Aspects of Carib political economy

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It is frequently claimed that the societies of Lowland South America lack, or at best have poorly developed political institutions. The late Pierre Clastres cogently argued that no true political anthropology could evolve while we insist on defining other peoples' political structures in negative terms; in terms of what they have not got in comparison with us. However, and virtually in the same breath, Clastres denies that the economy of Lowland South American societies is a political economy (1977: 168). His argument is that in these societies the economy is not autonomous but is embedded in sets of other relationships. While I readily accept Clastres' characterization of the economy as embedded in the sense he means, I cannot agree with the conclusion he draws from it that there is no political economy.

In contrast to Clastres, one may cite Turner who writes:

Gê and Bororo social structure appears... as a form of political economy based on social rather than material production and reproduction... It is a political economy based upon the exploitation of young women and men actively engaged in producing the basic social units of human production... by older men (and to a lesser extent older women), who form a dominant "class" by virtue of their control of the crucial means of production (in this case, the obligatory setting of the productive activity in question), the residential hearth (1979: 168).

Despite the marked differences that characterize the social organization of the Gê compared with that of the Guiana region, Turner's remarks are not inapplicable,

and least of all his contention that the basis of Gê political economy is the strictly adhered to practice of uxorilocality. In the course of this paper I shall make other references to non-Carib ethnography in order to help illuminate the features of Carib political economy. I shall be reversing usual procedures in so far as I shall be looking at the complex in order to make sense of the simple. My reason for this is that the political economy in Guiana is so elusive and unformalized that it is only by working from the more obvious and more formalized that it is possible to bring its organization into focus.

I am taking political economy in the rather conventional sense as referring to ways in which, within a given society, the production and distribution of wealth are organized. The first difficulty is in identifying the nature of wealth, and it is perhaps Clastres' failure to do this that led him to deny Amerindian societies a political economy. That what constitutes wealth is culturally defined should prove unexceptionable since even dictionary definitions accept this proposition (see, for example, the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary). It is further arguable that wealth, whether it refers to health or riches, is inevitably unevenly distributed. Because of this, wealth is at the same time both a scarce resource and a value. The political economy is concerned with the management and control of scarce resources, and the ability to do this generates value for the individual(s) concerned.

The question is then: what constitutes wealth in Guiana? I argue that it is not material goods (with the exception of certain Western manufactured goods). The natural resources of the environment are plentiful enough to provide all traditional needs, and this, I suggest, is also the normal native perception of his environment. Given the intense debate about ecological determinants this may seem a brave or naïve claim to make. However, I suggest that Amerindians rarely perceive of an absolute shortage of natural resources. For example, they may be fully aware that there is a scarcity of game in a particular locality, and they will often fully appreciate the reasons for it, such as over-hunting. But, at the same time, they will be equally certain that there is plenty of game if they move to a different part of the forest.

Another aspect of this has been treated by Henley who writes of the Panare that "in the absence of any individual ownership of the means of production (other than tools), no individual depends on another for access to them" (1982: 66). I agree with this in so far as it refers to natural resources (land, game, etc.), but would also include labour, or rather human resources in general, under means of production. Scarcity within the tropical forest is less a matter of natural resources than of labour with which to exploit them. It is people who are in short supply.[1] This does not necessarily mean any or all people, and exactly what sort of people are seen as scarce varies from one group to another. Harner (1975) has claimed that among the Jívaro there is competition among men for women who are the scarce means of production; that is, in the production of prepared foodstuffs which men convert into power and prestige. Lizot writes of the Yanomami: "les biens matériels et les

[1] Although concentrating on the supply of women rather than human resources generally, this is a theme that runs throughout Rivière (1969a). I made the point then that a number of Trio institutions can be seen as devices for preserving a community's female resources. I also remarked that women were the one crucial resource that could not be replaced from the environment by any competent adult man.

denrées alimentaires ne sont pas rares; les femmes, elles, le sont... en réalité, les femmes sont le bien rare dans l'absolu" (1978: 107). This may be the case with the Yanomami, but in fact there is no need for there to be an absolute shortage of women for them to be perceived as being in short supply. Given the size and distribution of settlements through most of Guiana, any single Indian will only be aware of a very small number of women among whom his choice of a wife will be further limited by such factors as age, relationship and existing marital status.

This last point is well illustrated by the Trio among whom there is a fairly evenly balanced sex ratio, but from the point of view of any particular individual or community the supply of women appears very restricted. On the other hand it may not be women in general but women with certain qualities who are regarded as being scarce. Thus the Piaroa see as scarce well-connected women whose relationships can be transformed through marriage into politically valuable affinal ties (J. and M. Kaplan, personal communication).

However, it is not merely women who are in short supply but human resources generally, a fact which is underscored by the following comments. Overing Kaplan has stated of the Piaroa that: "The foremost aim of the *ruwang* is to expand the membership of the residential unit to which he belongs" (1975: 146). Arvelo-Jiménez writes that "the major issue that divides the Ye'cuana is the allocation and re-allocation of personnel, and the Ye'cuana attitude toward inter-village migration" (1971: 370). Dumont refers to the attempts of Panare headmen to attract and retain people (1978: 129), and very similar terms, incorporation and retention, were adopted by Morton (1979) in his analysis of the Waiwai material.

The evidence is there that the political economy of the region is concerned with the management of human resources, which are, or are assumed to be, scarce. In general terms, it can be argued that there is a relative scarcity of safe, familiar people in comparison with dangerous strangers. There is barely any need to elaborate on this point for the ethnography is replete with statements about the high evaluation of kin and co-residents compared with the ambivalent attitudes towards strangers and non-residents. A quotation from Arvelo-Jiménez's work on the Ye'kuana expresses the point well in the context of the present discussion:

In a society with no inheritable, material property and hence no goods to capitalize on, the only wealth of an individual is (1) his membership in an autonomous social unit, i.e., a mature village; (2) his membership in a locally compact and numerically strong group of close relatives; and (3) his ritual skills. The acquisition of the latter type of wealth is unrelated to kinship... Kinship is the key factor in the acquisition of the first two types of wealth (1971: 63-64).

In other words, the successful manipulation of human resources, their retention and incorporation in a community by its leader, provides wealth both for himself and his followers. The more successful the leader the more secure in their wealth of social relations are his followers. At the same time, there are limits to which a leader can build up the size of his settlement, and one of the reasons for this, I will argue, is that it is a political economy of people and not of goods. First, however, we must look at two social practices directly concerned with the incorporation and retention of people, particularly women.

There are two features of Carib societies that are important here. First is the preference for settlement endogamy, and, if that is not possible, for uxorilocal residence. The failure of settlements to be totally endogamous is more often than not the result of demographic factors rather than any other. Given the average size of a settlement the chance of a man finding a wife in his own settlement is slight. The extent to which a man can impose uxorilocal residence on his daughters' husbands is also uncertain and depends mainly on the authority he has over his daughters rather than over his sons-in-law. If a man can control his daughter either directly or through his wife, her mother, then he will in turn have some hold over his son-in-law. The strength of this hold, I would posit, depends on the actual or assumed shortage of women, and a man will tolerate to a greater degree uxorilocal residence and the demands of his in-laws if his chances of obtaining another wife in place of the one he has are poor.

Ideally a village leader will arrange as many endogamous marriages as possible, and marry any other young women uxorilocally. If he is astute enough he will arrange such marriages with men who have daughters or sisters available as wives for the other young men of his settlement.

In practice, this is rarely achieved as the detailed information available on the composition of settlements indicates. These data, while indicating the preference for settlement endogamy and uxorilocal residence, are an expression of the basically political nature of residential choices. Arvelo-Jiménez has remarked that "village history is a political history" (1973: 4), and Overing Kaplan has claimed that a Piaroa's choice of where to live (or better, with whom to live) is a political decision. In fact, the Piaroa example leads us on to another aspect of the political economy.

Overing Kaplan states that a Piaroa makes his choice on where to live in response to two considerations; which of my kinsmen can provide the best ritual protection and which the best ritual teaching. In a passage quoted above, Arvelo-Jiménez has identified ritual skills as the third type of wealth among the Ye'kuana. However, she also notes that it is different from the other two types of wealth which consist of the network of relationships based on kinship and co-residence. Indeed she makes the point that the possession of ritual skills is a means of achieving the other two forms of wealth. The Piaroa case is rather more complicated, and is best approached by looking at the division of labour and the productive activities of men and women.

These activities are too well known to require description here, and I wish to concentrate on one aspect, the alienation by men of food, and above all manioc beer, processed by women. It is women who make beer but it is men who give it away and it is to men that political prestige accrues as a result of giving it away. It is the political value of the food which men alienate. The relationship in Amazonia between chiefship and polygyny has often been noted, and the archetypal argument is that the good hunter through the provision of a surplus of meat is able to attract and then maintain more women. The surplus production of these women can then be used to give feasts which advance the man's political career by attracting followers. This is a vastly oversimplified account, but it contains the truth that political advancement depends partly on the surplus of female production.

However, the women involved need not necessarily be wives, for mothers, sisters and daughters will equally well do. Indeed Overing Kaplan has made the point that there is no political advantage to be gained from polygyny among the Piaroa, and this brings us back to the importance of ritual.

While among the Piaroa it is ritual competence that attracts a following, one of the most important ritual skills practised by the *ruwang* is in the preparation of food. The ritual preparation of food by the village leader parallels the culinary preparation by the women; both activities are directed towards making the food edible. This is entirely appropriate because, while the *ruwang* compete with one another for followers in terms of ritual knowledge, highest status can only be achieved by sponsoring a large and lengthy feast. The ability to sponsor such a feast depends on control by a *ruwang* over the surplus production of a large enough labour force, both men and women, and not on the control over any natural or cultural resource. However, what the Piaroa case seems to demonstrate is an incipient move from a political economy of people to a political economy of goods.

I have lingered on the Piaroa example because it is instructive in the way it differs from the neighbouring Carib speakers whose control over human resources is more directly expressed. We are now in a position to return to a point made earlier but temporarily left to one side. This is the suggestion that the limitation on the size of settlements has something to do with the fact that we are dealing with a political economy of people and not of goods.

As is well documented a village leader in the region has no coercive powers and little authority beyond his individual skill in the management of social relationships. What authority the leader has is basically familial, and tends to weaken as the ties of kinship lengthen. In a small village, there is a high degree of relatedness,[2] and familial authority is adequate for the mediation of disputes in the close-knit network of kin. However, as a village grows in size the degree of relatedness becomes increasingly diluted so that disputes not only become more common but their resolution gets more difficult. The reason why Carib villages become unstable above a certain size is because the links between the core of the village and its more peripheral members become too attenuated.

It is as wrong to ignore ecological factors in the study of settlement patterns and size, as it is mistaken to overlook cultural factors. In practice, there is no difficulty about incorporating ecological factors with other factors and achieving a more powerful explanation. I do not want to digress on this point, but a brief example will help show what I mean. If the hunting is bad (an ecological factor), the distribution of meat within the village is curtailed (a cultural factor). Those

[2] Chagnon (1975) also employs the expression "degree of relatedness," but his usage differs from mine. His is based purely on the closeness of genealogical relationships, and since he takes these as measurable, his degree is quantifiable. I do not accept that relatedness is a purely genealogical phenomenon but regard it as entailing other factors such as the number of overlapping relationships, length of co-residence, and affinity. Accordingly I use the expression in a descriptive sense. However, I entirely agree with Chagnon that "as villages become larger, the average amount of relatedness among the members goes down" (Chagnon 1975: 102-103), but this is a logical as much as a genealogical conclusion.

excluded from the distribution will be more peripheral, distantly related members. These individuals are likely to leave first because the shortage of meat is not offset by the value of their relationships within the settlement. An individual's commitment to a community will depend on the nature and number of his ties to its other members. The size a settlement will reach before fission occurs will depend on the nature of the relationships that compose it and the ability of its leader to manage them.[3] If we combine ecological and cultural factors we have not only a clearer idea about the mechanisms involved in the determination of settlement size, but we also have a sociological perspective (who lives with whom) on which ecology has nothing to say.

The control that a leader can exercise over his followers has to be exerted directly on them. In other words, control over people is not mediated by control over other resources. An individual is free to live where he wants, cut his field where he likes, hunt as he wishes, and gather natural resources where he finds them. Furthermore, the division of labour and the technology make an adult man and woman to all intents and purposes an economically self-sufficient unit. The leader controls no resource that is vital to the livelihood of the individual, save that is, in the case of sons-in-law, his daughters. The exception to this that we have noted are the Piaroa whose leader's control over people is mediated by his possession of ritual knowledge. The presence of this scarce resource seems to account for the more hierarchically organized political structure found among them than among their Carib neighbours.[4]

Thus it would seem that control over people is more effective if it is mediated through some other scarce resource. However, it may be argued that competition for wealth in the form of ritual is simply another way of building up and retaining a following. It is not fundamentally different from the direct competition for people, since in both cases, a leader's competence, whether it be with the visible or invisible world, is under continuous assessment. In both cases failure results in a decline in the size of his settlement. However, much depends on the nature of the individuals involved, and this in turn accounts for the rather variable social composition of settlements throughout Guiana.

Although settlement endogamy and uxorilocal residence are preferred, these practices only occur as a statistical trend and other arrangements are common. The control that a man exercises over his daughter is not essentially different from that which a man has over his wife. There is no sanction that can stop a man from persuading his wife to leave home and live elsewhere other than his inability to do so in the face of the opposing pressures applied by her kin. If uxorilocal residence is

[3] Some years ago (1970), I referred to Trio villages as single cell political units but it is relatively recently that I worked out some of the further implications of this. A settlement would appear to become particularly vulnerable to fission when it contains two cores; that is to say, when there are two men each of whose own network of relationships internally exhibits a higher degree of relatedness than that found in the settlement as a whole. There seem to be quite specific circumstances under which this happens.

[4] The Trio provide a modern, non-traditional example of the effect of an external scarce resource. The Trio have now been living for a generation in settlements many times larger than their traditional villages. This has been achieved by the missionaries who control scarce resources such as medicine, ritual security, manufactured goods, etc., and are thus able to control the distribution of people.

the commonest practice it is because it reflects the young son-in-law's relative disadvantage in the battle of persuasion. However, the leader's control is never assured, and the variation in settlement composition is the outcome of innumerable individual negotiations.

Herein lies the difficulty for a political economy that seeks to deal directly with the distribution of human resources rather than attempting to exercise this control through control over a vital, natural resource. As Lévi-Strauss noted when referring to the exchange of a woman in marriage, a woman can "never become just a sign and nothing more, since in a man's world she is still a person" (1969a: 496). In other words, people, unlike goods, do and say things of their own volition. From this I would wish to argue that there is an association between the political economy of people and the individualism, so often noted in the literature, that characterizes Carib societies.

This aspect deserves further attention, and the best approach to it is by looking outside the Guiana region. Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro (1979) have argued that the use of such terms as "flexible," "fluid," and "open to individual manipulation" to describe Lowland Amerindian societies is wrong because the conceptual norm against which they are being judged is that of Africa and other ethnographic regions. They argue that this South American fluidity may well be an illusion, and the difference is that South American societies are structured in terms of symbolic idioms that relate to the construction of people and the fabrication of the body rather than to the definition of groups and the transmission of goods. While fully accepting their general position, I do not think that the authors have appreciated the degree to which fluidity varies among societies of Lowland South America. The ethnographic examples on which they rely, Tukanoan, Xinguano and Gê peoples, all exhibit features which are absent or weakly developed in Guiana. In comparison with elsewhere Guiana societies do appear atomistic and individualistic.

Both the Gê-speaking peoples and the Tukanoans have social structures which contain the mechanisms of their own reproduction. These arise from an interplay between society and the individual. It is through membership in social formations that the individual obtains his social persona while at the same time the social formations depend for their perpetuation on recruiting members. Or, as I have expressed it slightly differently elsewhere, "the social persona results from recruitment in certain groups which thus maintain themselves by the enrolment of individuals" (1980: 537). This remark was made with reference to Gê societies, but it applies equally well to the Tukanoan groups, whose most important social formations are patrilineages. The reproduction of these lineages does not depend on biological birth through women but the creation of social persons through initiation by men.

It is difficult to identify a similar process in Guiana for the simple reason that there are no social groups which survive the lifetime of single individuals. The only identifiable social formation is the settlement, but it has no continuity since its existence is intimately tied to that of its founder and leader whose network of relationships constitutes it. As Dumont has remarked: "La mort du leader est la mort du groupe" (1977: 51). These social formations become visible if we stop time, but

their illusory nature is reasserted once the clock starts again.

Turner (1979: 165) has pointed out that:

...The matri-uxorilocal residence pattern of the Gê and Bororo... tends to generate units that are relatively smaller, genealogically shallower, but more stably and effectively integrated within that shallow depth, than the patri-virilocal pattern of many... lowland Amazonian groups.

The reason that he advances for this greater stability and integration under matri-uxorilocal arrangements is similar to that proposed in this paper to explain the nature of political relations in the Guiana region. It is the control of men over women which is more effective than that of men over men as is required with patri-virilocal residence.[5] Turner also argues that the narrow range and short term effectiveness of the uxorilocal pattern result from the lack of any mechanism for extending what are no more than intra-family controls. Thus there is no means whereby the father-in-law/son-in-law relationship can be employed in other contexts, nor on the death of the father-in-law is there any mechanism by which the brothers-in-law may be kept together. This is the moment when the Kayapo household, the basic political unit, breaks up and reforms in new households.

Much of this applies to the Guiana groups, but what is different is the social context. Turner refers to Gê "communities as agglomerations of multiple households" (1979: 165), but the lesson to be learnt from the Guiana example is that these households form a community only because their members are also members of social formations (age-sets and moieties) that are not ephemeral but exist separately from the life of any particular individual. Social continuity is achieved through these formations.

In structural terms, Kayapo households have much in common with Guiana settlements. The fact that the former are located round the periphery of a community while the latter are dispersed is consistent with the respective presence and absence of overarching social formations. In Guiana, the absence of any such social formations means that political relationships are simply dyadic. The only political resources are individual relationships. Thus, the political relationship that links a man to his wife's father, whether this is mediated by the wife/daughter or not, has no necessary ramifications outside that relationship. If the marital union ceases, so does the political relationship; when the father-in-law dies there is no continuing commitment because there is no other individual, let alone group, to whom the son-in-law owes allegiance. If it is the case that a group of brothers has married a group of sisters the community may survive socially, if not physically, its leader's death. But the likelihood of this happening if the sons-in-law are unrelated is far less since the various marriages entail links only with the father-in-law and not with one another. It is the dyadic and ephemeral nature of political relationships that prevents the formation of enduring social groups, and gives the political organization of the region its peculiar stamp. Society is no more than an

[5] I disagree with Turner on this point, and argue rather that the most acute problem faced by patri-virilocal societies is how to control effectively their female resources. Different aspects of my argument about this are to be found in Rivière (1982a, 1982b).

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aggregate of personal relationships, and accordingly societal and individual relationships remain at the same order of complexity. It is for this reason that these societies appear highly individualistic.

The variability in residence patterns can be traced to the same cause. Among the Kayapo it is clear that the close adherence to the rule of uxorilocal residence is closely associated with existence of social formations. In Guiana, there are no such formations through which residence rules can be mediated, and the residence pattern is the outcome of individual negotiations.

In Guiana, this same point is observable in the nature of rites of passage. These rites are not concerned with the passage of individuals into social roles and formations but with the personal development of the individual. If these rituals have a wider function it is to check the atomization that threatens these societies either by the essential participation of outsiders at community level or by the lack of self-sufficienty in ritual know-how at the individual level.

Finally, the notion of social continuity is in most cases cyclic and involves a rather narrow time scale. (A possible exception to this are the Ye'kuana). Few Indians know anything about even their immediate ancestors and genealogical amnesia is assisted by such mechanisms as teknonymy and the repetition of names. Likewise, the value of children is connected with creating the political and economic relationships that form an individual's security in old age rather than with longer term strategies of continuity.

The argument in this paper is highly condensed already and a summary of it may do more to confuse than clear the reader's mind. In its simplest terms I have been saying that there is no scarcity of natural resources in the region, only of human resources. The political economy of the region is concerned with the management of these resources, and particularly of women whose productive and reproductive capacities are so important. It is for this reason that marriage strategies are such a central part of politics. However, the control over human resources has to be exercised directly because there are no social formations through which it can be mediated. In turn, it is this absence of social formations that accounts for many reported features of these societies including their atomistic and individualistic nature. Consistent with this is the shallow time span in which they exist and their unconcern with social continuity.

On a broader canvas, what is perhaps most instructive about Guiana societies is what they share with groups from other parts of Lowland South America. What we seem to have in Guiana is the social organization of aboriginal Lowland South America reduced to its simplest logical form. It is as though in Guiana we find the bare structural relationships which other societies have taken and transformed to produce their own more complex organizations. If this is so, then a proper understanding of Guiana society is the first step towards a proper study of Lowland South American society.

Abstract

·Despite the late Pierre Clastres' claim that Amerindian societies lack a political economy, this paper constitutes an attempt to identify the nature and operations of a political economy within the Guiana region. The political economy is taken to be the customary arrangements for the production and distribution of scarce resources and the generation of wealth. However it is argued that in Guiana scarce resources and wealth cannot be taken as referring to material goods, but rather they are the means with which such resources are exploited. The scarcity, real or assumed, is of people, and particularly women who are not only valuable in their own right as means of production and reproduction but also as links through which the allegiance of men is obtained and retained. This helps account for the political significance of marriage in the region and the importance of uxorilocality as a means through which men attempt to control their female resources. In the absence of coercive authority, control is an aspect of individual relationships which are continuously negotiable. This accounts for the atomistic and individualistic nature of Guiana societies. Finally it is suggested that these societies represent the simplest logical form of a pan-Lowland social organization.

Resumen

A pesar de la afirmación de P. Clastres de que las sociedades indígenas carecen de una economía política, esta contribución es un intento de identificar la naturaleza y el modo operativo de una economía política en Guayana. Interpretamos la economía política como el arreglo consuetudinario tendiente a la producción y distribución de recursos escasos y la generación de riqueza. Sin embargo, debe tenerse en cuenta que en Guayana los recursos escasos y la riqueza no se refieren a bienes materiales, sino que constituyen más bien los instrumentos por medio de los cuales se explotan los mencionados recursos. La escasez, real o imaginaria, tiene relación con la gente, y en especial con las mujeres que no solamente tienen valor de por sí como medios de producción y reproducción, sino que constituyen vínculos mediante los cuales se obtiene y mantiene la lealtad de los hombres. Esto nos ayuda a entender la transcendencia política del matrimonio en la región y la importancia de la uxorilocalidad como medio a través del cual los hombres tratan de controlar sus recursos femeninos. En la ausencia de una autoridad coercitiva, el control es un aspecto de las relaciones individuales que siempre están sujetas a la negociación. Esto explica la naturaleza atomística e individualista de las sociedades guayanesas. Sugerimos, finalmente, que estas sociedades representan la forma lógica más sencilla de una organización social característica de todas las tierras bajas de Suramérica.