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FEEDING AND OWNING IN AMAZONIA

Costa, Luiz. (2017).

The owners of kinship: asymmetrical relations in Indigenous Amazonia, Chicago: HAU Books.

Luiz Costa's *The owners of kinship: asymmetrical relations in Indigenous Amazonia* is a major achievement. Incorporating decades of Amazonianist anthropology as its conditions of conceptual and analytical possibility, it stands as a compelling example of a form of scholarship that has become fully realized only in recent years. Costa's attunement to Amazonian ethnology turns his ethnography of Brazil's Kanamari people into a transformative engagement with core regionalist theories. It is this centripetal/centrifugal orientation – inward to Kanamari specificities and outward to Amazonia-wide themes – that makes *The owners of kinship* a perfect answer to the question of why Amazonianist anthropology has become one of the discipline's most unique and inventive subfields.

The existence of an extensive ethnographic and linguistic corpus of Kanamari materials gives Costa the ability and freedom to focus on a specific dynamic: the way in which the act of “feeding” creates bonds of dependence that make the feeder the *-warah* of the fed. Costa's baptismal ethnographic moment was his consternation with the apparently split meaning of the term. In Portuguese, Costa's Kanamari collaborators translated *-warah* as “body” but also as “owner,” “master,” and “chief.” “Body-owner” – what could such an expression mean?

To think of the agent that feeds a being as their “body” requires real conceptual struggle. As such, *The owners of kinship* is aligned with the ontological turn, which asks us to allow moments of ethnographic contingency to

transform our deepest theoretical assumptions. Despite the strangeness of his realization, Costa explains that though the prototypical example of feeding is a woman giving food to her pet, its meaning extends to the wider notion of “provisioning.” In this sense, the Kanamari concept of one’s body as that which encompasses and assures one’s existence is similar to an idea held by the young Marx. In his early writings, Marx (1964) argues that our “real body” is our “inorganic body,” or the features of the social and material world that lie outside ourselves yet enable our lives through what Bertell Ollman (1976) calls our “internal relations” with them. For Marx, as for the Kanamari, our body is that which allows us to live by providing our means of existence. In this sense, because of our asymmetrical dependence on it, it is not that difficult to understand how our “body” can also be our “owner.”

Costa’s main intervention into the Amazonianist literature is his transformation of Carlos Fausto’s idea of “familiarizing predation” (Fausto, 1999). The phrase refers to the practices of adoptive filiation Amazonians employ to incorporate alterity as a resource for their individual and collective self-production. Costa argues that Fausto is wrong to prioritize warfare and shamanism as the main means of familiarizing enemy capacities. By delving into his own data and other Amazonianist ethnographies, Costa argues that it is actually the capturing and raising of pets that is the most telling example, or “basic

cell,” of the processes Fausto describes. Costa’s choice to highlight the practice of pet-keeping serves as an effective response to Joanna Overing’s charge (2003): that Amazonianists who dwell on the capture and incorporation of alterity through warfare and cannibalism exoticize Amazonian indigeneity and ignore its more characteristic quality as a kind of humdrum, peaceful, and symmetrical sociality. What could be more “mundane,” in Costa’s words, than raising the infant animals that Kanamari hunters bring back to their villages? Even here, Costa argues, feeding emerges as a way to use asymmetrical means to transform predation into commensality, or “kinship.” Costa employs the idea of feeding to understand many aspects of Kanamari culture and history. His first substantive chapter examines how feeding and the dependency it generates operate in aligned though distinct ways in pet-keeping and shamanism. The second offers a conceptual and linguistic analysis of the relationship between feeding and the figure of the body-owner. The third ingeniously reinterprets Amazonian *couvade* practices to examine how feeding familiarizes the enmity of the newborn child. The fourth uses the idea of feeding to examine past relations between Kanamari “subgroups,” the structures of dependence that followed their disappearance during the Rubber Boom, and the recent orientation to Brazil’s national Indian agency as a feeder capable of generating new forms of kinship. The fifth examines a set of myths and rituals to describe how feeding

and kinship emerged from a preexisting state of generalized predation centered on the figure of the jaguar. What impressed me most about Costa's book is how he used the "schema" of feeding as a conceptual key to develop a cumulative understanding of Kanamari culture and history from chapter to chapter. In other words, its structure as well as its argument make *The owners of kinship* a powerful testament to the productivity of the tools it employs. Such tools include Costa's own ethnographic data as well as accounts of "variants" of Kanamari concepts and practices found in dozens of other Amazonianist ethnographies. Much more than the writings of senior Amazonianists who switched only gradually from particularism to comparativism, Costa's ethnography-cum-ethnology emerges from the gate as a mature example of what Carlos Fausto (personal communication) once described to me as neo-structuralist, "neo-classical, Franco-Brazilian anthropology". This theoretical orientation has become the most conceptually productive approach in Amazonianist anthropology, and reading *The owners of kinship* tells us why. *The owners of kinship* is that rare book that is so compelling that one cannot help but attempt to find faults with it in order to feel more secure about one's own data and approach. As an Amazonianist interested in many of the same questions as Costa, struggling to articulate the ways in which my anthropology differs from *The owners of kinship* is an incredibly productive exercise. But it can also feel futile,

as I know Costa would respond convincingly to my suggestions concerning any missteps in his work. Nonetheless, one must try.

First, Costa's analysis can feel overly abstract and schematic. It is, after all, a difficult book. His copious morphological breakdowns of Kanamari lexemes and phrases cloak his work in intellectual authority, but I am not sure they add much to his arguments. Even more, I worry that they alienate many readers, as they are too technical for the average ethnographer but too general for the specialist linguist. At no point did I doubt Costa's ethnography, but I did want to see more of his "primary material." As a novelist would say, I wished Costa would have "shown" more and "told" less. Costa continuously tells the reader how Kanamari people act/speak/think/feel. Yet he provides few in-depth descriptions of actual events and interactions. In addition, the book is relatively free of fleshed-out individuals and extensive verbatim statements.

Many of Costa's claims are provocative – for example, that Kanamari parents view their newborns as feared enemies, or that the main reason the Kanamari detest "whites" is because they consume the livestock they raise. Yet Costa does not show how such positions are voiced or enacted by actual people in actual contexts. Because of the omission, no matter how much conceptual sense Kanamari stances make, the reader is left unsure whether they actually shape Kanamari thought, affect, and experience. In short, one can finish *The owners of kin-*

ship understanding the conceptual structure of Kanamari culture, but she might have little sense of what life feels like for a Kanamari person.

Costa's discussion of dependence, magnification, and agency begs for an engagement with the question of "value." How do these concepts figure in Kanamari conceptualizations of an ideal life? As Kanamari people pursue their ideals, what capacities and incapacities do they create in themselves and their consociates? By exploring these questions, Costa's book could have become the first monograph to utilize all three of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's "analytical styles" of Amazonianist anthropology (Viveiros de Castro, 1996). Costa combines the "symbolic economy of alterity" and "moral economy of intimacy" approaches by exploring how feeding transforms alterity into commensality. But Kanamari society is also deeply asymmetrical. Value and inequality are central to the "political economy of control" approach, and if Costa had used it, he would have been the first to pull off a miraculous Amazonianist hat trick.

Finally, most ethnographers trained in a more Boasian, North American tradition will be skeptical of Costa's generalities. He writes about "the Amazonian owner" (155), "Amazonian social theory" (229), and what is true "throughout Amazonia" (115, 226). He even issues absolutes: "in Amazonia, filiation is always an adoptive filiation" (22) and "the process of kinship in Amazonia always involves making kin out of others" (229). To his credit, when

I told Costa how my data did not match some of his general claims – for example, that Cofán people have a lexeme that unambiguously means "body" and that some of them attempt to entice their pets to reproduce – he was fascinated rather than doubtful. Costa's curiosity should not surprise us. After all, his interpretation of how the Kanamari *couvade* protects the parents rather than the child is a startling rejection of an Amazonianist commonplace. Ultimately, Costa's careful yet creative syntheses are what make *The owners of kinship* so easy to appreciate. By putting the Kanamari into open-ended conversation with so many other Amazonians, Costa affirms, transforms, and adds to the conceptual models that regional specialists use to interpret their data. If I could suggest one ethnography to bring to the field for a neophyte Amazonianist, it would be *The owners of kinship*. It asks so many questions, offers so many answers, and makes so many suggestions about where one might look, what one might find, and how one might make sense of it.

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