, to give three current examples. These activities are having huge effects on the region (e.g. Watts 2005). However, the discourse of crisis and ongoing devastation legitimates expert knowledge rather than local knowledge, and external intervention rather than local empowerment. The perceived urgency given to environmental problems is associated with global discourses of nature and development. Surely it is for this reason that there has been a considerable growth in NGOs in the Amazon with finance from North America and Europe (Buclet 2004). Most of the NGOs propose innovative models of development, stress local management of resources and the importance of conservation. However, Buclet (2004) has shown how they are nevertheless embedded in a social system that is imbued with traditional forms of domination and older paradigms of socio-ecological development. This context limits the full impact of their policies.
The second purpose of the historical perspective is to refocus on the ribeirinhos themselves. As lacking in ambition or desire for progress as these floodplain people appear to developers, they are nevertheless carrying out a massive historical mission. Put simply, this task is the continued employment of skills which allow for reproduction from one generation to another, representing hard won positions arising from specific social situations in the flow of historical activity. The apparent effortless employment of these skills should not be mistaken for laziness, as the Amazonian elites have done and still do. Rather it is the precise maintenance of order and reproduction in a world of chaos and change that is their achievement.

References


Fernandes de Souza, A. 1848. ‘Noticias Geographicas da capitania do rio Negro no grande Rio Amazonas’, RIHGB, 10, pp. 410-504


Gomes, F. 2002. ‘A “Safe Haven”: Runway Slaves, Mocambos, and Borders in Colonial Amazônia, Brazil’, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 82, 3, 469-498


