



Elementary structures of reciprocity: a comparative note on Guianese, Central Brazilian, and North-West Amazon socio-political thought

Joanna Overing

In his work, *Society against the state* (1977), Pierre Clastres argued for the subtlety and the depth of Amerindian political philosophy, as one that in refusing the development of coercive power neutralizes "the virulence" of political authority (1977: 35) and allows for the egalitarian institutions that so distinguish these societies as we now know them. Clastres suggested that it is the philosophical sophistication (albeit an unconscious one) of the Amerindian that leads him to identify power with nature, and thus a force that must remain external to society. Very briefly Clastres' argument was that culture, in apprehending power as the resurgence of nature itself, negates both by asserting the predominance of the principle of reciprocity, the primary ontological dimension of Amerindian society against which both power and nature are opposed. While I agree with Clastres that the acceptance of power coercive in substance might well entail a rejection of reciprocity, the principle most basic to an egalitarian polity, I wish to argue that Amerindians identify coercive power, not with the forces of nature, but with the forces of culture, its products, and their control. It is not nature that Amerindian society is rejecting, but an ownership of culture's forces that would allow for the coercive or violent use of them and which would entail, among other controls, the control over economic activity and its products. Insofar as an Amerindian society achieves the goal of such a rejection it is a society without a political economy,¹ where no-one in a political role can order another's labour or the fruits of it.

¹ I mean by "political economy" that system within which one social group or category has *coercive* control over the labour (and its products) of another. My discussion is not necessarily in contradiction to that of Rivière's in this symposium who is postulating for the Guianas a "political economy of people" as opposed to a "political economy of goods."

In recent literature, we see that there exists considerable variation in the social organization of Lowland Amerindian societies of South America, between those of the Gê of Brazil, those of the North-West Amazon, and those of the Guianas. Thus, on the face of it my interpretation may appear to be too general a one, as well it in the end might be. In Gê and Bororo societies of Central Brazil, the Amerindian understanding of society as a process within a specific cosmological scheme of things is displayed spatially before our eyes both in their circular or semi-circular village lay-out and in their ritual life: dichotomous classifications of reality are exhibited in their ceremonial life, and each village itself is bisected by a moiety system, or series of moiety systems, opposed by dyadic classification and between which elaborate relations of logical complementarity are ritually played out, made formal through ceremony in complicated ways (see Lave 1979; da Matta 1979; Melatti 1979; Crocker 1979; Maybury-Lewis 1979). In the North-West Amazon principles of social structure are likewise visual to the eye, but of a different order: there is the head to tail segmentation of the anaconda ancestor which sets the conceptual pattern for the territorial segmentation of the river by the ranked patri-sibs of an Exogamous Group, who form exchange units with patri-sibs of Exogamous Groups of different anaconda origin. When compared with the highly ritualized social organization of the Central Brazilian societies and with the well-conceptualized lay-out of the North-West Amazon villages, the endogamous kinship groups of Guianese Amerindians appear fluid and amorphous in shape. In the Guianas there exists no complex spatial figuration reflecting the order of social life; there are no naming groups, no moieties in ritual exchange with one another acting out ceremonially a particular vision of cosmological ordering or expressing an eternal ordering of "another world" from the mythic past. There exists no ritual to declare the elaborate interlocking of the units of which society is comprised. To sight, Guianese social groups are atomistic, dispersed and highly fluid in form.

A prescriptive marriage rule associated with variations on a Dravidian type of relationship terminology is, to the best of our knowledge, universal to Guianese Amerindian groups (see, for example, Rivière on Carib organization 1974a; Overing Kaplan on the Piaroa 1972, 1975; Lizot on the Yanomami 1971). Throughout the Guianas the privileged union, in Lévi-Strauss' sense of the term (1969: 120), is within one's own local group, itself identified as a unit of close kinsmen (see Rivière 1969a; Henley 1979; Albert on the Yanomam in Ramos and Albert 1977; Overing Kaplan 1981). The traditional local group usually dwells together within a large communal house as an endogamous cognatic kinship group. Membership in the house is normally based upon a principle of affinity, and an adult should be married into the house, have affines within it, to join it. Its structure is one that I have previously classified as an "alliance-based kinship group" (1973, 1975), one which maintains itself as a unit of cognates by ideally restricting exchange to within itself, its unity as such a group being associated with the number of marital exchanges among men within the local group itself (Overing Kaplan 1984).

As I have elsewhere said (1984), it is ironic that in the very societies where the prescriptive marriage rule is of such overwhelming importance to the organization

of local groups within them, there is no evidence of a dual organization through which ritual or, indeed, social life could be played out; while in the organization of moiety relations within Gê and Bororo societies, the exchange of women between moieties plays a relatively minor part in the Amerindian understanding of moiety interaction (Lave 1979; da Matta 1979; Melatti 1979; Crocker 1979; Maybury-Lewis 1979). In Lowland South America, dual organization is often not associated with a prescriptive marriage rule, and conversely the presence of such a rule by no means implies the presence of dual organization. This contrast —that on the one hand there are societies with elaborate dual organizations but no associated prescriptive marriage rule and on the other there are those that have a prescriptive marriage rule but no evidence of a dual organization— will be pertinent to the discussion below of the variation we find between societies in the elaboration of principles of exchange within them. My argument is that underlying such contrast there is a unitary principle of society; the contrast in organization merely reflects the various ways in which a similar philosophy of social life can be acted out through “elementary structures of reciprocity.”

Thus, I shall argue that despite the great contrast in the organization of the Central Brazilian and the North-West Amazon societies with those of the Guianas, underlying their very dissimilar social structures is a similar philosophy of social existence that implies as well a particular understanding of political power and the control over the forces of culture, or the scarce resources in the world, that such power *might* entail. The principle of social life to which I am referring is the idea that society can exist only insofar as there is contact and proper mixing among entities and forces that are different from one another (see Overing Kaplan 1977, 1981). I hesitate here to speak of “underlying dualisms,” preferring “difference” as the term to describe the metaphysical principle which I am claiming to be a basic ordering principle common to all of these societies. I am further arguing that in indigenous theory “difference” is associated with danger, with difference being ultimately understood as variation in the set of the forces of culture, and of power in general, controlled. In brief, *social* existence is identified with both difference and danger, and inversely *asocial* existence (e.g., the afterworld) with identity and safety. It is for this reason that Amerindians place such considerable emphasis in social life upon the *proper* mixing of elements and forces, which must of necessity be different each from the next for society to exist: it is only through such “proper” mixing that safety can be achieved in society and danger averted. Finally, safety in society becomes no other than “fulfilled reciprocity,” in contrast to reciprocity unfulfilled where forces dangerous to one another meet dangerously (see Overing Kaplan 1984).

Such principles are expressed overtly in Piaroa² and North-West Amazon

² The fieldwork among the Piaroa, upon which this paper is based, was carried out in 1968 and 1977 with M. R. Kaplan to whom I am deeply indebted for data collected jointly. The research in 1977, upon which much of the presentation is based, was financed by the SSRC Grant HR 5028; Central Research Funds of the University of London; School of Economics Research Funds; and the Institute of Latin American Travel Funds. The SSRC also later gave me a Research Grant (HRP 6753) which allowed me the time to analyse data acquired in 1977.

cosmogony and in Central Brazilian ceremonial life: it is not by structural analysis that I have arrived at my conclusions. The extent to which Carib groups give overt expression in ritual or cosmology to a theory that equates society with both difference and danger, with the coming together of cultural forces different in source, is a topic still to be explored. If such discourse is not immediately evident, I shall nevertheless argue that Carib social structure in its ideal of the endogamous union makes a covert statement of these principles that might well be stated in more obvious fashion in other Tropical Forest societies.

The Piaroa and the Guianese Amerindians in general do their best in local group organization to suppress the differences of which society must be comprised, while the Gê, the Bororo and the North-West Amazon cultures stress them. A recognition of such variation among Amerindians in their social display of cultural differentiation, or on the contrary their suppression of it, takes one a long way in understanding variation in the social structures of the Amerindian groups of Lowland South America. Among the Gê, the Bororo and the Amerindians of the North-West Amazon the forces of culture are *socially* controlled, as evidenced by the relatively formal principles of social organization typical of these societies and mentioned above. The atomistic social structures usual to the Guianas and the unformalized nature of Guianese social groupings is, I would suggest, forthcoming from a philosophy of individualism³ that is strongly expressed by these Amerindians, a philosophy which contrasts the Amerindians of the Guianas in general with their more "socially-minded" neighbours to the South who place certain types of control in the hands of society. In the Guianas such controls are the responsibility of the individual.

For the Piaroa, and probably for other Guianese Amerindians as well, the forces of culture, asocial in origin, are domesticated within the individual who has the responsibility for controlling privately inside himself all cultural forces he takes within him. The Piaroa emphasis upon the individual's responsibility for such forces is but one aspect of a subtle philosophy of individualism that is extreme on any scale by which it can be measured (see Lukes 1973): it is one that plays an exceedingly important part in Piaroa social thought, as I suspect likewise to be the case for the Carib speakers of the Guianas who also place an emphasis upon self-control and individual responsibility. Melatti says of the Kraho (1979: 67), Gê speakers of Central Brazil, that the physical self through elaborate ritual is given an *outer* clothing of cultural identity which in turn provides the individual with social identity; while for the social Piaroa, culture and its forces—including one's own name—is one's *inner* clothing, the nature of which is private, shameful to reveal, and tamed by one's self alone. As I shall illustrate below, the social control of self is

The Piaroa dwell in the Guianas along tributaries of the Middle Orinoco. The Piaroa belong to an independent language group, the Sáliva, and have a significant number of Carib "intrusions" in their vocabulary. In both social and political structure, the Piaroa belong ethnographically to the Guianas. See Dreyfus, this symposium, who stresses the importance of treating the Guianas, along with the islands off its coast, as a single (albeit complicated) unitary whole in political organization.

³ See Rivière in this symposium who also places stress upon the importance of individualism to Guianese socio-political thought.

but a part of a wider set of ideas that the Piaroa hold about self-identity, the composition of self and the domestication of the elements (forces) of which it is comprised.

The social control of the forces of culture: Central Brazil and the North-West Amazonas examples

Ethnographers of Northern Gê societies (Melatti 1979; Lave 1979; da Matta 1979) make the observation that these Amerindians relate their complex social institutions to a complicated set of beliefs concerning the name-based transmission of social identities from name givers to name receivers. It is through such transmission of names, each name-set believed to be an immutable whole, that the continuity of society is thought to be based. Name-holding groups are described by these authors as corporate units owning in perpetuity not only sets of names, but also rites, ritual paraphernalia, and named ritual group locations (see Overing Kaplan 1981). In other words, the name-sets divide among themselves the scarce resources of society which are, I would say, on further evidence from the Bororo, the forces of culture: forces which allow for the health, wealth, and fertility of the land and the community, and thereby the life-giving (and life-destructive) forces of the world. For the Northern Gê the transmission of a name carries with it the transmission of ceremonial affiliation, esoteric knowledge, and ritual rights and obligations: the name in its acquisition provides the individual with a social identity and in so doing gives one membership into a social group that owns a portion of the forces of culture available in the world.

By far the clearest statement on Central Brazilian societies of the social control of cultural forces is given by Crocker (1979) on the Bororo. Bororo society, as represented by the village, is comprised of exogamous moieties, each with four "matri-clans" standing in fixed spatial order to one another around the village circle. The resulting eight-part division of the village corresponds to the eight-fold division of the forces of the cosmos. All the names of things in the universe are divided among the eight matri-clans who own as clan property one-eighth of the names of things in the world and their force, the corporate *aroe*, or "categorical essence" of each element owned. In the topography of the underworld, the world of *aroe*, all the "totemic entities" (their force?) and the dead members of a single clan live together in the geographical wedge allocated to that clan, a spatial arrangement that is replicated in the village. Thus, the forces of culture, the scarce resources owned by each clan, have their source beneath the earth. The most valued wealth of the clan, its own "spirit representations," are given as gifts to clans of the opposite moiety to be performed by their members, and each clan must fulfil its categorical and ritual responsibility to other clans, as representative of one of the eight categories into which the universe is classified.

As is true for the name-holding groups of the Gê and for the Bororo clans, the Pirá-Piraná sib of the North-West Amazon also controls ritual resources and its own set of personal names (Hugh-Jones C. 1979; Hugh-Jones S. 1979). As with the Bororo, the forces of culture owned socially —by each sib— have their source from

beneath the earth where they are housed in "Waking-up Houses," the stone houses of the sibs located in the underworld from whence the souls of the newborn come and to which go the souls of the dead. It is in the context of the ownership by each clan of its own store of personal names, recycled each alternate generation along with souls who live in the clan's "Waking-up House," that we can partially understand the puzzling hallmark of the North-West Amazon societies: excepting the Cubeo, North-West Amazon Amerindians ideally marry exogamously to their own language group, one's language being inherited from one's father. Christine Hugh-Jones remarks (1979) that language should be considered as a part of descent group property, along with ritual paraphernalia. If this is so, then each Exogamous Group—a set of sibs which is descended from one anaconda ancestor and which has the same language affiliation—has its own "store" of the names of things in the world. The corporate *aroe*, named totems, of a Bororo clan takes in one-eighth of the universe, while among North-West Amazon Indians each Exogamous Group "owns" a special vocabulary idiosyncratic to itself that covers *all* items in the world. It may well be that control over a specific set of names for things entails for these Amerindians a particular power over these things or access to its force (see Overing Kaplan 1981).

Christine Hugh-Jones also tells us (1979) that it is generally so among Amerindians of the North-West Amazon for marriage to be explicitly exogamous not only to language group and lineage, but also to habitat association, an identification conferred by sib membership and explained by origin myths. In mythic time the Primal Sun gave birth to three anacondas who are associated respectively with the domains of sky, earth and water, and who are the ancestors of the three intermarrying Exogamous Groups. Through the intermarriage of the members of these groups society came into existence, each group having its origin from sources of power forthcoming from different cosmic domains. The distinction between major cosmic habitats, and the forces associated with each, becomes at least for some Indians of the North-West Amazon a root distinction of sameness and difference and provides the language for the discussion of identity and difference in social relationships, and as such has a startling degree of classificatory strength in the ordering of Vaupés marriage exchange and ritual life.

In North-West Amazon societies those of the same Exogamous Group are identified with a particular habitat domain, while affines are associated with another. That similarity and difference are expressed in the language of habitat domain suggests a clear recognition of a control over forces that is economic in basis. Piaroa cosmogony, in telling about the creation of the world, the origin of culture and the natural elements of the earth, tells also of the battles that occurred in the wake of such creations between the two great demiurges of mythic time, affines to one another, over the elements and forces of the habitat domains each respectively was responsible for creating and thereby owned. Each wanted control over the forces of the other, as well as the ownership of the other's domain. In Piaroa cosmogony and theogony there is an explicit recognition of the perils to social man of power that attempts to gain ownership of the products of the universe, for it is a power that quickly becomes coercive, violent, and uncontrolled

in its expression. At the same time, as in the North-West Amazon, cosmogony associates affinity with difference, difference in source of origin and in type of powers owned. The mythic message is that the interaction of such differences, while a prerequisite to social life, is potentially highly dangerous to it: it is a danger that erupts when reciprocity between affines remains unfulfilled (e.g. through stealing from one another, through incest) and can only be averted through the careful playing out of reciprocity between them. The dangers of affinity are so great that the Piaroa *suppress* both linguistically and socially a classification that would place emphasis upon the differences underlying and necessary to the affine relationship, and thereby social order as well. Thus, among the Piaroa there is no simple association of a classification of significant habitats with marriage rules and group identification: the classification of the domains and their forces so important to cosmogony is not projected back onto the marriage system, nor does it provide a means of identifying social groups.

The Piaroa, as do those of the cultures of the North-West Amazon, place great emphasis upon the marriages of the first sets of people; for it is through these intermarriages of the first Piaroa men and women whose origins were within their separate places of creation "above" or "below" the earth, that society came to be and through which all Piaroa are cognates today. However, the individual's clan membership in no way obligates him in this-life. His clan is his origin and the home to which he returns after death. The Piaroa believe that in after-life the members of each clan live together in a settlement spatially separate from all other clans—separate from affines, from animals, from all beings different from self. It is in concept somewhat similar to the Bororo land of *aroe* and the Pirá-Piraná Waking-Up Houses, but unlike the Bororo and the North-West Amazon clan homes beneath the earth the Piaroa after-life clans are homes with no culture (*ta'kwarü*). Therefore, no forces of life nor forces of culture can be tapped by the living Piaroa from his source of origin; none can come naturally to him, for it is a powerless place. Also, for the Piaroa the spatial distinctions of after-life and of creation are pointedly *not* replicated in social life where, through intermingling, clans completely lose their spatial and social distinctiveness.

The classification of significant habitats *is* used politically, where distinctions of essential difference are actively expressed by political competitors to structure their individual battles. Before discussing both the suppression in Piaroa social life of differences, which despite such suppression are necessary to social order, and their expression in the realm of the political, I shall briefly describe aspects of Piaroa cosmogony for the purpose of clarifying the later discussion (see Overing, "The paths of sacred words," presented in the Seminar "Shamanism in Lowland South America" at the 44th International Congress of Americanists 1982, in Manchester for a detailed account of both Piaroa cosmogony and the Piaroa clan system).

Piaroa cosmogony: primeval violence and chaos

Ricoeur notes in his work, *The symbolism of evil* (1969: 178), that "evil is as

old as the oldest of beings; evil is the past of being." As in the myths of the ancient civilizations of the Middle East about which Ricoeur is speaking, Piaroa mythology tells also of a violence of power that is inscribed in the origin of things; it is a principle of violence that establishes while it destroys (see Ricoeur 1969: 182-183). The powerful and untamed powers let loose on earth to do the job of creation proved too destructive, wild, and poisonous to remain free as unbounded forces within a social world. For the order they created to remain intact, these mighty powers at the end of mythic time were tossed out of the world of the social to other worlds where they are now housed in relative safety in bounded form out of society where their evilness, or their potentiality for evil, can more easily be controlled.

Before the terrestrial and celestial worlds were created, all of the power sources of the universe were housed beneath the earth's surface, its face yet unconstructed. In mythic time as these subterranean powers became slowly unleashed on earth, it was their force that was responsible for the creation of all elements and beings of the surface universe and for the knowledge that allowed for existence there. Most of the powers responsible for the form and life of the earth's surface came from the subterranean land of *Ofo/Da'a*, a chimerical Tapir/Anaconda. It was through the means of two great mythic affines, Kuemoui and Wahari, whose births were the deed of *Ofo/Da'a* and whose powers he gave them, that most of the elements of the world of the Piaroa were created. The powers the Tapir/Anaconda transmitted to these two demiurges were distinct in origin and opposed in result. They were the forces that Kuemoui, the Master of the aquatic domain, brought to the earth's surface from his birthplace in water-formed culture, e.g., the cultivation of plants, cooking fire, ornaments, the powers of the hunt—curare, the hunting powders of sorcery, fish poisons, the hunting dog, while Wahari, the Master of the jungle, created the topography of the earth, its natural elements: its mountains, its rocks, its river systems, its rapids. The forces of the Tapir/Anaconda associated with these two sets of creation, that of culture as opposed to that of the natural elements of the earth and its sky, were different in quality, if not in strength. The powers of Kuemoui were venomous and evil in their wildness, while the powers of Wahari were relatively controlled and benevolent in their force. The opposition of wildness and control is reflected in the type of beings each was further responsible for creating as mythic time moved on—beings who were but aspects of their respective powers and, as such, helpers in the continual power battles played out between these two most powerful sorcerers of mythic time.

The source of culture on earth, culture in its origins, was then, of the poisonous and wild forces of Kuemoui given to him in the form of poisonous hallucinogens by his father, *Ofo/Da'a*. Although Master of culture and cultivation, Kuemoui created all the poisonous snakes and insects of the world. He poisoned all large rock formations and the streams. He is Grandfather of boils, the Father of biting and poisonous fish, and the Creator of poisonous toads. He is also the Grandfather of sleep and the Master of darkness. The crocodile, the cayman, and dangerous fish are Kuemoui's family, as too are the opossum and the vulture, the former an omen for, and the latter an eater of, jungle animals. In short, all dangerous and biting animals

and all things poisonous in this world for beings classified as "jungle animals" (*dearuuwa*), a category that includes the Piaroa themselves, are Kuemoui's family or creations and classed together as "Kuemoui's thoughts." Thus, in Piaroa cosmogony, culture is of the untamed, poisonous power of Kuemoui and it has its source in Kuemoui's madness. As the provider of culture to those of the jungle (i.e., the Piaroa and Wahari before them), his "gift" is a poisonous one, as wild as are his own mad powers of sorcery. Even his children, the garden plants, are poisonous.

Culture, made of the poisonous and mad powers of darkness is partially tamed by the forces of light that created the natural (inanimate) elements of the universe. Wahari, Kuemoui's son-in-law and Master of the jungle, spends much of mythic time attempting not only to steal culture from Kuemoui but also to transform his spoils into tamer, more efficacious forces for their safe use by jungle beings. As Kuemoui is power out of control, Wahari represents power in control. The force of his spectacular acts of creation was derived from non-poisonous hallucinogens given to him by the Tapir/Anaconda while dwelling in the subterranean home of his birth. As creator of most of the earth's features, Wahari was called "Master of the world." As Kuemoui was the Master of darkness and night, Wahari was Master of light—his power placed the sun in the sky. He was also the Master of jungle animals, then human in form, and Master of their house. He created through his thoughts all branch animals and birds of the jungle; he also created the Piaroa from fish he caught in their lakes of origin. He was a flier: he often transformed himself into hummingbird and eagle hawk, products of his own thoughts, to do the fantastic, to fly great distances over the earth and into it, thus, in contrast to Kuemoui who also transformed himself into aspects of his own thoughts, e.g., the predators jaguar and vulture.

As great sorcerers, Kuemoui and Wahari represent the fractionizing on earth of the powers of *Ofo/Da'a*, the supreme Tapir/Anaconda god whose home was beneath the earth. Wahari married Kuemoui's daughter. Through the intermarriage of these two great powers, opposed through their association with distinct domains of the cosmos—their origin within water and within earth—social relations came into existence, and the fertility of the Tapir/Anaconda god became expressed on earth as society, or more precisely it led to the emergence of the social state in mythic times. However, the affinal relationship so established remained a treacherous one, acted out in blatant non-reciprocity. As mentioned above most Piaroa myths tell of the duels fought out by these two demiurges over the elements, the forces and the domains which the other was responsible for creating and controlling. Kuemoui, the Master of water, wanted jungle animals as food, while Wahari was usually adroit in escaping the poisonous traps that Kuemoui set for Wahari and his family. In his turn, Wahari wanted culture. It was only with his marriage to Maize, Kuemoui's daughter, that he received the gift of cultivated plants and their processing. After marrying her, Wahari spent much of the remainder of mythic time stealing cultural artifacts from Kuemoui and trying to tame them for his own use. In the end he stole as well ritual and cultural artifacts owned by the "fathers" of the jungle animals.

All culture that Wahari received or stole is now given to the Piaroa, one of his

own creations; but they do not today receive the forces of culture from Wahari. At the end of mythic time Wahari killed Kuemoi in retaliation for his cannibalistic invasions upon his jungle domain; Wahari then was killed by members of his own family in revenge for his asocial sins, especially for his incest with his sister, Cheheru. (Kuemoi became reincarnated on earth as anaconda, and Wahari as tapir.) Both Kuemoi and Wahari, then, were killed for their social irresponsibility. Both lost the gifts given them by their Tapir/Anaconda creator—the wild forces of culture and the forces to tame it—to other beings, gods who now live an ethereal existence beneath the waterfalls of their celestial homes. It is from these gods that the Piaroa today receive the knowledge and powers of culture. These strong forces are today housed outside the terrestrial world where social life is played out, forces too destructive, wild and poisonous to remain free as unbounded forces within a social world. The powers of Wahari and Kuemoi live within the crystal boxes of the gods, who now own these forces.

The lessons from the mythic past illustrate that no orderly social life would be possible if such forces roamed free for the taking. Their continued unleashed existence would encourage, as it did in mythic time, acts of cannibalism, incest, madness and stealing—all asocial compulsions mocking the very rules of reciprocity (and resulting tranquillity) upon which, in the Piaroa view, society for its continuity is dependent. As will be discussed below, the proper, or better said, the safe exchange relationship is the reciprocated one, and it is only through repeated reciprocity that the peril intrinsic to the in-law relationship can be averted, that the danger of essential difference can be negated. On the other hand, for society to continue, the forces of culture must still be part of it, both to give it life and also to protect it.

The individual and the domestication of culture

We saw earlier that in Bororo and North-West Amazon societies cultural forces are owned by clans, and their source remains clan property where it is housed beneath the earth within the primordial homes of each clan. In contrast, among the Piaroa, the forces of culture belong to no social group, but to the gods, and they are brought back into society through individual initiative and upon the individual's responsibility. It is from the gods that the forces are tapped to give life (*ta'kwarü*), the "life of thoughts and culture," both to the individual living in society and to society itself. Such forces are brought into society through the skill of the shaman who domesticates their wildness by housing them within his beads of knowledge or helps others to do likewise. Culture must be domesticated within the individual.

The Piaroa in general place great value upon one's ability to lead a tranquil (*adupáwi*) life. The first formal learning that a child undergoes consists of lessons given to it by the shaman on how to live tranquilly with others: they are lessons on control. The Piaroa consider such training as part of a "domestication" process: the child must take more and more personal responsibility (*ta'kwakwoméná*) for his own actions; he must control the forces of culture as they come within him. As one grows older one must decide for oneself how many and which powers—those of

hunting, fishing, chanting, or sorcery— from undomesticated sources one can handle within oneself. These powers are acquired through the guidance of the knowledgeable shaman who cautiously taps them on his flights to the homes of the gods. As the individual grows he receives an increasing quantity of beads from the gods, and it is within these beads worn internally that the powers of culture taken by one are housed and thereby domesticated. One's inner state, with the least of powers embodied in it, is made more complicated as foreign elements enter it both at one's will and without it (disease). The inner clothing of the shaman is of course especially elaborate, and thus it is he who must show the most control: proper control of emotions implies the taming of cultural forces within one. Vicious feelings, evil intent, and jealousy are annoying but not considered harmful in the man who has taken within himself few powers from the gods; while such characteristics in a shaman, thought to be caused by his lack of proper domestication of powers potentially both wild and evil, are understandably thought to be highly dangerous to society's welfare as an indication of uncontrolled cultural power within him that can kill at whim, cause natural disasters, prevent the increase of animals, and cause the infertility of the land.

The forces of culture taken into oneself do not entail an ownership of their product, but rather entails the *ability* or the capacity to use it. The shaman as a political leader, and as one who has domesticated within him larger quantities of culture's force than have ordinary men, still has no such claim of ownership. Today the Masters of land and water own the domains of water and jungle. They are not Wahari and Kuemoi, but the jungle spirit, *Re'yo*, and the water spirit, *Ahe Itamu*, both of whom acquired their control over these habitats at the end of mythic time. These two spirits guard their respective domains, protect them, make fertile their inhabitants, and punish those who endanger their life forms. They also cooperate as guardians of garden food. The relevant point is obviously that the habitats of land and water, and their products, are not owned by man. Such control is not a part of the scope of political power in Piaroa society, a control which would be viewed by the Piaroa as very dangerous power indeed. The shaman leader has no power to order the labour of others. During the great ceremonies that he presents he *invites* others to labour for him and the community; he never orders such labour. It is his duty to control and fight against the wild forces of culture that wander into society from outside it, and not to control (overtly, at least) the social behaviour of individuals within his community, each of whom must manage his own control of self, a private matter where one must keep domesticated the forces of and the capacities for culture within oneself.

Politics, affinity and mythic classification

The mythic message, and the Piaroa understand it this way, equates society and its possibility with affinity, with the coming together of unlike items. Society exists only through the interaction of unlike entities and forces that are potentially highly dangerous to one another: the relationship between wife giver and wife receiver is an inherently perilous one, since in-laws are strangers who may eat you or steal

from you. The danger intrinsic to the in-law relationship can only be averted through proper reciprocity. In recognizing that society can only exist through the interaction of differences, of beings unlike one another, and in understanding that such mingling is very hazardous, the Piaroa expend a good deal of social structural energy in masking the principles of difference toward the end of achieving safety. But here caution is in order, for this is an observation that by no means holds for all Piaroa behaviour: it is within the communal house (*itso'de*) that affinal relationships are veiled, while in relationships between houses within a political territory they are stressed (Overing Kaplan 1984).

In keeping with the view that society can come into being only through the coming together of dissimilar forces, the jural relationship in Piaroa society is with in-laws, and political relationships are acted out in the idiom of affinity (Overing Kaplan 1975). One competes politically with one in an affine category, but never with one classed as a "father," "brother," or "son." As I have written elsewhere (1975), a Piaroa man establishes himself as affine—in the category of "father-in-law," "brother-in-law," or "son-in-law"—to most men within his territory. In so classifying them, he can compete with them as shamans, as well as negotiate with them for the marriage of their children or siblings. In political battles within the territory, cosmological symbols of power provide the semantic conditions through which competitors structure their competition. As shamans, they can through the power of hallucinogens transform themselves, just as the demiurges did in mythic time: they too can transform into eagle hawk, anaconda, rattlesnake, jaguar, thunder, crocodile and vulture. Each type of transformation distinguishes a specific type and order of power. Some transformations are of Kuemoui, and as such are manifestations of power that are both evil and uncontrolled. Others are transformations of Wahari, those whose power is that of flight, and not of eating others. In political competition, one gives one's opponent—a classificatory "brother-in-law," "father-in-law" or "son-in-law"—the attributes of Kuemoui. His power is power out of control; he is a user of poisonous hallucinogens; he transforms himself into anaconda, *becoming* Kuemoui in so doing—as his reincarnation on earth; or, he transforms himself into jaguar, who is both the pet of Kuemoui and his manifestation as hunter. One's opponent is a sorcerer who sends fatal disease, becoming in this action a cannibal, just as Kuemoui was: disease is always considered by the Piaroa to be a process of being eaten (see Overing Kaplan 1982).

Such use of mythic classification in the structuring of power battles between houses within a territory does not imply an ordering that is metaphoric in nature, but rather speaks of specific metaphysical states. In one's drugged state under the influence of hallucinogens, a shaman sees himself transformed as the handsome Wahari, and sees his opponent transformed as Kuemoui. The shaman understands such visions as literal truth, and acts upon them as such. Metaphor converts into an ontology that explicitly says that the "fantastic" is true.

Such language—and transformations—taken from the classification of the elements and forces within the cosmos as they existed in mythic time, must not be used to structure relationships within the house: one must never stress the essential difference to oneself of affines living with one. If political competition within the

house becomes serious in nature, the house immediately fissions. Thus, it is the *potential* affine who is Kuemoi, the cannibal, the user of untamed cultural forces. He is one with whom no marriage exchange has been contracted, or with whom one's ties of actual affinity are weak. The giver of disease, the cannibal, is one with whom one is in a relationship of unfulfilled reciprocity or, indeed, negative reciprocity. The relationship between actual affines who live together within the house must not be modelled upon the relationship that held in mythic society between the two archetypical affines who were enemies of one another (see Overing Kaplan 1984).

The Piaroa classify their relationships with others on a continuum that moves from danger to safety, and from difference to identity. This is not so unusual a classification, an increasing scale of social amity; but there are some interesting aspects pertinent to this discussion of their classification of others through categories that denote various degrees of social distance and social nearness. The most distant and dangerous relationships are with animals and members of other tribes where the natural relationship of Piaroa to them is one of killing: the danger is that of death, both for the Piaroa and, through Piaroa action, for both animals and foreigners (through sorcery). Because they have the right to kill members of both categories and to take from them, the Piaroa are in a non-kinship relationship to them. They are not called "affines." Most Piaroa deaths are caused by sorcerers from other tribes, and the Piaroa revenge such deaths through what modern Piaroa young men refer to as "the Piaroa bomb," a powerful revenge magic combining potent poisons and certain parts of the victim's anatomy which are burned together, and sent through smoke and chanting to the sorcerer's territory where mass killings are the result. The relationship, excepting that with the occasional trading partner, is one of blatant negative reciprocity.

Less dangerous, but still perilous, are relationships with members of other Piaroa territories. Here, there is not a natural relationship of killing or of causing disease; rather the danger is that of social death, and the relationship remains one of negative reciprocity. One travels to other territories and one takes food which cannot be reciprocated, or worse a wife—and then leaves. Except for formal trading, the demands of reciprocity cannot be met. So as not to face the problem, the individuals with whom one does interact are always classified as "kin," not "affines," a classification that carries with it the connotation of extreme safety amidst the perils of a strange land, strange food, and strange people.

Within the territory, where men classify most men of other local groups as affines, there is always the potentiality of achieving with them a relationship of reciprocity, of establishing a reliable relationship of exchange. Such dealings with potential affines are by definition ones of unfulfilled reciprocity, and the primary danger is that such relationships can degenerate into those equivalent to inter-territorial and intertribal ones, ones of negative reciprocity.

The safest relationships are, of course, those within one's own local group, with both kin and affines who live there. The house, however, cannot exist as an autonomous unit; for both shamanistic power and for spouses, it must depend upon other houses, despite an ideology that longs for its autonomy. The classification of

all men within the territory as affines can partially be understood as a recognition of this dependence: it is only through affinity that reciprocity can be activated. We see, then, that on the continuum that moves from danger to safety and from difference to identity, it at the same time moves from negative reciprocity, to potential reciprocity and finally to fulfilled reciprocity, the intensity of the latter relationship being so extreme that it almost approaches amity, or in Sahlin's terms (1972), "generalized reciprocity." Safety with the actual affine is partially achieved through proper reciprocity, and it is for this reason that the marriage exchange among the Piaroa is firmly based upon a principle of reciprocity carried out through the serial and multiple repetition of affinal ties.

The endogamous marriage and multiple affinity (see Overing Kaplan 1981)

For the Piaroa, society comes into being through the dangerous association of dissimilar elements: both mythological history and cosmological ordering give this message (see above the discussion of Piaroa mortuary clans where one lives with neither affines nor culture). It is this understanding about the nature of things in the social and cultural world that the Piaroa do their best to ignore in their relationships within the communal house. If the Piaroa were to use the mythic classification of the domain of land and that of water as the language for ordering their marriage exchange—as on the contrary is the case among the North-West Amazon Indians—or indeed the distinction of "above" and "below" underlying their own moiety system, they would also be making the overt statement that actual affines are creatures who are essentially different from one another and as such liable to devour each other. Thus, to ignore such divisions is one method of overriding the dangers of difference, of masking the very elements and forces of which society is comprised, or, if you will, any dualism of which it must consist. The Piaroa are not willing to accept the implications forthcoming from the assumption of essential difference, and it is through their very strong ideal of endogamous marriage that they manage to understate the necessity of essential difference to social life within the local group. The most obvious device they use in ignoring difference toward the end of safety is marriage with a close or at least well-known relative within the house; and this ideal of local group endogamy, so strongly stressed by most Guianese Amerindians, is but the other side of the coin of their equally emphasized fear of the stranger (see, for example, Rivière 1969a; Henley 1979).

I have written elsewhere (1973, 1975) that the larger houses among the Piaroa, within which dwell almost all of each member's conjugal kindred, do at least on an ideological level approximate the ideal of an endogamous kindred. The great fiction is, of course, that society as the isolated endogamous group that replicates itself through time becomes comprised of the association of "like" items, consanguines who are safe for one another, and not of dangerous "unlike" affines. Here, we have with the Piaroa an interesting dialectic between society as an ideal world of endogamous kindreds and society which includes the wider whole: potential affines and political opponents.

The endogamous marriage not only implies safety by both keeping everyone home with close relatives and by making fuzzy the distinction between "kin" and "affiné," it also is the marriage reciprocated, for through it previous affinal ties within the group are reaffirmed. In Piaroa theory, the more marriage exchanges enacted between two affines the safer the relationship and the more unified the group as a unit of cognates. It is a type of marriage exchange often found in the Guianas (see Rivière 1969a; Henley 1979; Arvelo-Jiménez 1971), where the viability of the affinal relationship, the political alliance, and the unity of the group, as well, are correlated with the number of marital exchanges established among men within the local group. In theory, the reduplication of any affinal tie within the group—as when a set of brothers marries a set of sisters—is both a marriage replicated and reciprocated, from the point of view of the group as a whole. Within an endogamous group, a marriage tie does not need to be directly reciprocated as in brother/sister exchange: any marriage within the group is at the least indirectly reciprocated, as in indirect exchange, insofar as every man within the group ideally receives a wife from within it. In one sense, through endogamous marriage, the very notion of marriage exchange, and not only its dangers, has been erased. Ironically, it is through the marriage exchange, especially the one re-enacted time and time again within the house, the gift continually returned, that differences are annulled and safety achieved. If one views reciprocity, as does Lévi-Strauss (1969: 84), as the most immediate means of integrating the opposition between the self and others, the Piaroa have through the endogamous marriage, where self and others are not only unified but become of a kind with one another, carried this principle to its logical extreme.

In that society itself is for the Piaroa equated with affinity, the coming together of unlike items (affines) and cultural forces, endogamy becomes a philosophy of society for them, a "half-way point," which overcomes to a certain extent the dangers of the social state and the dictum that says that society can only exist by the coming together of different and dangerous elements. In short, endogamy as an ideal expresses the Piaroa fear of the social state, thereby becoming a principle underlying a society suspicious of its own social nature.

Conclusion: elementary structures of reciprocity (see Overing Kaplan 1981)

I think it possible to say in general of Tropical Forest Amerindians that their notions of proper and improper reciprocity entail a philosophy of the relationship of things that are the same and the relationship of things that are different. It is from this perspective that we can come to a clearer understanding of the proliferation of dualisms within these cultures, no matter what their content or how they are played out. We have among the Piaroa the cosmological expression of the conundrum, which I think very general to Lowland South American Indians and of considerable importance to an understanding of certain ambiguities in the ordering of their social universes, that states the necessity of differences to social life—ultimately differences in the forces of culture; but it is a world where the coming together of such differences implies danger, while the conjoining of like

elements and forces implies safety and non-society, or an asocial existence.

Both the Bororo and Gê avert the dangers of cultural differentiation through elaborate ritual transactions between moieties, through which "ritual roads" are established between name-sets (see, for example, Crocker 1979; da Matta 1979; Lave 1979; Melatti 1979). Through the ritual inversions common to these systems, where "I" become "other" and "other" becomes "I"—where the chief of one moiety is chosen from the other or the ritual representation of the totems of one moiety is acted out by the other—identity and difference between cultural (and social) categories become as blurred as through the endogamous marriage of the Guianas. In each of these societies, the principles of exchange are to some extent principles of metaphysics, where the emphasis is not so much upon the attainment of a particular type of group formation, but upon the achievement of proper relationships among beings of categories which are viewed as significantly different, but necessary to one another, for society to exist. Such principles of exchange also express a specific political philosophy which says that no man, no group, can have sole ownership over the forces of culture, or a set of them, that would entail as well a control over their products.

Whether the distinctions expressed relate to the classificatory logic of names, to symbolic attributes of cosmic habitats, or, as in the classic case to "kin" and "affines," or to the "marriageable" and the "unmarriageable" as implied by a prescriptive marriage rule, in each example such contrasts are employed in the elaboration of exchanges that are clearly "elementary" in form, but an elaboration that is ultimately cultural in derivation, and not social. J.C. Crocker comments (1979: 296-297), when speaking on the elaboration of structures among the Gê and the Bororo, that categories founded on other sources of distinctions than those forthcoming from a prescriptive marriage rule "can possess precisely the same inexorable implications for social interaction which must express a logical model as the most rigidly prescriptive 'elementary structure'." Instead of "elementary systems of kinship and marriage," we can speak more generally of "elementary structures of reciprocity," and thereby treat Guianese Amerindian societies, societies of the North-West Amazon and those of Central Brazil as so many examples of one basic structure.

The implications for Amerindian social life of the elementary structure of reciprocity ordering it is that society itself becomes a logic for maintaining a balance, a proper relationship among cultural items in the universe that allows society to perpetuate itself. Reciprocity itself can thus be equally viewed as a particular mode of self-perpetuation, not of groups—which might entail the coercive control of both people and scarce resources—but of relationships, a perpetuation that counteracts the development of such control.

Abstract

This paper continues the conversation on Amerindian egalitarian political philosophies that Clastres began in his work, Society against the state, where he postulated that Amerindian societies of the Tropical Forest are societies without

political economies. He argued that the social force of the principle of reciprocity within these Lowland societies has such strength that it negates the possibility of the development of a leadership that would allow for the political control over another's labour or the products of it.

My own discussion of egalitarianism among Amerindian societies revolves around the exploration of specific structures of reciprocity—those described for the Gê and the Bororo, for the North-West Amazon, and for the Guianas—toward the end of unfolding Amerindian theories of social existence forthcoming from such structures. As contrasting as these structures of exchange may appear, they nevertheless express a similar view of the nature of society, one that entails a sophisticated understanding of the dangers to society of a political power that is allowed control over scarce resources in the world. Thus this exploration leads me to agree with much of Clastres' insight into Amerindian political philosophies, but to disagree with his argument that Amerindians identify coercive power with the forces of nature, forces external to society. Rather, the evidence leads one to conclude that the power that is being rejected is one much more dangerous than the forces of nature would be to the establishment of a proper, a safe, and a comfortable social order. The coercive power that is most feared and the one consistently battled against through the playing out of elementary structures of reciprocity is power that allows for the control over the forces of culture itself, which would entail, among other controls, the control over economic activity and its fruits. In short, the element common to all of these structures of reciprocity, and the one that gives each such social force, is the principle that no man, no group, can have sole ownership over the forces of culture when such ownership would entail as well a control over their products.

Resumen

Con este trabajo se persigue continuar la discusión sobre la filosofía política indígena igualitaria que Clastres inició en su trabajo *La société contre l'état*, y en el que postuló que las sociedades indígenas de la selva tropical son sociedades sin economía política. Dicho autor argumenta que el principio de la reciprocidad tiene tanta fuerza que niega la posibilidad del desarrollo de un liderazgo que permita el control político sobre el trabajo de los demás o los productos de este mismo trabajo.

Mi propia discusión del carácter igualitario de las sociedades indígenas se centra en el análisis de las estructuras específicas de reciprocidad tal como se dan (y así fueron descritas) entre los Gê y Bororo, en el noroeste de Amazonas, y en las Guayanas; el propósito de este trabajo es exponer las teorías sociales indígenas que resulten de dichas estructuras. Por más contrastantes que sean estas estructuras de intercambio, con todo expresan un punto de vista similar en cuanto a la naturaleza de la sociedad, y se muestran agudamente conscientes del peligro que supone para la sociedad la existencia de un poder político al que se le permita controlar unos recursos escasos. Este análisis me lleva a concordar en gran parte con el punto de vista de Clastres; sin embargo, estoy en desacuerdo con su argumento según el cual los indígenas identifican el poder coercitivo con las fuerzas de la naturaleza (que son

externas a la sociedad). La evidencia disponible nos lleva más bien a la conclusión de que el poder que las sociedades indígenas rechazan para poder establecer un orden social apropiado y seguro, es mucho más peligroso que las fuerzas de la naturaleza. El poder coercitivo más temido y que más se combate a través del juego de las estructuras elementales de reciprocidad, es el poder que permite el control sobre las fuerzas de la propia cultura, incluyendo, entre otras cosas, el control sobre la actividad económica y sus frutos. En otras palabras, el principio común a todas las estructuras de reciprocidad y que le da a cada una de éstas una gran fuerza social, señala que ningún hombre ni ningún grupo puede poseer por sí solo las fuerzas de la cultura si tal posesión implicara también el control de sus productos.