



## Syncretic features of contemporary Maroni River Carib religious belief

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### Introduction

In traditional Carib religion, belief in spirits and shamanism were the key concepts. Under the influence of missionaries the Caribs became Roman Catholics, or so they say. Yet the actual content of their beliefs is not 100% Christian. It is not 100% Carib either. Moreover, in certain beliefs traces of the Creole cultures of Surinam can be noted. Thus, at least three cultures have contributed to contemporary belief, which as a syncretic religion is truly Carib because it is not found outside Carib society. Let me give a concrete example to demonstrate what I mean:

#### *Example 1: The case of the cottontree*

In 1966 a cottontree fell into a creek. This tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), in Surinam known as the *kankantri* (and among the Caribs as *kumaka*), houses powerful, malevolent spirits and no one cares to damage even a dead tree. This particular tree, however, had to be removed because its trunk barred the way to a number of gardens in the forest. One of the shamans held a séance and discussed the people's plight with the spirits of the tree. Next day a group of men, mostly shamans themselves, went to the tree, armed with axes. Each of them made the sign of the cross and uttered a short prayer to God. Each then anointed hands, feet and axe with a mixture of oil and certain leaves, and proceeded to cut away that part of the trunk that made canoe traffic impossible.

In this simple sequence of actions elements derived from three cultures can be discerned: the spirits of the tree and shamanism (Carib); the sign of the cross and the prayer (Roman Catholic); the protective mixture of oil and leaves (Creole, at least according to the Caribs).

In this paper I shall, first, describe various syncretisms. Secondly, I shall discuss the sociocultural background of Carib syncretism. For the sake of brevity

I refer to my *The Maroni River Caribs* (1971) for general ethnographic information. Here it is sufficient to mention that this paper is based on fieldwork carried out in 1966-1968, in Galibi, a Carib village with about 500 inhabitants, in the Maroni estuary, Surinam.<sup>1</sup>

### Cultures involved

The Caribs live on the Maroni at least since the 15th century, as the reports of the earliest visitors testify. European people penetrated the area from 1499 onwards. The English gained a firm foothold in Surinam in 1650. In 1667 they were replaced by the Dutch. The centre of plantation based exploitation was the Suriname River and some of its tributaries. Until the 19th century the Maroni river and its rather hazardous estuary remained on the periphery of colonial Surinam. The Amerindians were left to their own devices but definitively felt the influence of the new people.

Seen from French Guiana, which became a sugarplantation based colony at the same time as Surinam, the Maroni area was peripheral too. A strong influence on Amerindians was exerted by the Jesuits who concentrated the former in mission settlements (Kourou being the nearest to the Maroni). The Jesuits were expelled from French Guiana in 1764 and the Amerindians became dispersed. Some of them went from Kourou to the Mana and Maroni area. I suspect that most of the Christian influence on Carib thought goes back to the missions of Kourou and Sinnamary (cf. Barrère 1743: 22-23). From the Surinam side the Roman Catholic mission gained momentum since the end of the 19th century but became influential in Galibi only in the course of the first half of this century.

The plantations on the Suriname river were based on slave labour. The English, coming from Barbados, brought with them African slaves, and the Jews, coming from Brazil, brought many more. From the very beginning slaves tried to escape from the harsh conditions of plantation life. Already at the end of the 17th century they succeeded in creating villages of their own, deep in the forest. Around 1700 some of them settled on the Djuka creek, a tributary of the Maroni (De Groot 1977). They became known as Aucaner or Djuka Bush Negroes. The Amerindians assisted the colonists in trying to fight the emergent Bush Negro societies which threatened the plantations. In fact, the people in Paramaribo were quite happy with a relatively large Amerindian population on the lower Maroni. Slavery was abolished in Surinam in 1863. A large proportion of the former slaves eventually moved to Paramaribo. Their descendants are known as the Creole population of Surinam. Largely deprived of their African cultural heritage they formed a culture of their own (see for certain aspects Buschkens 1974 and Wooding 1972). Although there are vast differences between the urban and rural Creoles and the various Bush Negro cultures (Djuka, Saramaka,

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) for making the fieldwork possible.

Matuwai, to name the most important ones, see Köbben 1979; Price 1975; De Beet and Sterman 1980). I shall usually refer to Creole of Bush Negro culture in a very general way.

Surinam's plural society counts several other cultures (Hindustani, Javanese, middle-class Dutch) but in the present context these can be ignored.

## Syncretisms

The first entrance to Carib religious thinking can be found in shamanism and belief in spirits (see Kloos 1968, 1970, and also De Civrieux 1974). Religious belief is founded on very mundane matters, such as health. According to the Caribs illness is caused by spirits. A few spirits are innately malevolent. The majority, however, are not, and bother men, women and children only after having been offended. There is a strong tendency to attribute illness to personal faults or faults of close relatives (Kloos 1971: 215-218; 1970). The Caribs have populated almost every part of their environment with spirits but they are not in the least a spirit haunted people.

Carib language has several terms for spiritual beings.<sup>2</sup> Some of these terms unambiguously refer to a specific being. Others are relative, which means that the identity of a particular spirit is at least partly derived from its connection with someone or something. The *yumi* category, for instance, can be seen as an abstraction from animal species and, occasionally, natural phenomena. *Kaikusi yumi* is literally the "father spirit of the jaguar." It is the essence of the jaguar in general, having received an identity of its own as a spiritual being. The *akiri* category contains spirits belonging to rivers, trees, stones, etc. *Wewe akiri* is a tree spirit. Familiar spirits of the shaman are categorically called *akuwa*, and guardian spirits, given by a shaman to one of his patients to scare away evil spirits who cause harm, are called *ekosanon*. But these four terms, *yumi*, *akiri*, *akuwa* and *ekosanon*, can be used for one and the same spiritual entity. There is, for instance, a small owl *popopo*, whose father spirit is *popopo yumi*. This spirit habitually lives in the *takini* tree. Therefore it is one of the tree's *akiri*. When this spirit becomes the familiar spirit of a shaman he calls it his *akuwa*. When the shaman asks an *akuwa* to safeguard one of his patients for a number of days from further attacks (see Kloos 1970), he refers to it as his patient's *ekosanon*.

The whole system has an enormous potential. The Caribs, however, use only a very small part of the logical possibilities. They are not much interested in an abstract philosophy of spirits as a goal in itself. They are interested in spirits as long as they cause harm. That part of the system actually used can be quite individual, geared to personal needs and experiences of a particular

<sup>2</sup> To some extent present-day Carib terminology has become mixed up; *yoroka* is perhaps the most general word used for spirits. Creole language took over the word *jorka*, "bad spirit." Following Creole usage, the Caribs nowadays tend to regard *yoroka* too as a bad spirit.

individual or shaman.

The search for the causes of illness in terms of attacking spirits takes place in this system but also among extra-systemic spirits. It is among the latter that new spirits are recognized. These new spirits are independent ones who do not fit into the above-mentioned system. The Caribs do not care about this.

The new spirits are alternatives in explaining illness and the following case demonstrates the process of syncretism:

*Example 2: The case of the frightened girl*

In March 1966 a girl was with her parents in their fishing camp near the sea when she suddenly got fits during her sleep. She was brought to her maternal grandfather, a shaman, who blew tobacco smoke over her to chase away spirits, but to no avail. Then the girl was brought to the doctor in Albina (a small town on the Maroni, about 20 km from Galibi) and she stayed a few days in the local hospital. She had no fits during these days, but in the canoe on her way home it started all over again. At home, when she had no attacks, she looked constantly around her, as if she saw fearful things. She hardly slept for fear of being attacked something. Various people, among them kinsmen living in Albina, said that a doctor would be unable to cure her, and they suggested a Negro woman in Albina. The girl's parents went to see her and the girl was washed with certain medicines. But without any effect. A shaman living near Albina held a séance and then suggested visiting another obeah man, also living in the vicinity of Albina. The girl and her family stayed a few days with this man, who washed the girl with beer. During daytime she was all right, but at night the fits came back. Since the obeah man did not give enough attention, in the eyes of the parents, they tried other specialists. In Albina they met a Bush Negro from Western Surinam (a Matawai), who claimed to have learned to cure a disease like the girl had. He went to live with the family in Galibi for several weeks. The girl had no attacks during his stay. Meanwhile two shamans held séances, the girl's maternal grandfather and another relative, a MoMoSiSo. After a few weeks the Matawai said that he had done what he could. He left, saying that they should try others too. The parents then found an obeah man in the vicinity of Paramaribo (via friends). They paid him a visit and he told them that after such a long illness a rapid recovery could not be expected. He treated the girl and she improved. In September 1967 she was almost recovered: she felt bad only after strenuous labour or during a feast with many people talking and laughing around her. But suddenly she collapsed again. The parents asked the obeah man from Paramaribo to come and he stayed a week in Galibi. Once again the girl recovered a little, and that was her condition when I left the village, early in 1968.

Several explanations were offered in the course of the girl's illness, some of them only to be rejected:

1. The mother of the girl had been married to another man, before her present marriage. Because her first husband was too exacting she had left him. His father, a shaman, had sent a spirit to harm his one-time daughter-in-law. This explanation was soon rejected.

2. The obeah man and the Creole medicine woman in Albina both said that the spirit of the Boa had made her ill.

3. Back in Galibi a different explanation was found. The girl's maternal grandmother (the wife of one of the treating shamans) dreamed about a spirit who came from Tapuhuku, a Carib village near Albina. The background is this: a few years ago the MoMoSiSo of the girl had accidentally killed a man from Tapuhuku. The father of the victim was a shaman and had sent the spirit of the woodlouse (Creole: *akantamasi*; Carib: *kubisa*) to revenge his son. The spirit

was unable to harm its proper target because the latter was a shaman himself, and attacked a member of his family instead. This theory was affirmed in séances held by the two shamans involved. The Matawai too thought this plausible: allegedly he had independently arrived at the conclusion that the cause was a spirit "who came from upstream" (Tapuhuku does lie upstream).

4. The shamans added as an additional cause the spirit of the fits or cramps, *wayopan yumi*.

5. The last obeah man rejected all theories and said that someone had sent a bad spirit to the family out of jealousy, the father of the girl being one of the Chief's lieutenants. The father regarded this as the best theory, but he was the only one to do so.

It is the Creole or Bush Negro obeah man who augmented Carib beliefs with the belief in the avenging spirit of the Boa. Of old, the Caribs attached much importance to snakes, who played an important role in mythology. But these snakes were all of a mythological nature. There was, for instance, the enormous *Alamali*, who was so big that his body was wrapped around all the branches of the gigantic *kumaka* tree and even then hung with his head almost on the ground to catch animals he attracted with his magic. But real, living snakes played no part in illness, unless, of course, they bit a man. The land boa (*segumin*) is a relatively harmless snake, who sometimes even comes into the houses. The Caribs were afraid of the large specimens, but not for supernatural reasons. Kappler (1854: 95) relates that the Caribs were afraid to catch a boa, but there is not the slightest indication that there was a supernatural reason for their fear. Ahlbrinck (1931) does not mention any belief about snake spirits, although he discusses their mythological significance. The boa is seldom called by its Carib name nowadays, it is called by its Bush Negro or Creole name, *daguwe* or *papa gado*. This snake plays an important role in Bush Negro and Creole religious thinking. For the Caribs it became, characteristically, a bad spirit. If it is killed on purpose, its spirit stays with the murderer and proceeds to kill his children. Only an obeah man is able to help in such a case. A Carib shaman is powerless.

This big snake is associated by many Caribs with the snake who seduced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. The missionaries at Galibi already for a long time use a number of French pictures to enliven their teachings. These pictures, about 60 x 80 cm, in full colour, show various scenes taken from the Bible. The style is 19th century romanticism: dramatic landscapes, people in long robes, etc. Many pictures are completely unintelligible for the Caribs, but one shows Adam and Eve, standing at the foot of a big tree. A gigantic snake has wound his huge body around the trunk, head downwards, looking at Adam and Eve: *Alamali*, seducing Adam and Eve by his magic! In Carib thought three concepts have become merged: the Carib concept of mythical snakes, the Creole concept of the Boa who avenges himself if killed, and the Christian concept of the snake who brought Adam and Eve to sin. The snake is in the eyes of the Caribs not the sacred animal; it is according to the Bush Negroes. The Caribs took

over the supernatural importance of this particular snake, but changed its meaning in line with their own conceptions, making it a bad spirit who kills.

About the woodlouse one word: it was known to the Caribs as *kubisa*, of course. But they did not regard it as potentially evil. The Bush Negroes discovered this, they say, and nowadays the Caribs too have become cautious.

There is another picture from the French pictorial catechism that has some appeal to the Caribs: it pictures the Holy Trinity, with God (*Tamusi*) and Jesus (*Tamusi membo*, or little God) sitting next to each other, and a dove (*akukuwa*) flying above them. God is the only personality from the Roman Catholic pantheon to have a definite role in Carib thought. Neither Jesus, nor Mary, nor the numerous saints appeal to Carib imagination. Rationally they know about them, emotionally they ignore them (some say that Jesus must have been a *pīyei*, or shaman, because he cured people).

God plays a role in everyday life. Many people utter a short prayer before embarking on fishing trips. A prayer is often said at the beginning of political meetings. God's influence is felt in certain misfortunes: most congenital abnormalities are attributed to God rather than to spirits (*ya'ame tīgase tamusi 'wa* -he was badly made by God). God judges people after their death, admitting them to heaven or sending them back to earth (see Kloos 1971: 152ff, for a highly syncretic version of the fate of the soul after death).

Is the conception of a highly personal God aboriginal or not? According to Ahlbrinck (1931: 208, 455) it was. Comparing several Carib-speaking peoples in the Guyanas this seems unlikely. Formerly all Caribs in the Guyanas believed in a supreme power, but this power often was quite impersonal (cf. Butt 1961 for the Akawaio). If there was a God he was a rather otiose one (see Gillin 1936; I suspect that among the Barama River Caribs too missionary influence is responsible for their conception of a personal God).

To me it seems likely that the Christian elements encountered by Ahlbrinck among the Caribs in the twenties go back to the teaching of the Jesuits in French Guiana in a distant past.

God is the undisputed master of the universe. The Caribs feel therefore no fundamental discrepancy between their philosophy embodied in spiritual beings, and their experience with Christianity. Their catechism gives them no reason to see it otherwise. I quote from it:

Angels are exalted, immortal spirits, fallen angels are called devils or bad spirits, devils desire to harm us both spiritually and physically.

The children at school learn these statements by heart, but then they have known the truth of especially the last line all their lives.

The relationship the Caribs see between God and the spirits is a new phenomenon: they feel that God is stronger than the strongest shaman's spirit, *Tukayana*. They believe that it was God who gave the *maraka*, the shaman's rattle, to the Caribs. The *takimi* tree, whose latex is imbibed by those who want

to become a shaman (see Kloos 1968), is the master of the trees and was planted by God. Shamans frequently say that their work with spirits can only succeed if God helps too. Once again, the Caribs are not very interested in the exact nature of the relationship between God and their spirits, although they are more specific than is the case with Bush Negro elements. This might be due to the fact that there is some tension felt between shamanism and Christianity. The general idea is that a close contact between Jesus and the church on the one hand, and the shaman's spirits on the other, is not acceptable by either. Going to church, and even more the Holy Communion, is seen as too close a contact to be good for a shaman who wishes to remain one. The tension cannot be explained by present day attitudes of the missionaries: in general they are very lenient, working predominantly with the children at school. They assume that shamanism will die out anyway, without interference on their part, which might cause bad feelings. The behaviour of missionaries in a more distant past was not so tolerant.

Other Christian elements are also bent towards their alleged usefulness with regard to health. Thus for several generations the Caribs have baptized their infants. Although many intellectually know the Christian meaning of baptism, the idea does not appeal to them. They feel that a baptized child is better protected against malevolent spirits. They practised the *couvade* -which is partly a rite de passage for the father, partly a protective measure for his child- and they added a Christian element in their search for the protection of babies, and also a Creole element by using amulets against *ogri ai* (the bad eye, a concept foreign to their traditional culture).

Holy water is another element that became popular and can be found side by side with other measures: it protects and chases away evil spirits and is used when their presence is suspected in a way similar to tobacco smoke, blown by a shaman.

### *Example 3. A case of measles:*

Towards the end of an afternoon a small boy of three years old suddenly starts to behave very strange. He walks in circles, with shaking legs. He looks around wildly but seems to notice nothing. His mother wants to put him into his hammock but he refuses to lie down. His behaviour is extremely nervous and uncoordinated. An effort to calm him with a wet, cool towel fails, as does a shower with *segi watra* (Creole for holy water). Finally the mother, who acts composed and seemingly unperturbed, says that she wants to be brought to a certain shaman, who is at that moment with his family in his garden on the other side of the river. The little boy is transported to the shaman, with his mother. During the crossing of the river the boy suddenly grabs the gunwales of the boat. Later the mother tells the shaman that the spirit tried to pull the child into the water. The shaman performs a *séance* and discovers an *ewalu'mi* -a "dark spirit"- who came from far away. He succeeds in chasing him away. The mother stays a few days in the garden, with the child. After a few days the child develops measles (his strange behaviour can probably be explained as being spasms, caused by fever) and he recovers in due time.

## Sociocultural background

Compared with scores of other Amerindians in South America the Maroni River Caribs are a lucky people. They have, of course, felt the impact of the colonial powers and experienced demographic havoc following population decline, yet by and large they have been able to decide upon the course of their lives themselves (see Kloos 1974). There never were plantations on the Maroni. If they became workers in a different economy it was never by force, and they usually preferred being fishermen -and they were in a position to do what they preferred. They remained independent and were with regard to new phenomena and new possibilities in a position to take or to leave them. Apart from experiences with early missionaries who appear to have used pressure and sometimes force to convert them, this applies to new ideas as well. It appears that in their choices the Caribs followed the strategy of their traditional way of thinking, in which we distinguish between religion and medicine only because *we* are accustomed to do so.

In many acculturation studies acceptance or rejection of foreign cultural elements is related to values held by members of a particular society. I do not underestimate the importance of values and other ideas when I say that this part of the problem of acculturation is more complicated. After all, values are not independent variables. Because values themselves need so much explanation their explanatory power cannot be very high. Rather than relating acceptance or rejection of new ideas and activities to existing ideas and values, I would relate both to existential problems facing people living in a particular situation.

One of the main existential problems really worrying the Caribs is illness. The Carib world is a generally safe one. There are no immediate dangers threatening the whole group or individuals (in the distant past this was different). Food never was a problem: there is absolutely no anxiety over food (see Kloos 1971: 71). Village society offers relatively few serious problems of living together -the problems felt are expressed in the form of dramatized narrative. It is predominantly illness and a high infant mortality in a very recent past which cause anxiety among the Caribs. It is illness that induces the Caribs to search for better methods when known methods fail. In their search for alternatives they are not interested in ideological purity or in theoretical consistency: the Caribs are a very practical people who are interested in alternatives that work. That is also the reason that even shamans go quite easily to the doctor when their own treatment fails (see Kloos 1970, for examples).

The traditional merging of religion and medicine, the practical mind of the Caribs and the sociocultural pluralism of Surinam where shamans, obeh men, missionaries and physicians live side by side, gave rise to marked syncretism in contemporary Maroni River Carib belief.



## **Abstract**

*In traditional Carib religion, belief in spirits and shamanism were the key concepts. Under the influence of missionaries the Caribs became Roman Catholics. Yet the actual content of their beliefs is not entirely Christian. It is not entirely Carib either. Moreover, in certain beliefs traces of the Creole cultures of Surinam can be discerned. Thus, at least three cultures have contributed to contemporary belief, which as a syncretic religion is truly Carib because it is not found outside Carib society. The guiding principle of acceptance or rejection of new elements is a major element in Carib thought, namely the interpretation of illness in supernatural terms. In constructing their syncretic religion the Maroni River Caribs have been relatively free: although their way of life has been deeply influenced, they always have been independent, specially in the economic sense of the term.*

## **Resumen**

*En la religión tradicional de los Kari'ña, la creencia en los espíritus y el shamanismo constituían conceptos claves. Bajo la influencia de los misioneros estos indígenas se han convertido en católicos romanos, aunque el contenido actual de sus creencias no sea ni completamente cristiano ni completamente Kari'ña; además, es posible discernir en algunas de sus creencias rastros de la cultura criolla de Surinam. De esta manera, por lo menos tres culturas han hecho aportes a sus actuales creencias, configurando una religión sincrética que es auténticamente Kari'ña ya que sólo se practica dentro de esta sociedad indígena. El criterio básico que guía a los Kari'ña para aceptar o rechazar nuevos elementos religiosos, tiene que ver con la interpretación de la enfermedad en términos sobrenaturales. Al elaborar su religión sincrética los Kari'ña del río Maroni se han sentido relativamente libres. Aunque su estilo de vida ha sufrido cambios profundos, ellos siempre han sido independientes, sobre todo en el sentido económico de la palabra.*

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