

INTRODUCTION

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They had and have this power for living which our modern world has lost - as world-view and self-view, as tradition and institution, as practical philosophy dominating their societies and as an art supreme among all arts. They have what the world has lost, they have it now (John Collier).

The contents of this volume, which takes its cue from the bifocal theme of "American Indian reality between persistence and change", receives and solicits reflections on the debate concerning attestations of the prevalence of a continuity with a tribal past which has flowed back into present-day native societies and urbanized communities *versus* a more open attitude towards integration and acceptance - partial or general - of Euroamerican behavioural patterns and models.

In their wealth and variety these contributions reflect different angles, to the point of expressing contrasting interpretations in keeping with the elusive nature of the theme which - because of its range - allows for different focalizations. The many-faceted field of enquiry also allows the researcher interpretative approaches which privilege one or another aspect and do not elude the antiphrastic effect of the exploration of the limits of this debate's topicality.

The essays collected here, which mirror the theme's many facets, are placed on diverse interpretative levels and refer, by turn, to general theoretical perspectives or specific research fields.

While Champagne, adopting a social sciences' register, explains Native conservatism as a constitutional trait of American Indian cultures, Flynn examines the Northwest coast urban Indians' painful movement towards empowerment, stressing how they are often - erroneously - classified as less authentic than their on-reserve brothers. Kehoe warns against unconsidered adhesion to outmoded theoretical hypotheses and not rigorous enough use of data that often turn into a means to perpetuate incorrect anthropological assumptions.

Loeb illustrates Crow beadwork as the formal reflection of tribal clanic relationships and of the society's system of beliefs. Mauzé discusses the link between today's *Kwakwak'wakw* masonic lodges and their tribal secret societies, while Silverstein points to the euroamerican improper use of Thunderbird symbolism borrowed from Ojibwa society which, in the process, loses its prominent meanings. Slater, finally, sketches throughout the "voices" of a few American Indians the terms of the current debate about native writings on non-native topics and vice-versa.

Though it is true that the various interpretations progressively adopted by the vast literature on the subject can all contribute to open enlightening vistas onto the dynamics and motivations accompanying the cross-cultural interaction between American Indians and Euroamericans, it is also true that an interpretation of the forms and effects induced by their reciprocal relationship may sometimes overshadow other aspects, with the risk of producing a simplified and limited image.

The variety of the terms which recur in the anthropological vocabulary on the subject - conservation, recovery, revitalization, survival, traditionalism and, on the other hand, change, innovation, integration, adhesion, acculturation - clearly indicate the multiplicity of orientations underlying these studies. In fact we find the most eloquent measure of the problematicity inherent to the discussion on continuity and change in the symbolic and social models of native Amerindian societies in a study of the constant change in ethno-anthropological

perspectives, among which an interpretative trend tending to negate, or at least drastically reduce, the emphasis placed on the bipolarity of this theme as an analytical focus has recently emerged. For, belying the old and incorrect assumption - attributable to a naïf undervaluation of the gap existing between the two cultures - that, like many European minority groups, the native minority too would end by flowing into the great United States melting pot, «the vanishing American has somehow not vanished at all» (Brown 1988: 62). This has forced anthropologists - and not anthropologists as well - to become aware of the ineffectuality of the oxymoron of an indiscriminate flow of the Natives into the Euroamerican establishment and of the effects of an improper application of Western conceptual categories and semantic attributions to Indian culture which finally produced a typification which had little or nothing to do with reality.

«The result of this new awareness on the part of the anthropologists... has led to a growing number of hypotheses to explain the phenomenon of the tenacity of traditional values and cultures» (*idem*: 63). Brown notes how, of these, the hypothesis which points to the isolation of the reservations as a decisive factor in producing conservative orientations is naturally belied by the persistence of the tribal heritage also among urbanized communities. Using a rather Meadian interpretative model he also notes how

among the vast array of forces that work for the persistence of traditional values is the often neglected psychological factor of the inherent stability of the basic personality structure, which acts as a selective screen in the process of change (*ibidem*).

In fact - as Brown himself concludes - the present-day native permanencies, fitting as they do into a span of options including overall adjustments and conservative reactions, total changes and remarkable tribal retentions, do not lend themselves to plausible generalizations: however, even in cases of hybridization of Indian and Euroamerican values the signs of a high degree of traditional Indianness emerge unequivocally.

This has resulted in a perception of the Amerindian reality which is still extremely vigilant and able to fully and coherently

reconstruct its own models in new contexts - the reservation, the metropolis -, while maintaining almost intact their cohesive and structuring power. In current anthropological studies this has also resulted in analytical attention moving, as we have said, from the tradition/innovation axis to the issue of cultural integrity and its compatibility with the undeniably new questions induced by the changed sociological reality. In other terms, with the exception of cases of definite ethnic option within the ambit of the Euroamerican society, continuity seems to have set in as the prevalent process in the native reality, in a setting in which hybridizations acquire meaning more as formal adaptations in order to preserve rather than as effective innovations (thus becoming instrumental in maintaining the *corpus* of beliefs as well as the behavioural registers of the web of social relations and aesthetic-artistic principles).

One of the most powerful factors in processes of ethnic conservation among the American Indians (1) is their vital and pervasive tribal religion. This consequently offers the most wide-ranging area for a verification of the theory formulated above.

Where religion is concerned, the paradoxical conversion of innovation into conservation is made possible by the

extreme flexibility of the symbolic register... [thanks to which] the process of preservation of ethnic identity moves and is perfected by granting the Euroamericans some possibility of interference while reserving for the Natives themselves the reformulation and redefinition of their behavioural patterns, which continue to refer to interpretative hypotheses within their culture (Tiberini 1993a: 79).

Without denying the impact of the cultural shock produced by the arrival of the Europeans - in view of this, in fact - it is surprising that though «European values and Christian priorities subtly influenced Native ideology soon after the contact,... religious practices per se changed little» (Paper 1989: 105). If it is true that

while adaptations to reservation and Christian domination developed, [many] traditional practices went underground [and that]... Indian Agents reported the demise of traditional religion on

many reservations, [nevertheless] it continued away from the settlements among a minority of Native peoples. The continuation of these traditions formed the core of a revitalization movement that has been growing exponentially over the last decade and a half (*idem*: 108).

The present-day Sun Dance ceremony (2), still qualified as a «symbol of traditionalism and an ethnic marker» (Medecine 1980: 281), is emblematic on the one hand of these reconstitutive dynamics and, on the other, of the recourse to a very clever use of minor formal innovations aimed at the preservation of still essentially traditional rituals. Speaking of it in connection with the Lakota Sioux, B. Lincoln defines it «a feast of cosmic-social re-aggregation» (1993: 67) and the occasion in which the Lakota «not only reassert the bond with their past but attain one of their main scopes: that of reactivating their link with the Sun's energy and power» (*idem*: 68). Lincoln also analyzes the new elements introduced in the celebration of the ceremony by Francis Strong Bear in a Lakota reservation in South Dakota, and in particular the opening of the Dance to non-native participation and the contrasting reactions which this innovation produced even though it had been legitimized by a vision (3). In fact this seems to qualify as a revealing example of the sophisticated use of innovations which, as we said, do not distort tribal practices and rites and finally end by reasserting them, thanks to a process made possible by the absence of rigid dogmatic truths in the system of native beliefs and by a different and more fluid notion of revelation which allows for constant readjustments of the symbolic horizon and of the mythical tradition. The persistence of the vision is equally emblematic; besides certifying the inexistence of a fracture between men and gods, the vision - which remains a vital terrain for access to and exchange with the supernatural and a medium for the transmission and sacralization of messages of power - is invested today, for the American Indians, with the function of terrain of negotiation with new mystical interlocutors - the symbolic hypostases of Agencies or Institutions - on which by now the well-being of the native community depends (cfr. Tiberini 1993b) (4).

Careful observation shows in fact that not only vision and the Sun Dance but the entire ceremonial *corpus* - with the exception of certain minor rituals - have remained alive and *mutatis mutandis*, fully coherent. However Amerindian vitality is not limited to the religious or spiritual circuit for it invests every sector of native culture, tenaciously expressing itself along lines which faithfully follow the same dynamics as those activated in the religious ambit and calling for the same capacity for skilfully bringing together tradition and innovation and ably modulating what is new in order to preserve what is old.

What is really new seems to lie essentially in the prevalence of a pan-Indian register over the tribal specificities evident both in the present-day ritual code and the growing number of pan-Indian movements which connote inter-ethnic relationships between the native minority and the dominating Euroamerican culture, as well as in the changed intra-tribal relationships of the urbanized enclaves and, finally, in the artistic expressions of neighboring ethnic groups.

In their art and their crafts the American Indians, from the North West coast to the South West deserts, from the Arctic regions to the Great Plains, have known how to make use of imported materials and techniques, successfully incorporating them into a persistent symbolic background and onto still traditional foundations. D. W. Penney (1992: 35) notes:

In the early years of contact, the unfamiliar had to be reconciled with the familiar and the Indian had to find a sensible frame of cultural reference. Trade goods were valuable because Indians recognized in them attributes corresponding to their ideas of value - social and religious values as well as economic ones. Wealth was understood traditionally as spiritual and social well-being and its material expression was valued only to the extent that it could be displayed in dress or dispersed through gift giving. The 'practical' attributes of trade materials combined with symbolic attributes, their relations to ideas.

In a context in which materials such as

glass beads, silk ribbons... or colored cloth... were interpreted in terms of their symbolic implications and potential for power... [it is

not surprising that the women, when making articles of clothing] began to develop techniques for incorporating them into the formal expression of dress... [which] became a means to express success, wealth and well-being (*idem*: 36-37).

Besides, far from using a fixed repertoire of formal themes and solutions leading to a static and rigid production, decorative art in particular suffered profound changes due to outside influences, to ideas borrowed from other tribes, even before it entered into contact with the Euroamericans. The Plains Indians, for example, «even in the pre-contact period participated in a vast trading network which brought new materials and new ideas thousands of miles from their sources...» (Feder 1986: 93). It is therefore difficult, as J. C. King (1986: 87) points out, to speak of traditional art or of «truly Indian art» without recurring to an oversimplified use of the basic concept of tradition since «art traditions emerge, flourish and decay within the context of Indian society whether or not they are influenced by white culture during the process». The use of the terms «traditional» and «non-traditional» is misleading in this case insofar as, besides suggesting «a black and white situation when reality is much subtler» (*idem*: 90), it does not take into account the fact that

the maintenance of native traditions provides an unbroken continuity... To compartmentalize Indian art artificially as "traditional" or "non-traditional" is to deny the continuity of Indian society by specifying a particular point at which it breaks from the past. To do this is to idealize precontact societies and to imply that in adopting Euroamerican ideas, materials and markets Indian societies are absorbed. The crucial term in Indian art is "Indian"; without it Indian art has no existence, whatever the apparent traditionalism of the artifacts to the European or American beholder (*idem*: 90, 92).

Besides, not taking this into account is tantamount to avoiding any recognition of the creativity and contributions - in the sense of change - of individual artists who did not deviate into non-traditional planes but reflected natural shifts in artistic-esthetic sensitivity while, at the same time, producing stylistic innovations (5).

Another positive sign of change which receives stimuli from the reservoir of Euroamerican culture on the one hand, and, on the other, preserves foundations and meanings of tribal art, can be seen in the flow of Navajo sandpaintings into art exhibits and museums. Thanks to minor adjustments, the sacrality of these exhibited works is ably safeguarded while making them available to a wider audience (6).

Even the commercial art destined for the tourist market did not belie the perspective which saw the strenght of Indian art in continuity, even in its formal evolution, inasfar as it was deliberately created to be enjoyed in non-native ambits and therefore kept knowingly distinct from the production destined for the internal circuit:

The production of souvenir tourist art [in fact] probably began with the arrival of the first non-Indians or, at least with the Indians' early realization that non-Indians were eager to obtain artifacts to take home as records of their travels. At first pieces made for sale were simply copies of the items that Indians were making for their own use. Later, however... special craft items were developed strictly for sale (Feder 1986: 103).

Socio-economic relations and models represent the terrain on which the signals of continuity apparently suffered a plausible decline and the degree of Euroamerican interference appeared more evident. And yet, even in this ambit, an anthropological approach exists which seems to reconsider the question of the tradition/innovation binary opposition implying a reciprocal inflexibility of possible choices - conventionally translated on a practical plane into the reservation/urbanization contrast - and proposes less rigid interpretative trends aimed at culling the compatibility between cultural integrity and economic development, between conservation of ethnic identity and professional activity in the metropolis (7). Where this is concerned Castillo's theory (1982: 17) is significant: he attributes to the American Indians the ability to find an equilibrium in the urban ambit and therefore in contexts which have become bi-cultural, playing a «dual» role, i.e. adopting a western economic-professional model without this implying the abandonment of their own native cultural patrimony. Referring

to the *enclaves* in the reservations D. H. Smith (1994: 177), on the other hand, formulates a theory which sees in development «a means to the end of sustaining tribal "character"». Smith maintains in fact that:

economic development can help tribes become self-sufficient without undermining their cultural integrity. As incomes increase the tribe becomes less dependent... as development occurs tribal members have an opportunity for increased pride in their culture and heritage and their society prospers in more ways than simply increased income... The likelihood of a society maintaining its cultural integrity in the face of poverty, alcoholism and the like is rather low (*idem*: 185).

And, further on:

Maintaining cultural integrity does not necessitate returning to pre-Columbian economies... As the standard of living increases among Native Americans the behavioral characteristics that make them individuals are more easily maintained and developed (*ibidem*).

The cautious and controlled exploitation of Euroamerican technical resources, carefully modulated to suit the tribal needs of the reservation, proposed by Smith can in fact produce effective benefits without running the serious risk of detracting from Amerindian cultural integrity. In other areas, in fact, similar attempts at experimentation and mediation have already been successful: for example, the flowering of Indian fiction and non-fiction in which the use of the written medium has proved to be perfectly congenial to a culture which originally had only an oral tradition, making its affirmation and exploitation possible.

In conclusion, the constant which is also enucleable in the context of the behavioral and socio-economic pattern - or of the literary register - is expressed in recurrent dynamics in which conservation is ensured through partial innovation (8), as we described it in connection with the religious system or the native artistic production; a perspective in which the American Indians are no longer seen as being "on the edge", pressed by the need to make radical and irreversible choices, but as people for whom

continuity and cultural integrity appear not as choices but rather as incontrovertible and inalienable traits.

There is no line of total flight from native institutions which does not imply their denaturalization but there are strategically different degrees and ways of mediation with non-native institutions - decided for the most part by the American Indians themselves - which consent their survival not in a residual form but as a vital part of modern Euroamerican society.

As Hall (1987: 23) stresses:

[for all the] concerted attempts in the past two decades to re-examine Native American History from a Native American point of view, Native Americans are still too often seen as victims rather than active participants in their own histories. Focusing on incorporation not only underscores their active role but also highlights the harsh restrictions under which various Native American groups acted, underscoring their creative and often heroic responses to these conditions.

This anthropological approach is in tune with De Mallie's interpretation (1988: 19) and leads to

a fuller appreciation of the richness of tribal life without restricting it either to narrow cultural or social boundaries and allows an understanding of the integration of diverse levels of cultural meaning and social process. Most valuably, it provides a corrective for writing off specific cultural traits as "non-Indian" or "introduced", and focuses on the dynamic forces that shape the patterns of American Indian life.

Against this background, finally, the image of a present-day Amerindian civilization equipped with a new dialectic force, listening to the rhythms and opportunities offered by the western establishment and at the same time in possession of a strong enough mastery of its own heritage to be able to affirm its own continuity and persistent cultural integrity and render any descriptive exaggeration tending to reduce it to the abstract ambits of the "traditional" or the "non-traditional" misleading and artificial, blatantly emerges.

Notes

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1. Where this subject is concerned, see Harrods 1987.
2. In the ambit of the vast bibliography on the Sun Dance, see Jorgensen (1972), Melody (1976), Mails (1978), Medicine (1980), Grobsmith (1981), Powers (1982), Amiotte (1987), Walker (1991) and Lewis (1992).
3. The possibility and at the same time the need to introduce innovations easily lends itself to contrasting interpretations - renewal in continuity for some, laceration and hybridization for others -. This has led to the formation of two lobbies which refer respectively to nativist leaders and to traditionalist activists: the different choices depend on the one hand on the proportionally inverse accentuation attributed to tribal particularism and to its emotional and structural importance and on the other on evolution and renewal as the keys to the survival of the culture.
4. In this case the innovation is in a way sacralized by authorization through a vision: a medium which still today is culturally recognized for the confirmation of operative guidelines or for the legitimation of changes of direction. For this see, among others, Melody (1980) and Kelsey (1992). For the aspects and functions of visions in the tribal ambit and their enriched significatums see also Tiberini (1991 and 1993b) and Irwin (1994).
5. The problem of traditionalism in art and of the creativity of native artists has also become a part of the debate involving Euroamerican museum strategies and the various options for the exhibition of primitive art. Various and at times contrasting positions have been taken up. For this see Graburn (1976), Coe (1986), Price (1989), Coote & Shelton (1992), Anderson & Field (1993), Whitten & Whitten (1993) and Clifford (1994).
6. Concerning this, Parezo (1983: 22) says: «Two major steps were prerequisites to the making of commercial sandpaintings. They had to be put in permanent form and taken outside the ceremonial context for reasons which had nothing to do with their ritual use but which served other interests of the entire community. Both steps had to be accomplished without bringing misfortune to the community... Singers and anthropologists provided the all-important rationalization which allowed the shift from sacred to secular realms to occur». And further on he adds: «[The Navajo people]... debated with themselves and came up with the argument that the new media - permanent recording in writing and pictures - were acceptable and preferable to losing this tribal vital knowledge, valuable not just to themselves, but to the whole world» (*idem*: 29), thus summing up the evaluation of the pros and cons which probably underlay every "reformist" strategy adopted in general by the American Indians in different situations and activities.

7. The exploit of urbanization inaugurated by the 1948 Relocation Program in fact produced growing tension in the relations between urbanized Natives and those resident in the reservations. Its escalation reached a climax at the beginning of the '60s with the explosion of the civil rights movements (cfr. Fixico 1991).

8. On the strategies of mediation with the establishment through channels not in dissonance with tribal ways, and therefore culturally acceptable, see also De Mallie (1988), D. Lonowski (1994) and Z. G. Standing Bear (1994).

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