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The premise of equality in Carib societies

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The ethnographic situation presented in the Guianas is one of many small groups, some of which appear and disappear, change location, combine or separate. This pattern has persisted for hundreds of years of Western contact (Rivière 1969a: 27-28). From sources of different time periods, Gillin (1948: 804-817) records over two hundred named groups representing more than ten language divisions for the Guianas as a whole. Most of these are reported as living in the interior forests as groups that had fled Western encroachment along the coast and the large rivers. Butt's survey (1965) depicts a similar contemporary situation for the Guianas, a number of small groups organized for survival whatever the conditions of regional relations. Caribs among them seem to emphasize this pattern.

The central common element in these small-scale societies is cross cousin marriage in a two-section system (Gillin 1948: 849; Murdock 1951: 433; Oberg 1955: 478; Rivière 1974a: 640). The emphasis is on direct marriage exchange which must be understood in terms of the tendency for highly consanguineous marriages and concentrated kinship relatedness. These societies are characterized by a "simple, undifferentiated structure, tightly knit yet flexible within its own parts" (Butt Colson 1971b: 88). Designed for group survival at a minimal level (Oberg 1955: 479), the commonly occurring kinship system can organize a very small number of people.

Analysis of Carib relations tends to focus on male kinship, especially the asymmetry between son-in-law and father-in-law (Rivière 1974a; Armellada and Butt Colson 1976; Adams, n.d.). To launch his adult life, a Carib youth leaves home and apprentices himself to a potential spouse's father, usually his mother's brother. In the perimeter of the household, the young man's status remains ambiguous until, perhaps ten or more years later, he becomes a father himself and eventually separates his family from that of his father-in-law. While a man has lived in (at least) two households, his wife remains in her natal household until the couple establish their own.

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As one with no wife, a man does not negotiate with his father who has no wife to give him. As a wife taker, a man relates to the more powerful mother's brother, whose daughter he desires for a wife. Brothers tend to cooperate in order to release the supply of wives from the control of the older generation. Also as a wife keeper, a man relies on the political support of his brothers. In turn, men as wife givers relate from positions of power to the following generation of sisters' sons. Women are given and women are kept as men conduct politics among themselves. From another point of view, women remain in a mainstream of generational continuity by long-term relations to their mothers and their daughters (Adams 1978). Men's relations which are formed and dissolved in each generation conform to and promote this continuity among women.

Political asymmetry between Carib men is never resolved. Rather generational change-over and population dispersion realign relations. A man matures from one with no wife to a wife taker, to a wife keeper, to a wife giver, interacting at each life course stage with different men. A wife giver is always more powerful than a wife taker, but these terms refer to a dialogue in process. Once the wife is given and taken, the relationship between father-in-law and son-in-law is structurally concluded. Beyond the wife giver stage, a man relies on the care of his female relatives, his wife and her sisters, and his daughters.

Inequality between men emerges in conflicting kinship claims to the same woman. A son-in-law tries to assert a wife status of a woman whose father claims her as his daughter. The woman's location, either in her father's household or in her husband's household, establishes her identity by fiat. Equality between men is based on equivalent relationships to the same woman —the same mother, the same sister, the same wife (as a category of potentials). Brothers who marry sisters keep their equivalence beyond those brothers who do not. Unrelated men who marry sisters initiate a basis of equivalence. Men's relations to other men are defined through women, assumed to be passive at least with regard to the formation of households and settlements (Gillin 1936: 136).

Adult men move their households about freely in order to associate with other men. In general, cooperation develops among brothers, actual siblings and parallel cousins, and these kinsmen tend to live near each other. And in each generation, these groupings of brothers are equivalent or replaceable among themselves —allowing little basis for the distinctions of leadership.

The tenuous quality of leadership among Carib populations is marked (Butt 1965-1966; Dole 1966; Rivière 1981: 23-26; Schwerin 1980: 47; Thomas 1982). When told what to do, Caribs tend quietly to leave for less congested environs, or only temporarily delay this plan. Sons-in-law wait for the time they can remove themselves and their families from the households of their fathers-in-law. A leader, such as John Miller among the Barama River Caribs of Guyana, can emerge through marshalling kin relations, but such political brinkmanship is an anomaly. It is temporary at best and may prove to be in the service of continuity in Carib society.

John Miller is prominent in Gillin's 1931-1932 ethnography. Miller is described as Sawari's headman, "a tall virile fellow with little bloodshot eyes and a crooked left arm" (Gillin 1936: 101). He is a "forceful personality, known far and

wide by reputation in the Barama country" (Gillin 1936: 120). The basis of this claim is Miller's success in surrounding himself with people. His settlement, Sawari, had 47 people, almost a fourth of the entire Barama River Carib population at that time (Gillin 1936: 110).

At Sawari, Miller's village clearing included 27 people (Gillin 1936: 109). In addition, 13 people lived at John Cook's clearing (Gillin 1936: 111). Some distance between Cook's and Miller's clearings suggests the degree to which friendship had been replaced by competition between them. A third small clearing was inhabited by a single family: a husband and wife and their four children (Gillin 1936: 110).

In Sawari's several clearings Miller had around him eleven other adult men (see Gillin 1936: Figure 13). Miller's relationship to his current father-in-law seemed to lack the obsequiousness common to a son-in-law. Indeed with a view to pursuing further domains of power, Miller was learning shamanism from his father-in-law.

A few years after the death of his first wife, relations based on a link between Miller and her father were not in evidence. However, the deceased wife's sister Mary, who had moved to Sawari when her husband died, remained there after her sister died. She cared for her sister's four small children as well as a deceased brother's child (Gillin 1936: 117-118).

Miller was most distantly related to two married men who did not seem to have brothers of their own. These men no longer lived with fathers-in-law. Nor did they have the human resources to claim independence at this stage in their lives. One of these men had no daughter (as yet), the other's daughters were still young children. It would be some time before either of them could plan to include a son-in-law in their households. As mentioned, one of these men had his own small clearing, a satellite to Miller's. The other was included in that of John Cook. Miller chose to call these two men "younger brother," although so distantly related they could also be categorical cross cousins. Gillin records that their mothers' mothers and Miller's mother's mother were sisters, but certainly other relationships could have been traced as well.

The presence of these two men in Miller's settlement evokes the greatest generational depth in figuring kinship. The ties between each of these men and Miller are traced through two generations of women. Despite such matricentered kinship memory, the wives of these men are unconnected to any other adults in Gillin's chart (1936: 113, Figure 13). In a similar manner, Miller's father-in-law's current wife is linked with her sister, but their kinship relations with other members of the settlement are not pursued.

In Gillin's chart and analysis women are wives, mothers, sisters and daughters. That is, someone's wife, someone's mother, someone's sister, someone's daughter. The kinship information to support a consideration of women who have mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters and husbands is absent. The image of women's inconsequence is enhanced by ignoring direct kinship relations among women in this highly interrelated population. Gillin's analysis expresses a young man's point of view (Tiffany and Adams 1985).

By exploring a common feminine genealogy, Miller could readily co-opt as

"young brother" the two men in a waiting stage in their own adult lives and so add to the population size of Sawari. Had Miller considered these two men "cross cousins," they would have called for more complex stratagems in the marriages between living individuals to incorporate them into the settlement. Either way, kinship choice is devised by simplifying and selecting kinship knowledge, particularly to the exclusion of information about women. Such kinship information as reported is a legend for the political relations between Miller and adult males at Sawari.

Eight men were more clearly Miller's age mates and these he addressed as "cross cousin," in this case wife's brother or sister's husband. Two men were the brothers of Miller's younger wives (who were sisters); their third brother was not yet an adult. Another man was the (tentative) husband of one of Miller's two sisters. This man and his two sisters were Miller's father's sister's children, first marriage choices for Miller's sibling set according to Carib organization. However, Miller had not married in such a manner. These two sisters were each married to one of two brothers (Cook and his half-brother) with no recorded relation to Miller. These two brothers' two sisters were also present and each married to one of two brothers whose third brother was married to Miller's other sister. Miller's influence in his settlement diminished beyond the husbands of his sisters and the brothers of his wives.

Essentially bankrupt in human resources due to the death of his first wife, John Cook had come to live near Miller (Gillin 1936: 127-129). Cook married Miller's father's sister's daughter. This woman was an appropriate marriage choice for Miller himself, and so by extension a sort of brother relationship was initiated between Miller and Cook. After rebuilding his "capital" by having some children, Cook now presented a challenge to his fragile relationship with Miller and to Miller's leadership in general. Based on a mature marriage and growing children, Cook claimed an independent estate in people. Cook's attempts to relocate himself threatened the ties among the sibling groups of his sisters and his wife and her sister, distributed between his and Miller's clearing. At the time of Gillin's field work, Cook was not able to separate these sibling groups.

Ten years or so into the process of establishing a large settlement, Miller had built a coalition, not, however, with brothers or sons-in-law. In an earlier episode in their lives, Miller's brother Alec and father were party to the homicide in which Miller incurred a deformed arm, and all three served jail terms in Georgetown (Gillin 1936: 120). But neither father nor brother is mentioned at Sawari in 1932-1933. Alec lived at Hairi, a settlement some ten miles away (Gillin 1936: 120).

Miller's daughters by his first deceased wife were very young at this time, and Miller had no children, as yet, by his younger wives, Elizabeth and Charlotte. Rather, Miller held together a kin group of men who were cross cousins to him, either actual cross cousins or those by marriage. All of these men were related through a female with a more immediate kin relationship to Miller. Retaining his deceased wife's sister as a wife, Miller had in his settlement two more groups of sisters —his own sisters and his younger wives, sisters to each other, and their younger sister. Miller's settlement grew with the arrival of three other sets of

sisters, including Miller's father's sister's two daughters and Miller's sister's two sisters-in-law. Also, Miller's father-in-law David had remarried a widow whose widowed sister, in the course of events, came to live near her at Sawari and subsequently took David's son as a husband there (Gillin 1936: 124).

Of the many deaths which occurred among the Barama River Caribs at this time, that of a spouse of adult age was the most disruptive to society. A woman, it seems, upon the death of her husband, returned to her sister's clearing. A man would go where he could obtain another wife. Miller took advantage of both of these tendencies in the management of his settlement's population size.

Miller's first wife's sister arrived at Sawari upon the death of her husband and Miller himself became her husband. Miller's current father-in-law's wife's sister similarly moved to Sawari when her husband died. Although much younger, Miller's wives' brother became her husband. Miller's sisters joined his clearing. The husband of one had died. The other's husband had left her. Miller helped to secure another husband for each of them at Sawari.

Miller's accomplishment is contrary to Gillin's analysis of the building blocks of Carib society: "brothers tend to group together to form a settlement and assist one another in social and economic affairs in the settlement" (Gillin 1936: 97). Groups of brothers were found in Miller's settlement, but Miller had no actual brothers there. By holding together sets of sisters, Miller was able to expand beyond that social group of brothers and their wives possible with the Carib principle of direct marriage exchange. Miller, without brothers, was able to attract men who added themselves as husbands to women in Miller's settlement. These men brought siblings and their spouses, establishing a complex society under Miller's purview.

Miller had a double wife taker relationship, at least a nominal one, with his father-in-law, but shared a wife keeper status with none of his contemporaries. Nor was Miller a wife giver. With the rest of the men, Miller had neither a common status with regard to the same woman nor a competing claim with regard to the status of the same woman. The premise for these men's cooperation with Miller's leadership was negative, if not null. Had he so wished, Miller could have initiated a "brother" relationship with his sister's husband's brother who desired the second of Miller's younger wives for his own wife. Her father said that he had "given her" to Miller (Gillin 1936: 119). Miller would not release her. Miller's sister's husband and his brother were Cook's brothers (half brothers), and such a marriage would have added momentum to Cook's assertations of independence as well as the separation of sister sets.

Of course, women may serve as passive links between men who are political actors. The relationship between son-in-law and father-in-law may be conceptualized in this manner, although the potential for the daughter's influence is great. Women's presence alone does not convey participation in political arenas. What is the manner of women's political participation in this Carib example? What did sisters have to gain by supporting Miller's leadership among men?

The Barama River Carib example suggests that women and their reproduction add a dimension to the Carib political charter. Existing marriages among living individuals and their children are more critical than references to lineages for

establishing kin groups. An adaptation to dispersion, small Carib societies tend to be based on no more than three generations, and adjacent generations tend to be in charge of their interrelations without reference to the interests of a third generation. Usually fathers-in-law and sons-in-law relate to each other in the absence of a political role for grandparents or even sons-in-law's parents. However, the daughter/wife does intervene between father-in-law and son-in-law. At stake is her ability biologically and socially to reproduce children, her interest in which is maximized in Carib society. Her courtships are overseen by her natal family who continue to protect her as a young mother. Only as an experienced mother with growing children does she leave her parents. Population producers and their surrogates, women and their sisters, gain a measure of social determination as their interests converge with those of men, whose political careers are based on the management of population size.

Thus, women and their children are a basic unit of Carib society, identified in the immediacy of dispersion and relocation. Collective leadership of extended fraternal groups is a feature of Carib society understood in theory, by anthropologists and by the Caribs themselves. With three generations or more of population stability, such groups of brothers, married to their cross cousins, can emerge. Among Carib populations, however, disruption and dispersion seem to have been more common than stability. Sisters and mothers and mother's sisters represent sources of assistance and refuge. Under these circumstances, women neither give nor take relatives. Sisters, as kin keepers, care for parents and husbands, and as mothers they produce relatives, i.e. children.

Carib society regenerates itself again and again. And in this process, women, especially sisters, and the sibling sets they reproduce are a basis on which political relations among men can be elaborated. A Carib population can theoretically grow from one woman. Equality between women, like that between men, is based on an equivalent relationship to the same woman —the same mother. The inequality between men does not seem to occur in women's relations. The principle of regeneration is chartered in the myth, a Carib version of the Noah story, presented here. Among the Barama River Caribs, Noah is a woman.

A dog would come to people's houses. He was very mangy and skinny. Every time the people would scorn the dog. They would yell at him to go away.

The dog would return to the forest and appear at another house. At some houses he would appear as an old man who had many sores and could hardly walk. It was all the same. From house to house, the people would chase him away.

One day, he came to a place where there was a lady alone. There were no children, nobody else. He appeared like a man, an old man with many sores. He said, "Hello, my daughter."

The lady gave him a seat and he sat down. The lady studied him and thought, "My father could look like this."

With water, she washed his sores and wiped his skin. He sat down. In good time, he parted his hair with his hand. He had no comb, but his hair shone like glass.

The lady said, "Daddy, please take food."

She gave him food and sweet *cassiri* (a fermented beverage) to drink. (This lady's husband had gone hunting. He did not know anything).

When the man was finished eating, he said, "Alright, daughter, I am going away."

She said, "Alright, walk good."

The man went a good way. The lady went to where he had sat and found a piece of arrow. She said, "Eh, my father left this thing."

She ran behind him hollering all the time.

The old man said, "Alright, girl, bring it."

He told her what was going to happen with the little piece of arrow. He said, "This is a great, great thing I left for you. I did not forget it. Because you followed me, I am going to tell you everything that is going to happen. My daughter, this piece of stick is going to be a big boat for you. This boat will get large by degrees. After so many years, it should be big. Put all kinds of plants in the boat. Do not mind that there is no water, put everything in. Take every animal by pairs. Pack everything in the boat. My daughter, later on rain is going to fall night and day without stop. The rain will not stop until all the trees are gone and the world has been killed with water. That is all I will tell you."

And the old man was gone on his way.

The husband came back from hunting, and the lady told him what happened and showed him the stick that would be a big boat. She explained that her father told her how it would get large and she was to put all the plants inside. She was to rip out all of the cassava and put it inside. Then it was going to rain night and day and never stop. Water was going to pour out on the yard, and not one tree would be left to climb.

Years went by and more and more the boat grew. The lady planted all the plants inside. She put in all the types of animals. The rain fell night and day as the old man had said it would.

Plenty of people were sporting, drinking *cassiri*. The message was sent all about, but nothing happened. There was more and more water, and more and more people were sporting. The family, the sister, all were told good-bye. The wife and husband went inside the boat, and the door locked. All the people said, "Let us come in."

The husband said, "No, I do not know how to open the door."

There was more and more water. The people climbed up on the house roofs. More and more of the people drowned. Then all of them drowned. This big ocean covered the whole bush. There were no trees, just a boat and one vine rope from the boat to the sky. All the time the ocean was lifting up the boat, and afterwards the boat was left hanging up in the sky.

God sent down a crow to see if the water had dried. The crow saw a lot of human beings who had drowned. The crow started to eat them and did not bother to go back. God forgot him.

God sent a waracabra to see if the water had dried. Fine red ants ate both of the waracabra's feet down to the bones. The waracabra wanted to come back, but he could not. God forgot him.

God sent a pigeon to see if the water had dried. The pigeon flew over everything and did not light on the ground. Nothing troubled him and he went back to tell God that the water had dried.

The boat was sent back to the land. God opened the door, and every type of animal came out and fended for themselves. God made a building for the two people and told them to plant. All the plants came back quickly. What was planted today could be used tomorrow.

In this narrative, many themes are expressed: ethnic distinctions, a woman's relation to her father and her husband. Among them, a metaphorical reference to the cassava plant is unmistakable. The asexual or vegetative reproduction of the cassava plant, as cultivated, represents human reproduction as well. Beginning with one woman, children bud off, and from the daughters among them grandchildren bud off and so on.

A benefactor appears as a mangy dog or sick old man, a powerless Carib status. The old man exchanges a seed for the care given him by one woman, the exception among many. The benefactor is supernatural, "his hair shone like glass." In other versions he has "boots and a hat," suggesting a Western identity and the old man's source of power as well. The seed is a "little piece of arrow" in this case, a Western coin in other versions. The seed grows into a boat into which the woman is to "put

all kinds of plants," especially cassava. The earth and the people are drowned by water, just as the cassava plant can be. When the water subsides, only the woman and her husband remain. While the animals fend for themselves, the gardeners' endeavors are rewarded by rapid growth; the vegetative reproductive process of the Caribs embarking on society once again.

The woman specifically says good-bye to her sister, and while her husband accompanies her, he "did not know anything." It is she who treats a stranger as her father, obtains from him the gift of future life, and secures plants in the growing boat. When called upon to save kin, the husband confesses, "I do not know how to open the door." Neither does the woman. Rather through naïve acts of nurturing, she is able to reproduce kin.

Closer to the mouth of the Barama River, the people of Sawari in the 1930s were first exposed to introduced diseases and Western economic influences which changed the settlement patterns and demography of the entire Barama River Carib population by the 1960s. It is suggested that John Miller was the headman of segments of Carib society, sisters and their husbands and children, exposed to this cycle of historical disruptions. These sisters returned to each other when left widowed, took care of deceased sibling's children, increased the number of daughters among their offspring (Adams 1981), and in general, emphasized kin keeping. In a time of greater stability, these sisters may have been more willing to leave each other and devote themselves to their own husbands and children.

Miller rose to leadership through the manipulation of marriage relations which permitted sister sets to stay together. Quite a different image, including allusions to violence, was attached to Miller. He was thought to be the best hunter. Despite his deformed arm, Miller was "respected by all for his cunning, courage, and strength" (Gillin 1936: 121).

Miller, apparently, was able to hold his settlement together, at least most of its population, until his daughters by his first wife found husbands and became mothers.

Eventually, Miller, as a wife giver, confronted younger men as wife takers. Charlotte's group reported that in the 1950s John Miller had fallen victim to a *kanaima*, the mythical avenger of the Caribs. After cutting a field that day, Miller had gone at dusk to bathe in the creek. Later he was found badly beaten and unable to speak. Two days later he died. The population at Sawari dispersed, and then some of them, including Charlotte and Elizabeth and their children, moved back.

Miller, whose atypical leadership was made possible by the women's part in the Carib political charter, was eventually defeated by women's roles. While Miller was able to manipulate networks of adults, he could not forestall the re-emergence of Carib society among his daughters and their children. Eventually, the generational sequencing of Carib society terminated Miller's leadership. While the accumulation of actual people in one location is a basis for male leadership, opposing population principles also operate in Carib society. These principles are introduced with women's roles in reproduction and distribution of individuals. These principles operate in generational time and tend to undermine the political career of a leader such as Miller. Without an economic component in his political

control, the end of Miller's leadership was timed by the reproductive maturity of a new generation of Carib women.

In 1970-1971, Sawari was abandoned. The Carib population, while increasing rapidly in size, had collected around Baramita Air Strip near the headwaters of the Barama River, in response to economic opportunities there. Others had left the river system for Matthew's Ridge some fifty miles to the North.

The Sawari population which had moved to the air strip included Charlotte, Miller's youngest wife in 1932-1933, Charlotte's two daughters (and the husband they shared), Charlotte's deceased sister Elizabeth's (also Miller's wife in 1932-1933) son and daughter and their spouses and Charlotte's young son by Miller's older son whom she took for a husband when Miller died. Others from Sawari, including Charlotte's eldest daughter married to Charlotte's brother, had gone to Matthew's Ridge.

At the air strip, Charlotte's groups lived in close proximity to each other and helped each other. Charlotte's married son began to pay more attention to his wife's family. Charlotte's daughters' husband and Charlotte's sister's daughter's husband (also married to two other women who were sisters) were distant relatives to each other, but they began to act like brothers. New marriages and new children recreated a Carib society.

Abstract

Carib social organization is explored using an example of leadership among the Barama River Caribs of Guyana. In this case, women's contributions to social organization are examined in generational time as Carib strategies for survival. Principles of equality among men and among women are reviewed as mechanisms for population and generational continuity.

Resumen

El presente artículo ofrece una investigación sistemática sobre la organización Caribe en la que se muestra, además, un ejemplo de liderazgo entre los indígenas guyaneses del río Barama. El trabajo presenta un estudio de caso (a través de varias generaciones) de la contribución femenina a la organización social Caribe como estrategia de supervivencia. También se examinan los principios de igualdad entre hombres y mujeres como mecanismos de adaptación poblacional y de continuidad generacional.