

Between the Stone and Metal Ax: Animist Heritage and Present-Day Negotiations of the Andoque Concept of Power (Northwest Amazonia, Colombia)

Entre la hache de pierre et la hache de métal : héritage animiste et négociations actuelles du concept de pouvoir chez les Andoque (nord-ouest de l'Amazonie, Colombie)

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Auteur

E. Arazi

EHESS, Paris / Université hébraïque de Jérusalem (HUJI)

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RESUME / ABSTRACT

This report summarizes fieldwork among the Andoque of Northwestern Amazonia (Colombia). The research explores how the Andoque's notion of power is constructed and negotiated, and how it operates, in different entanglements between the Andoque, their territory and its nonhuman entities, and non-indigenous agents, as the Andoque oscillate between a grip of the "stone ax" and of the "metal" one. While the former represents the Andoque's ethos of economic independence and territorial autonomy, the latter stands for their reality of dependence on the Whites and on the market. Power emerges as the outcome of nourishing relationships with nonhuman entities and with the guardian spirits of different sites and resources. Since it is based on mastering certain ritual procedures, power is highly contested among community members. Although present-day exchange with non-indigenous agents requires the deployment of indigenous power and knowledge, people also suspect that this exchange risks these power and knowledge's very relational foundations.

Ce rapport résume une enquête de terrain parmi les Andoque du nord-ouest de l'Amazonie (Colombie). La recherche porte sur leur notion de pouvoir et sur les manières dont elle est construite dans le territoire ancestral et négociée entre les Andoque eux-mêmes, les habitants non-humains du territoire, et les agents non-indigènes des autres territoires. Ces négociations sont analysées dans un cadre cosmologique indigène qui décrit une tension entre « la hache de pierre », qui représente leur éthos d'indépendance économique et d'autonomie territoriale, et « la hache de métal », qui représente une réalité de dépendance aux Blancs et au marché. Le pouvoir apparaît comme le résultat de relations substantielles, entretenues selon des procédures rituelles spécifiques, avec les esprit-maîtres du territoire et d'autres êtres non-humains. Cependant, à cause des savoirs et savoir-faire nécessaires pour entretenir ces relations, le pouvoir des individus demeure incertain, parfois extrêmement discuté par d'autres membres de la communauté. Aujourd'hui, si l'on reconnaît la nécessité de maîtriser ces pouvoirs et savoirs afin de

gérer et bénéficier des échanges avec des non-indigènes, on soupçonne en même temps que ces échanges affaiblissent les relations avec les non-humains, et, par conséquent, mettent en danger les pouvoirs et savoirs basés sur elles.

MOTS-CLEFS / KEYWORDS

Amazonie , Animisme , Ecologie , Pouvoir

Amazonia , Animism , Environmentalism , Power

TEXTE INTEGRAL

Drizzle

I've heard so much about it that seeing it was an anti-climax: these three wide pits in the ground were no deeper than four meters, and as their bottoms were covered with piled leaves, my camera could not even capture the fact that they were pits; they rather looked like shallow dimples in the forest ground, and I could not hide the disappointment from my two Andoque guides who were so proud of that site, the Ax (Andoque: Pөө).

The Andoque number 360 individuals who reside in their ancestral territory in the Colombian Amazon, living off fishing, hunting, horticulture, and occasional wage labor and commerce. This people is composed of five clans, each of which has its own animal or a natural element as its mythical origin. Clan members invoke these figures when seeking remedy or protection. The small number of Andoque members is but a shadow of their pre-1900 population, when the Peruvian Casa Arana rubber company enslaved and massacred what is estimated to be 10,000 members [1]. I spent 12 months with the Andoque between 2018 and 2019, exploring the forms that the concept of power takes in an animist society, that is, one whose members identify continuities between their subjectivities and agency with those of various non-human entities, such as plants and animals [2]. Living several months with each clan, it was while I stayed in the settlement of the Sun Clan that Tañe, the owner of one of the four Andoque malocas (ceremonial communitarian houses, invited me to visit the Ax.



Fig. 1 : The Maloca of Fisi, the Andoque's captain.

Albeit disappointing at first sight, these shallow cavities are essential to the Andoque ethos and history. These holes are the place where the mythological ancestors of the group discovered the stone axes, bequeathing them to the Andoque alongside the name they would for self-reference: Pøø Siøhø, People of the Ax. The Ax is personified: Pøø is the guardian spirit of both the site and tool, and just as Tãñe talked to Pøø upon arrival to prevent the light drizzle from becoming hard rain, so did those ancestors talk to him to obtain the axes. The use of the ax made the Andoque fully human, enabling them to fell trees and grow yucca, coca, and other crops; it allowed them to live in society, granting the separate clans an overarching identity. The scarce stone axes accorded prestige to the maloca owners who had them, as they enabled them to clear bigger forest plots and produce greater amounts of food, and use them in shamanism, invoking their guardian spirit for witchcraft or remedy [1]. Trading the stone axes with neighboring groups, the Andoque gained a predominance, which was forever lost once the White men arrived with their more effective steel axes. Andoque chiefs traded captives as well as subservient group members in exchange for metal axes, and. While it was the maloca owners' privilege to trade people for axes [3], their White counterparts (downriver merchants) were considered powerful, their greater access to axes according them jaguar-like shamanistic-predatory abilities [1]. Later, during the rubber period – and similarly to the way the swift introduction of steel axes shook long standing social institutions in other societies using stone ones [4] – the easier access to steel axes broke traditional power relations.

In this article I borrow my hosts' ax from s to clear the woods of my ethnographic data and introduce key aspects of their concept of power.

Territory, Resources, and Owners

The multivalence of the term “Pøø” as resource, site, and guardian spirit at one and the same time is instructive for understanding the Andoque concept of power. In accordance with the ubiquity of the discourse of mastery and ownership in indigenous Amazonia [5], I learned that animism fashions the Andoque's concept of power through their communication, modeled after interhuman relations, with the owners of such sites and resources. Power is the product of a dialogue with the owners of different resources and substances, such as coca, yucca and other plants, fish and animals, as well as remedies, sorcery spells and ceremonies. These owners are entities who are believed to reside in specific places. A person who engages properly in such dialogues (and their family, clan or community) can benefit from the site or resource and avoid negative outcomes, such as illnesses. Ceremonial dances that ensure the community's well-being are the acme of such dialogues. Power should be considered, therefore, as territorial management striving to increase population growth, which is a recurring topos in Andoque mythology and an important criterion in evaluating leaders. This is in line with literature arguing that power and prestige in Amazonia derive from the communication with non-human entities [6]. Among the Andoque, this approach may have received further impetus during the group's post-genocide revival process.

A dialogue's success depends on other successful dialogues: spells' owners, for example, will only take heed of a person who offers them fine coca and tobacco, that is, the one who conducts a successful dialogue with these substances' spirits; this dialogue, in turn, depends on that person's ability to “think with his origin,” which means to converse with his clan's guardian spirit. In such a manner, power is the fruit of an affinity between 1) a person who controls their own desires; 2) the substances they produce, consume, and distribute; 3) their clan origin, and 4) the territory along with the origins of its different sites and dwellers. Lively debates exist if this dialogue can be carried out in Spanish, given the dying out of the Andoque language, which is not spoken by the younger generation, and if a person who commercializes the traditional coca powder, as many do today, can still engage effectively in such dialogue when consuming it.



Fig. 2 : Tañe toasting coca leaves for the preparation of coca powder.

Knowledge/Power

Crucial for forming this affinity is the knowledge of myths, spells and ritual procedures, and a double game prevails with respect to people's hold of this knowledge. On the one hand, since respect is based on fear from knowledgeable people, one usually wants to be reputed as such. On the other hand, such a reputation exposes that person to the violent envy of others. If an adversary knows on which spells, myths, and rituals the power is based, he or she can harm that person specifically by turning the owners of these spells, myths, and rituals, against them. Furthermore, it is said that a remedy's guardian spirit becomes angry if one tells others about the remedy, making it inefficient for the "informer". As a result, and in a praxis that spreads to various contexts, the Andoque are experts in hiding what they know and what they do not, to the extent that every situation becomes a masquerade of the hold of knowledge/power, as well as of the mastery of a discourse of opacity [7].



Fig. 3 : Following the instructions of the captain, who will cure her, Maria is cutting leaves to make a remedy.

Although the community recognizes one person as their captain, i.e., the supreme traditional authority, who is the son of Yíñeko, the charismatic captain who led the recuperation process, criticism about the scope of his knowledge and his capacity to follow his father's footsteps abound. The community's unity is often overshadowed by conflicts between families equipped with different myth versions, about who should and can engage in the abovementioned processes of communication, managing life in their territory and their relationship with outsiders to benefit from their territory's resources (such as tools and money) as well.

Two Axes

This concept of power is at play as the Andoque oscillate between a grip of the stone ax and the metal one—power is used as a resource in a negotiation that constantly refashions it. While the stone ax represents the group's strong ethos of economic independence and territorial autonomy, the metal ax stands for their reality and ethos of dependence on the Whites and the market. This dilemma is a specific, economic manifestation of the Amazonian tension between “dependence on otherness” and “ethics of autonomy” [8]. In the same cannibalistic manner [9] that I often witnessed the Andoque “devouring” ideas and practices introduced by foreigners, trying to show that they had already existed within their tradition, they have also incorporated the metal ax into their mythology.

According to the myth, the daughter of Heron of the River Center, who represents the Andoque as well as ideal leadership, gave birth to many goods identified with the White man, including the metal ax. Heron of the River Mouth, who stands for the White people whose influence upon the Andoque was first exercised from Brazil downriver, captured the daughter and stole these goods. Her brother's travel to the river mouth in order to regain them is the origin of the exchange with the White man. Unlike Tukanoan narrations of their ancestors' choice of the bow over the gun, leaving the latter for the White man who subsequently refused exchange [10], the Andoque tell of a Western theft followed by commerce, which reflects their great dependence on outsiders' goods. By making it easier for the Andoque to clear forest plots, the metal ax first facilitated their incorporation into the non-indigenous economy [11], then made them dependent on it.

Most of my data regarding myths, rituals, economic activities, internal conflicts, gossip, etc., correspond to the duality dependence/independence, in which the Andoque negotiate individual, family, and collective power. It reflects, on the one hand, the Andoque's strong desire to auto-govern their territory—politically, economically, ecologically, and epidemiologically—and, on the other hand, their wish to benefit from the exchange with people foreign to their territory to the extent of ceding some control over it. This dilemma gave birth to the modern myth of Yíñeko, the captain who reconstructed the Andoque culture after the genocide. The *modus vivendi* that he reached with the less violent post-1930 rubber bosses concerning the time and space allotted to cultural practices and those dedicated to rubber activity, is considered today by community members as the proper equilibrium between the two axes. Following that activity, the Andoque have taken part in all the bonanzas of the region: tiger pelt commerce, gold mining, cocaine production, commercial fishing, and environmental initiatives. However, the rubber activity alone was orchestrated collectively and managed through ritual by the captain, whereas the rest of these activities have been performed on an individualized basis, undermining the community's political-economic unity and resulting in the loss of that idealized equilibrium.

The Ecological Triad

Since an ax, regardless of the material of which it is made, is first and foremost made to fell trees, the discussion over it leads us to the relational triad Westerners-Andoque-forest, and to a specific case study: community members' dealings with environmentalists.



Fig. 4 : The Captain's family members planting Coca in their newly cleared garden.

Environmentalists often consider indigenous people as allies in rainforest preservation as long as the latter adhere to a traditional lifestyle [12]. However, the Andoque are often deemed “too White” for them, in the sense that they prefer economic development over ecological preservation. From their point of view, embedded as they are in a cosmology of predation, the Andoque trace trees’ mythical origin to inimical anacondas who lost an ancient war to one of their guardian spirits. Consequently, they do not understand why Westerners prioritize the well-being of their inhuman rivals. Furthermore, they oppose the Western view of Nature as given and ahistorical, considering it rather as a product of a creation and conservation process in which humans have played a crucial part (echoing research on landscape domestication in Amazonia [13]), for which they should be compensated. In an important legal dispute against an ecological programme that subsumed their territory under its jurisdiction without consulting them, the Andoque protested the violation of their rights to autonomy and self-determination, and expressed their demand to benefit from the resources of such programmes. Interestingly, whereas they demand rewards for managing the territory according to their traditions (that is, exercising their autonomy), they justify their demands by their “needs”, meaning, their economic dependence on goods from other territories. By the same token, the more integrated the Andoque are into the national society, the less they converse with guardian spirits in order to manage their territory. My thesis explores these dynamics, paying close attention to the ways in which the Andoque concept of power acts as a means for negotiating them as well as their product.

Rain

Rowing a boat back home from the Ax, the drizzle became the heavy rain that we had feared it would become. “He recognized us,” said Tañe, meaning that Pøø only let it rain after we had left his site. I smiled, then sadly wondered if in the future, Tañe’s grandchildren, neither speaking Andoque nor knowing the territory and the rituals like their grandfather, would be able to say the same.

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