



Sentimental archaeology

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ABSTRACT

A senior anthropologist is trying to put together anthropology and art in a project, called Anthrology, that needs different steps to be concluded. One of them requires returning to the populations surveyed when the researcher was young. In the year 2018 he was able to access the sites he visited forty years ago: a former fishermen village called Telok Mengkuang (Malaysia) and three Costa Ricans villages inhabited by a native population that know is called Maleku. The first site doesn't exist anymore, overwhelmed by industrialization, while the situation of the second is, at present, much better than many decades ago. The present testimony of the two visits is a sort of sentimental report, because good storytelling is all about emotional connection.

I only do projects for the past

Ennio Flaiano

Malaysia: looking for the paved village

2018. We are aware that we live a life between a dreamy future and a continuously revised past. In order not to suffer from a present that tries to integrate them, usually unsuccessfully, I profited from an invitation to Cambodia to return to a settlement of fishermen on the east coast of Malaysia, which I visited forty years ago. I already knew that the village of Telok Mengkuang no longer existed, overwhelmed by the rapacious modernization of Southeast Asia, but I wanted - I had to - track down what was left of it. Sentimental archaeology? Sure! This time I was dealing with the Eastern Lions. The new that advances, at every rising of the Sun. In reality they are only sea lions in heat, that steamroll everything, motivated as they are by money, that acts as a testosterone incentive, to be grabbed immediately, before other competitors arrive. When I found it, I discovered that in that Malay village they had respect only for the cemetery, which was saved only because, like all the places of decomposition, it was located just outside the hamlet. Had it been on the seashore, it would have been undoubtedly asphalted as well, as were the coconuts, the huts and the secular traditions that for centuries found a comfortable and safe shelter in that beautiful bay, now completely cemented over.

1978, summer. Forty years ago we arrived there by chance, driven by the need to save money, as the few hotels in the area were quite expensive. We were a bunch of pseudo-friends very different from each other: a doctor totally devoted to his role; a very sweet but frightened girl who was pining after her partner who had asked her for a break in the relationship; a female photographer who had to recover from the shock of being replaced by a man by her female lover with whom she had raised her children. They missed her: the complexity of bonds that bind mothers and children also applies to surrogate mothers. Then there was the undisputed leader, a geographer who, close to his forties, decided to be maintained for the rest of his life by the community (at that time it was possible to retire after twenty years of work). This was in order to devote himself to his favorite sport: to increase *ad libitum* his human phallic collection. Which included not only all the shapes, the colors and the dimensions of the “gadget” that moves the world, but also solemn disappointments and enjoyable hangovers, because male volubility is variegated. At all latitudes. He was perfectly convinced that this frantic search was the fertilizer of his creativity. In reality it was only a desire for compulsive revenge, in fact he did not produce anything more after a certain age, too busy as he was in the effort to conquer new prey, using his words instead of his physical body, which with the age abandoned him.

With our sleeping bags we arrived around noon in the village, under the blinding Sun that filtered through the pitted and striated leaves of the coconut trees. As soon as we reached the center of the village, a boy, who acted as a lookout, began to shout: “Ikan ikan” from the top of one of the coconut trees. In some languages of Southeast Asia when a word is repeated it means plural or multitude, it depends on the context. In Telok Mengkuang we later discovered it indicated the presence of a lot of fish in the bay. So, the fishermen summoned all the inhabitants available and loaded them onto the beached boats in a hurry. They explained that our luggage would be safe, guarded by the elderly and that we had to lend a hand. We wore our swimming suits and went up, one by boat, to throw and then collect the nets, which in a flash were filled with small fish. All the boats, big and small, were soon overflowing, so we were forced to swim to the shoreline. The fishermen went quickly to the nearby Chinese merchants, who were amazed by the huge amount of fish and deposited a significant amount of Malaysian ringgit to the boats owners. That catch was considered to be miraculous by locals and it was associated with the contemporaneity of our appearance on the beach, so, when we asked a hut to stay for a while, one was quickly offered to us. We were then invited every evening by the grateful and hospitable fishermen to eat with their families. In practice, we shared their lives for a while. One of the most significant experiences of my journeys around the world. A few years later the geographer returned to Telok Mengkuang and I remember his discomfort when he came back to Italy, and I asked him about the village: “It doesn’t exist anymore. It was incorporated by a refinery” he said, in tears.

1980. The only fault of the village was being too close to a port that, from the Fifties, had begun to grow, sending the many raw materials abroad that the Malaysian peninsula became available to export in exchange for a rapid industrialization. This always happens in countries where corruption reigns supreme, is often robbery: snatch and flee, to start again in another place. In the Seventies the port, little by little, incorporated all the villages of the bay where it stood. Only a promontory separated Telok Mengkuang from the phagocytizing harbor and its fate was soon set out when, to satisfy the needs of a few, it was decided that the area of the village would become the site of a steel mill bordering an oil company, and quickly expropriated. I miss the details, but I plan to find them soon. One can reasonably think that the fishermen, that in many Indian Ocean cultures are considered a “low caste” (perhaps because they smell of fish, an odor difficult to be removed) have been evacuated and poorly compensated, also because they were not the legitimate owners of that state-owned area: they simply lived there for generations. Unwilling and perhaps unaware of the fact that the Malaysian state had one day decided that the bay was “for all” and that, therefore, it was available to those who would have made it more profitable. With their small survival businesses they had no way out.

2018. I got this information almost by accident, after a couple of days of fruitless search: nobody in the area knew anything about Telok Mengkuang, not even the elderly, was it possible? The afternoon of the third day, having lost my eyes on Google Maps and traveled hundreds of kilometers backwards and forwards to the promontories that face - unfortunately many - on the east coast of Malacca (this when I could, because not all of them were always accessible), I had the intuition to follow a paved road that led to the dense thicket of a tongue of land with steep sides, that, yes! Reminded me of something, and I came to the Darul Imam Training Centre, a mega-construction halfway between a congress center and a luxury hotel. From the gate a smart Malay who introduced himself as Lateef, in perfect English, asked me what I was looking for and when I mentioned Telok Mengkuang he invited me to park the car and sit under an umbrella, where a comforting coconut just removed from the fridge with a straw “on top”, appeared magically as soon as I sat down. Yes, that was the right area. He was then helped to gather more information on the hamlet that had disappeared from a lady who knew some of the old villagers, many of whom had been transferred to the mainland, in two settlements. The next morning I looked for the community that, according to the information gathered, should have contained the highest number of the former villagers but to no avail (my desire, now, is to return to the area because I need to interview the survivors). One afternoon I went, with Lateef, whom I later discovered was one of the managers of the training centre, to see the steel mill, the cathedral in the desert that had supplanted the village. It was a huge rusty and dilapidated structure that only operated for about fifteen years before being abandoned. It was only the result of enormous speculation, and we know that the money grabbers do not split hairs: they did not care about the five hundred evacuated villagers and the sufferings and inconveniences caused. The whole area was now patrolled by armed guards who did not have the threatening air they should have possessed: the gentle soul of the Malaysians was certainly not impressed by a constantly armed rifle and a pistol in the holster. In any case, they drove us from all the places we thought we could enter, but kindly, without any arrogance. Only one of them, benevolent as he was, pointed us to the place where we could find the cemetery. Someone still cared, there were no weeds around. I even found some recent tombs, none with photos, according to the Muslim tradition that, iconoclast, prefers “doodles” to the human figures. Lateef explained to me that the cemetery was untouched because otherwise the inhabitants’ anger would have provoked a popular uprising, that the managers of the steelworks were careful not to stir up. It was also clear to them that the bodies were full of symbolic meanings connected to life and death. The cemetery is a place that allows us to re-establish contact with life when we are affected by the disappearance of a relative and the corpses, exorcising our existential precariousness, become, in some way, sacred. In short, they are untouchable. That cemetery is a small enclave in a huge and rusty desert, created by greed and human ignorance, where centuries of “fishing wisdom” have also been buried. OK, no one would change a sonar with the child shouting from the coconut: “Pisces!”. But, I express a grievance: where are the sea stories that fishermen told their children decades ago before falling asleep?

Guatusos or Maleku? Maleku!

Former Bombay is now Mumbai and has been for decades; today Celebes is Sulawesi, and Burma is Myanmar, with capital Yangon and not Rangoon. For half a century many countries have been trying to get rid of the real names, usually crippled by the colonizers. This is also what happened to the Guatusos, who now want to call themselves how they usually refer to each other: we are the Maleku. More than forty years ago it was difficult to get to their villages. At the time, the passion of my life was anthropology, the only discipline along with psychology that, in my opinion, could make me understand who I really was. More than a passion, it was an impetus towards myself, anthropology was actually only a means and a pretext. Since we are governed by two closely related entities, the

experiential and *narrating* selves, the stories we tell about ourselves are often the result of a tug of war between them. In fact, the narrating-self uses the experiences we make as raw material to invent stories. Once these narratives are brought into being, they modify what the experiential self knows and undergoes. The sense of thirst, for example, is different if I cannot drink anything in preparation for a physical examination, from what I can endure in a desert without water. The narrating-self assigns different meanings to the experiences we have, so it creates different events and adventures. It must be remembered then that sometimes the experiential-self can sabotage the narrative's plans. If from next Monday I decide to go to the pool because it is good for me (a creation of the narrating-self), the same day, when it is time to go, the experiential-self has the upper hand and I put myself on the computer, perhaps giving myself the excuse that the weather is bad. Forty years ago I was more than ever at the mercy of these two entities, with a narrating-self that, as in all young people, tried to sugarcoat all the experiences I had and those I was able to imagine. Like becoming an anthropologist, a sort of lay missionary who, instead of exporting cults, used the various nuances of the scientific method to ascertain some truths about the human condition. At that time, to teach this subject at university, it was necessary to go to a population not yet acculturated in the western sense and study some of its traits. After an experience that ended badly in Guatemala, I decided to go to the safest and most democratic country in Central America, Costa Rica, when I discovered that indigenous people lived there too. I had to present my credentials to the local university which, after several stalls, mostly bureaucratic, sent me to a tiny ethnic group, living close to the borders of Nicaragua: the so-called Guatusos, who had also given the name to the territory where they lived and to the main town of the area: San Rafael (de los Guatusos). To get there I would have to rent a private plane and, from the airport of San Rafael, go on foot to one of the three *palenques*, or settlements, where the Indians had been fragmented: Margarita. There, the local primary school teacher who had been alerted by radio, found a hut for me and helped me to carry out my survey.

At the beginning of the last century it is estimated that the Maleku were about 16,000. They lived hunting and gathering, in very large huts, which could also contain up to seven or eight family groups. Each hut was far from the others, so each settlement had many square kilometers of rainforest available. From which everything that was needed for those small communities was derived. There was no centralized power, the only ones with a little bit were the shamans with their rites and potions. Unfortunately for them, those forests were little by little invaded by the *vaqueros*, local cow boys, who needed meadows to graze their semi-wild herds, which were quite numerous when I arrived in the area. The impact on the Guatusos with peasants and herdsmen fell like grasshoppers in the area, was deadly: the shamans could do nothing against new diseases such as, for us, trivial flu or measles and other more fearful illnesses such as syphilis and tuberculosis, so they also lost credibility and status. Deforestation deprived the Indians of their centuries-old sources of subsistence and of their profound connection to nature. Their lifestyle, very similar to that of some Amazon tribes, did not resist that invasion. They also ran the risk of becoming extinct genetically: when the invaders found a woman in the forest, they rattled her without hesitation, so much, she was a native! As always happens, almost *in extremis*, the central government intervened, even under the pressure of local anthropologists and ethnologists and created three settlements, with huts on stilts: *Palenque* Margarita, Tonjibe and El Sol.

When I was there the situation was quite critical. In fact, it is difficult for a hunter-gatherer to become a farmer, a cow-boy or a lumberjack. Certainly not on his own, but dependent on the new land holders, which paid them, when it happened, especially in bourbon: certainly not a Single Barrel, but horrible potions badly distilled. Before leaving, the university doctors made me promise that I would never offer them alcohol, at most cigarettes. Many of them were alcoholics, and even some women were on the way to become drunkards. To be on the alert, when I took samples of their

blood: many Guatusos were affected by tuberculosis. The same women, who, long ago, in the forest, were constantly busy looking for plants and small animals, as well as raising their children, in those *palenques* felt themselves worthless: how could they spend the days after doing the housework in a mansion of thirty square meters? The only school, located in Margarita, consisted of two sheds on pylons, the small river that was behind them, sometimes grew and submerged the schoolyard. The first contained the administration and the master's house, at the time the same age as me, who belonged to a different ethnic group, but because he was not a Tico (so are called the Costa Ricans who speak exclusively Spanish), he was very empathetic, strongly involved in its educational role and participated in the hardships and sufferings of the Guatusos. He had been chosen for this reason, they confirmed to me later at the University of Costa Rica. He found me a hut, he looked for food and little tuna cans, he collaborated as much as possible with me. I'm still grateful to him. During the day I worked hard: I had to get the school children used to my presence. My activities, according to my naive idea, should have intrigued the mothers and then, finally, the men. In effect, taking body measurements, taking handprints, making them taste and smell substances, showing numbers and colored drawings, pricking the middle finger to obtain a few drops of blood, has the same appeal as a visit to a hospital laboratory. But I didn't realize this, totally dedicated to my survey as I was (fig. 12). The teacher, more circumspect, promised them that the data I had collected, even if they would not serve immediately, would certainly have provided help in the future. He did not say what kind, but he let it be understood that it was pecuniary. Little by little, between sudden showers of rain and quick flashes of the sun - we were in the wet season that made everything smell like moss - the search went on. My torment came at sunset. The mosquitoes raged and, among them, could also hide the mythical *zancudo*. A malignant pest that, as it bites, could put its eggs into the blood vessel. A few months later these proliferated and invaded the body. There was no remedy: you died because there was no antidote at the time. I was told this, it was probably not true, but I was very frightened. I used tons of repellent at the first mosquito buzz, taking refuge as soon as I could in the hut, which had only an oil lamp to give me comfort. I was very worn out, because of the hot, humid and exhausting climate and then the diet, always the same: rice, black beans and a coffee that I softened with condensed milk, when I was able to find it, together with the occasional can of tuna. The night was usually interminable: sudden showers of torrential rains would beat on the roof, waking up and preventing me from going back to sleep. I was waiting for another day when I would spend collecting data between the mud and the water, the only comfort being lunch, which I would have consumed with the rowdy class. More than forty years later, the school is still there, in a bend in the Frio river. But it is not used to all three *palenques* as it once was, forcing children to travel miles in what was left of the forest. Now *palenque* Tonjibe has become more populated and therefore more important; it has its own school. This is because in forty years the Maleku have tripled, now they are about 600. Knowing so has comforted me a lot. In all the schools, there are six in total at present, that of Margarita has two new bodies: the old ones, where I worked, can still be seen, but it is in disuse (fig 13). These days in addition to Spanish, children are taught in Maleku: the bilingual syllabary quote in Spanish: "...It is about redeeming the essence of being Maleku, of acquiring a formation and a knowledge in accordance to the cosmovision that the indigenous has of what he surrounds him". In all schools there are mother tongue teachers. Maleku, not unlike other languages or dialects, presents small differences from place to place. Not always, in regard to the form, the books in the original language reflect the traditional stories, but only the basic contents are expressed. The child, if intrigued, can ask additional accounts and narratives to the parents or better to the grandparents, whose heads are perhaps still echoing what was told to them by their ancestors, when they lived in the forest. Now the process of integration into the Costa Rican society has been almost complete. The economic activities are still the traditional ones: the craft that uses natural resources, especially the balsa tree and the *jicaro*. For consumption by the tribe, *yucca* and bananas are grown. Tourism is developing. There is no lack of entrepreneurs and traders: the picture, compared to almost half a century ago has totally changed. Many seem to adhere

to the movements for the rights of the natives, because they would like to have a better control of their territory.

My former Guatusos, now Maleku, are today able to mix present and past, something that I didn't observed more than forty years ago. They are living in an environment that, although modified with respect to its origins, is always rich from a biological point of view and can offer economic alternatives, such as "ethnic" tourism. Which is undoubtedly an opportunity to be exploited. *Cum grano salis* or with a grain of salt, of course, as Plinio the Elder wanted.

Conclusions

Although the two contexts, Malay (sea) and Costa Rican (mainland) are different, the environment is the same: the equatorial rain forest, with its two seasons (rainy and "dry") and an environment rich in resources. That they did not have to be exploited beyond a certain limit, as the survival of both groups depended on this. They did not interrupt the natural cycles and flows because of their centuries-old experience. In this case three dimensions are intertwined: human beings/environment/society, which are difficult to integrate and fully understood, because among them there are different causes, effects and interactions. In both groups, however, a phantom lingered on them: that of the superiority of the context of the values of Europeans or of the newly-Europeanized Asians, which led to the expropriation of their territory, to their marginalization, resulting in cultural impoverishment and the destruction of portions of the rainforest. New diseases were introduced: modernization has certainly meant for the great-grandparents of the current Maleku devastating epidemics. But it has also revealed that it catapults certain human beings from a traditional way of living to a world of tensions and conflicts, both within the group itself and with those from "outside". Globalization does the rest. We are all aware that the constraints created by geography on how we live and on how we stay together are increasingly weak. The same people feel they are losing importance as individuals, now choral nature is privileged, which can also last the space of a chat. More or less unconsciously, we all know - just think about the smartphone that we handle every day - that we are becoming an integral part of a new global network, so the stories that our narrating self tells us, creating the illusion of being autonomous, lose their strength. This self, which for centuries has tickled our fantasies, will soon be supplanted by algorithms which, after collecting the data that we graciously offer to Google several times a day, will know each of us much better than that of our narrating self. We will rely on these algorithms, sooner or later. Maleku and Malaysian fishermen have suffered de-localization and assimilation, along with us they will also swallow the loss of their personal sovereignty, at least as we have experienced it so far. If this will be good or bad, only our dreamy future will know. Probably these considerations are only the product of a sense of insecurity, the feeling of being unprepared in a new world that is moving forwards, where our points of reference are quickly changing.

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