



## Gender relations in the Central Northwest Amazon

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### Introduction

Various authors have alluded to the position of women in the Central Northwest Amazon (henceforth referred to as the Vaupés). Divergent and at times conflicting views emerge in the ethnographies written by anthropologists who have carried out fieldwork in this region. In addition, published materials by non-specialists dealing with the Vaupés (eg., authors of book reviews) show an even greater divergence. This paper discusses some possible reasons for these different interpretations, and attempts to reconcile, at least somewhat, the separate views.

Understanding the reasons for these differing conclusions is particularly useful for Vaupés gender studies. Virtually all authors have portrayed the inhabitants of this region as belonging to a rather classic, male-dominated, horticultural society. Some even comment on how patrilineal descent and patrilocality assures the political subordination of women. However, although the Vaupés has been described by some as a bastion of male domination it has also been described as a region in which society gives women significant power in certain crucial areas. With respect to gender, no one claims that the Tukano of the Vaupés are egalitarian. They are less blatantly male dominant than, for example, the Yanomamo yet more so in comparison to other neighboring groups.<sup>1</sup> Hence,

**Authors' note:** An earlier draft of this paper was read at the 45th Congress of Americanists, July, 1985, Bogota, Colombia. Fieldwork from October 1968 to November 1970 was supported by the Danforth Foundation and the Stanford Committee for Research in International Studies. Eighteen months of this time were spent with a longhouse community of Bará Indians on the Inambú River. "Tukanoan" refers to all riverine indigenous inhabitants of the Vaupés. Although many Tukanoans live on the Brazilian side of the border, this paper considers only those in Colombian territory. Given that the region has undergone profound changes, the discussion applies to the ethnographic present of the late 60's. I am grateful to Elizabeth Reichel, James Howe, Kaj Arhem, Jane Collier, and two anonymous reviewers for commenting on earlier drafts.

<sup>1</sup> For example, J. Langdon (1982) states that the Barasana, a Tukanoan group in the Pirá-paraná region, devalue and control women on the social plane far more than do the Siona, also of the Northwest Amazon. See also Chernela (1984: 29) and Overing Kaplan (1981).

whether referring to the differing region-specific conclusions or to comparisons made with neighboring groups, under standing the relationship between the sexes in the Vaupés remains problematic.

To what point, for example, can one determine whether certain behaviors (e.g., ritualized deference) indicate the extent to which Tukano women are actually subordinate to men as opposed to only appearing so? Below, explore some of the assumptions concerning how expressions of opposition and antagonism between the sexes are, or are not, indications of what might be termed "practical male dominance".

Practical male dominance— the ability of males to manipulate females with a minimum of effort and negative consequence— is contrasted with symbolic expressions of the same. Argue that some observers have concluded from the symbolic expressions of male dominance in the Vaupés that practical male dominance is much stronger than is actually the case and that this, coupled with the actual intra-regional variability, accounts for the differences found on the subject in the literature.

This paper limits its discussion to: 1) the social structural determinants of the differential amounts of power men and women wield and 2) why the Tukano tend to characterize women's power in negative terms. Used to focus the presentation is a provocative paper by Collier and Rosaldo (1981).

Currently the study of gender is full of persuasive arguments identifying the need to re-think virtually every related anthropological subdiscipline (e.g., Rogers 1978; Lamphere 1987; Moore 1988). Due to the importance of gender in Western society the study of gender roles is a particularly delicate subject. Westerners and Tukano alike see men and women as fundamentally different. However, the task of understanding what this means for the latter is hampered by an analytic language laden with unexamined assumptions, pseudo-objectivity, and great definitional variation of crucial concepts (e.g., power, status, equality, solidarity, sexuality). Furthermore one must take account of several native models; minimally those of the male and the female. One must also recognize that individuals are often unaware of significant structures and dynamics in their own society and under given conditions, choose to ignore and distort others. The researcher must be cognizant of the fact that both men and women in a given society tend to give outsiders a male-oriented perspective. As is so often the case, the dangers of an overly superficial portrayal of females in a given society are increased when the researcher is male, talks about women only with males, and is unaware of his own ethnocentric assumptions concerning sex differences.

Several well-known case studies of sexual opposition and antagonism exist for Lowland South America. Attempts to interpret these cases however, have resulted in a plethora of analyses and disagreement in the literature. Quinn characterizes Amazonian and New Guinea societies as follows:

From these two parts of the world come ethnographic accounts of institutionalized gang rape. Other elements of the complex are a concern with female pollution; a preoccupation with male sexual depletion; and elaborate male ceremonial activities, knowledge of which must be kept secret from women... Interper-

sonal relations between the sexes in these societies are also characterized as hostile and antagonistic (1977: 216).

Many general ethnological issues concerning gender can be profitably examined in the context of Lowland South American scholarship. For example, the analysis of gender often demonstrates why importing African or New Guinean models of kinship, particularly descent, to Amazonian cultures is so inadvisable (Shapiro 1988).<sup>2</sup> Crocker (1979) notes that while the Bororo base their social system on the idea of biological continuity through time, it refers more to the contrast between the principles of maleness and femaleness rather than on notions of descent. The Vaupés is a focal point because it offers the spectacular and well described Yuruparí ritual complex (S. Hugh-Jones, 1979); an instance of the "battle between the sexes" which is fought, like all proper battles, in the trenches and with propaganda (i.e. in the Vaupés, in skirmishes between real people and in myth and ritual).

Based on research in the Papurí region of the Vaupés, observed that Tukano women appear to project a "don't mess with me" attitude which they back up with sanctions not available for instance, to Yanomamo women. Marriages, following an initial period of instability, are long-lasting and monogamous. Unlike some other Lowland South American societies, could discern no institutionalized rape of any kind. What produced these differences between the Tukano and groups like the Yanomamo? Attributing such single-variable differences as mission-influence and the cessation of raiding and feuding or the cultivating of manioc rather than plantains is clearly inadequate.

Both the Bororo and the Tukano appropriate biology in their models of society. However, analyzing biologically-based assumptions about human nature and society, including those of the West, is not the same as studying biology (the underlying biological givens of sex are not addressed here). Western ideology is much enamored of naturalistic explanations of phenomena, and thus members of Western societies tend to automatically attribute gender differences in social status or observed behavior pattern— whether in Western or other societies— to underlying biological causes.<sup>3</sup> There are far too many examples of once-popular theories about sex differences currently "of historical interest only" because they foundered just at the point where they depended on unexamined assumptions concerning the universal givens of nature (Jaggar 1983). Here gender is considered to be an aspect of social personhood, determined to a large extent by economic and political processes.

<sup>2</sup> However, Whitehead's (1986) distinction between male cults and clan cults in Melanesia is very useful for Lowland South America. The Mundurucú rituals would be an example of a male cult, and the Yuruparí ceremony in the Vaupés an example of a clan cult.

<sup>3</sup> See Collier and Rosaldo's (1981: 315) trenchant criticisms of both descent and alliance theory as being too grounded in assumptions about human sexual biological givens. An even more forceful argument is made by Collier and Yanagisako (1987).

Discussion of the relations between the sexes in Amazonia has a long and lurid tradition. Koch-Grünberg, the noted German explorer who conducted extensive research in the Northwest Amazon, observed that:

In all the tribes that I visited the position of woman and her relation to man is a worthy one... how great is the part played... by woman; she enjoys respect... she is the equal of her husband, and in diligence and artistic skill perhaps even his superior (1908: 360).

Many of the problems with this sort of description and analysis are obvious. Koch-Grünberg lumps all the groups he visited into one category, and furthermore, as has become apparent among other 19th and early 20th century writers, what he meant by certain words may not be what one thinks he meant. And while he would seem to be agreeing that women have power in Amazonian societies that they lack in the West, when one determines his underlying assumptions, it is obvious that they are biologically based. He interpreted women's work as:

...heavy, but ...for the Indian, part of the natural order of things... Moreover, the physical strength of the two sexes is about equal, and it is by no means certain that the average man would be the master of an average woman in a fight (1908: 368-369).<sup>4</sup>

Koch-Grünberg's statements illustrate the pitfalls noted above in attempting to assess women's position in Lowland South American societies: 1) variation in the meaning of terms used, especially their connotation; 2) problems resulting from attempts to incorporate specific ethnographic examples into generalizations; 3) lack of analytical vocabulary to clearly and precisely communicate the points being made; 4) the influence of ethnocentrism and androcentrism; and 5) failure to gather data on crucial topics that might allow a more accurate assessment of the position of women.

All sorts of explanatory weaponry have been marshalled to account for Amazonian gender relations. Women's subordination, male fierceness, endemic raiding and feuding, polygyny, and other features of many Amazonian societies have been explained by sociobiological principles (Chagnon 1979) or by reference to ecological limits, particularly with respect to protein availability (Harris 1983) or the need to maintain carrying capacity (Siskind 1973). Some authors examine the consequences of various types of social structures such as, for example, the effects of residence rules and settlement pattern (Murphy 1956). Explanations based on affect as opposed to cognition have been suggested by Murphy and Murphy (1974), Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971), Gregor (1985), and many others. And while "explanation" means something different for anthropologists constructing structuralist models of how and what things mean rather than why they mean, a theory of causality does underlie all structuralist analyses: the assumption that nature, human and

<sup>4</sup> This is reminiscent of the notion -held by Durkheim and other 19th century theorists- that as civilization and morality progress, women become physically weaker, including a reduction in brain size (see Brown 1970).

environmental, will be mirrored in the symbol systems of a particular culture in a congruent and consistent fashion (C. Hugh-Jones 1979; Goldman 1981).

### **The Vaupés**

Tukanoans are a riverine-oriented people of the Central Northwest Amazon, a region straddling the border between Colombia and Brazil, on and above the Equator; an area of about the size of New England. Approximately 10,000 Tukanoans inhabit the tropical rainforest region with population density of no more than .3 per km<sup>2</sup> (PRORADAM 1979: (I) 372). Tukanoans speak Eastern Tukanoan and Arawak languages and participate in a regionally integrated social system characterized by extensive multilingualism and language exogamy. Traditional settlements consist of a single patrilocal multifamily longhouse which has now been replaced by the nucleated village. The men hunt, fish and clear the fields in which the women cultivate bitter manioc and other crops.

Tukanoans have developed an unusual marriage network in which each community belongs to one of sixteen different groups that speak sixteen different languages. Marriages must take place between individuals not only from different communities but from different primary languages. The main units of Tukanoan social structure, in ascending order of inclusion, are the local descent group, the sib or clan, the (ideally) exogamous language group, and the poorly understood phratry. The language group, usually referred to as tribe, is a named patrilineal descent unit composed of from six to more than thirty clans. Distinguishing features are 1) the language and name; 2) separate founding ancestors and distinct roles in the origin myth cycle; 3) the right to ancestral power through the use of certain linguistic property such as sacred chants; 4) the right to manufacture and use certain kinds of ritual property; and 5) a traditional association with certain ceremonial or near-ceremonial objects. Membership is permanent and public; the one fact known about an individual before anything else is his or her language group.

### **Social structural considerations in describing gender relations in the Vaupés**

Undoubtedly some of the discrepancy found among Vaupés authors results from a lack of agreement about analytic language and from various unexamined assumptions held about the meaning of terminology.

Collier and Rosaldo (1981) have analyzed politics and gender in what they term "brideservice" or "simple" (small-scale) societies. They argue that these societies—virtually all hunter-gatherers and many horticulturalists—differ so much from "bridewealth societies" that even their shared features (e.g., polygyny) are similar only on the surface. In brief, "brideservice" societies are characterized by relative egalitarianism but sexual asymmetry. No adult can command the labor or obedience of any other, and while both sexes produce economically important commodities, in particular foodstuffs, "...the social relations of the sexes are not created

from equal or balanced exchanges of male and female products" (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 282). Relations between affines are characterized by gifts of labor by the groom (brideservice), as opposed to bridewealth societies:

...in which goods given on marriage are seen as payment for rights to a woman's labor, sexuality, or offspring; in such groups, the acquisition of marital prestations typically places the groom in a relationship of debt to senior kinfolk who provide young men the prerequisites for launching their adult careers (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 278).

Simply put, in brideservice societies the groom is indebted to his senior affines and in bridewealth societies, to his own senior kinfolk.

While bridewealth societies seem to characterize most horticultural tribal societies (e.g., in Africa), Collier and Rosaldo claim their model for brideservice societies generally applies to the Amazon (1981: 279). They focus particularly on the Yanomamo, Sirionó, Mundurucú, and Sharanahua. The Northwest Amazon, however, does not fit their model. There is no institutionalized brideservice.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, affinity does not regularly organize production and, given patrilocal settlement exogamy, and not even temporary uxorilocality, the opportunity for males to interact daily with their father- or brothers-in-law simply does not occur to any significant degree.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, female sexuality is not celebrated in the manner described by Collier and Rosaldo.

Understanding more comprehensively why the Vaupés does not fit Collier and Rosaldo's model is instructive. For example, the authors state that in brideservice societies, while men and women contribute to the diet in complementary fashion, women are only required to feed families, whereas men will distribute their meat throughout the group (1981: 281). In the Vaupés, Tukanoan men often bring back only enough fish to feed their families, and while game and sometimes fish are shared, it is the women who do the actual distributing. Men do however acquire prestige when they provide meat for an entire longhouse. Women's distribution of the items they produce is far more likely to be dyadic (eg., a gift of a pineapple to a specific other hearth group in the longhouse), or mainly symbolic (i.e., when each wife contributes a basket of manioc cake and pepper pot at a communal meal). Thus, Tukanoans do fit Collier and Rosaldo's generalization that the social relations of the sexes are not created from equal or balanced exchanges of male and female products, even though one might see such exchanges occurring in strictly material terms (1981: 282).

Tukanoan men do not, in any formal sense, create claims to women by performing services for in-laws as occurs in the brideservice societies described by Collier and Rosaldo. But it is the case that goods cannot be converted into the kinship ties that structure productive obligations (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 288).

<sup>5</sup> Brideservice is found in the neighboring Mirití region (E. Reichel, personal communication). In addition, Arhem notes uxorilocal residence can occur in "gift" marriages where women are not exchanged (1987: 150, 156).

<sup>6</sup> This is true for the time of fieldwork (1968-70); at present, patrilocality is breaking down in the most acculturated settlements.

Among the Bará, when inquiring about "brideprice," (because Goldman [1963] had mentioned it in connection with a Cubeo headman obtaining a second wife), I was informed in no uncertain terms that only a woman can be exchanged for another woman. Collier and Rosaldo offer the following explanation:

...it is precisely because women are producers, whose marriages do establish relations of inequality between bachelors and married men, that exchanges of women can provide the basic metaphor for social order in brideservice (1981: 299).<sup>7</sup>

An additional similarity between the Vaupés and Collier and Rosaldo's composite picture is that in the former marriage is a male achievement, enabling men to attain a public position not generally enjoyed by their wives (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 280). It can be argued that, in the Vaupés, the beginning stages of marriage mark a decline in female status and autonomy (Jackson 1983). Marriage confers adult status on Tukanoan men more than upon women because it is more of an achievement for men. The Vaupés fits Collier and Rosaldo's characterization of a newlywed wife having no increase in access to male products because of her change in status. This means that young men need wives more than young women need husbands. "Marriage is cast, overwhelmingly, as a matter of a man's establishing claims to the moral commitment and daily services of some particular bride" (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 283-84).

The Vaupés also fits the general picture of brideservice societies in the lack of elaborate wedding ceremonies. Unique among Tukanoan life crisis events, a "wedding" is almost entirely secular and with little ceremony. Once a marriage has been agreed upon, the bride simply moves to the groom's settlement.

Equally applicable is the conclusion drawn by Collier and Rosaldo that marriage is seen by brideservice societies as a process rather than an event. Although the Tukanoan bride's move to her husband's settlement is a definite event, marriage can nonetheless be seen as a succession of stages in a gradual evolution from the status of single to what we might term "fully married" (Jackson 1983: Chapter 7).

Collier and Rosaldo report an almost universal preference for some form of direct-exchange marriage in brideservice societies, stating that direct exchange is seen as expressing men's ability to create harmony, and hence social order, in the face of apparently conflict-ridden heterosexual relations (1981: 300). Tukanoans clearly prefer direct exchange, and a sample of 423 marriages reveals a fairly high percentage of direct exchanges (62.9%). Arhem (1981) also states that direct exchange is a preferred form of marriage, but that among the Makuna most marriages are not exchanges. These "gift marriages," say the Makuna, merely affirm the presence of on-going alliance relations between affinally related longhouses.

Another similarity is the egalitarianism found in these societies. Although Tukanoan society contains many features of ranked societies, it does not have

<sup>7</sup> "In the tropical forest environment land is abundant and women's labour is the major constraint in the economy. Women, in a sense, represent a scarce and valued resource. Apart from ritual paraphernalia, there is no other tangible form of social value among the Makuna" (Arhem 1987: 138).

institutionalized competitions for leadership roles and, in fact, most men do not aspire to such roles. All men do, however, compete with other men for women. Collier and Rosaldo describe this state of affairs accurately, even though open raiding and feuding is no longer evident:

rather ...disputes in public contexts are overwhelmingly concerned with the wives that all men need and all can fear to lose: There is a politics of sex... Male adulthood is predicated on men's claims to the spouses who attend their equal hearths, and men compete and fight for the attainment of a secure marital status (1981: 290).

Although men are dominant in many respects, a husband depends on his wife choosing to stay with him and choosing to acknowledge the bond of marriage by carrying out her role as wife. Neither a husband nor his kinsmen have power to force her to do their bidding, and if she wishes to end the marriage they are powerless to keep her. In Vaupés relations of production— as opposed to other spheres of interaction— men find no advantage in defining women as inferior and, indeed, do not do so (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 313).<sup>8</sup>

Collier and Rosaldo state that the emphasis on male autonomy and the necessity of adopting (and backing up) a "don't mess with me" stance in these societies contributes, ironically, to women's autonomy. This is because everyone is mutually dependent on each other. It is in this sense that Tukanoans can be categorized as an egalitarian society. Men cannot ensure compliance from women in the way high-ranking men in many stratified societies can:

Thus, women's will is recognized at the same time that men may speak in terms of male-male marital exchanges because marriages, like all social relationships in brideservice societies, depend, ultimately on the cooperative commitment of potentially autonomous individuals..." (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 297).

As many authors have noted for the Vaupés, women are seen as actively interested in sex. In contrast to the way women's sexuality is seen in some societies, where it is described as an interest in being sexually attractive and in acquiring the nonsexual and reproductive benefits of sexual encounters with men, Tukanoan women are depicted in myth and discussions of actual incidents as highly sexed. Tukanoan women quite definitely see themselves, and are seen by others, as sexual beings; the Victorian stereotype of the sexually unresponsive wife who obliges her husband or is interested solely in reproduction does not apply. While descriptions of women greedy for sex *per se* can be easily found in the West, the associated stigmas are more likely to be rather negative ones partaking of the angel/whore or virgin mother/witch dichotomy. This widespread complex is absent in the Vaupés, although negative images of sexually active females are certainly present. Also lacking is the concept of a mother or sister who betrays family honor through im-

<sup>8</sup> A similar point is made by Errington and Gewertz (1987) about the Chambri of New Guinea with respect to women's labor, and note that while men may be dominant in some regards it is ethnocentric to assume that male strategies for achieving self worth inevitably result in women's devaluation and male domination.



proper sexuality. Tukanoan women are seduced into betraying their kinsmen in several myths, but no issues of honor are at stake.

In some ways however, Tukanoan women do not fit Collier and Rosaldo's description of the role played by extramarital sex in brideservice societies. It would appear that patrilocality and settlement exogamy create special problems for would-be adulterers in the Vaupés in addition to those encountered by, for instance, San women seeking extramarital relations (Shostak 1981). While Collier and Rosaldo note that data on sexual behavior is difficult to obtain, they are impressed with how much is said about sexuality in brideservice societies. Based on my experience, Bará women and men certainly talked and joked about sex, but her anecdotal impression is that things are far more reserved than among, for instance, the San. In fact, G. Reichel-Dolmatoff considers the Barasana to be somewhat puritanical about sex (1971). A problem in Vaupés scholarship is that, with the exception of Reichel-Dolmatoff, authors do not say much about sexual behavior itself<sup>9</sup> (although T. Langdon notes the Barasana talk about it frequently). And the information they do provide, about where intercourse is likely to take place, at what time of the day or night, its frequency, or the frequency, nature, and function of homosexual behavior, is for the most part anecdotal.

The idea of female sexuality as potentially dangerous to men, so frequent a theme in Amazonia and New Guinea, is very much present in the Vaupés. While women's rituals are less elaborated than in many of the societies discussed by Collier and Rosaldo (1981: 276), what rituals there are, tend to fit with the authors' characterization as having less to do with the creation of life than with health and sexual pleasure.

One can begin to understand some of the reasons not only why in certain respects women appear to have power in ways not available to them in complex societies, but also why certain blatant forms of male domination— such as gang rape— appear in the literature on Lowland South America and do not become expunged even with the most well-informed, up-to-date and energetic rethinking and reanalysis.

Collier and Rosaldo observe that sex emerges as a subject for both play and violence. Their examples of playful sexual contests are paralleled in the activities at the end of Cubeo mourning rites (Goldman 1963: 238), or the wild fruit (in particular *miriti*) harvest festivals involving sexual challenge and threat found in all Tukanoan groups. Important here is the association between fertility (of wild, not domestic comestibles— which are cultivated by women), male maturity, male strength, and symbolic expressions of male sexual violence toward affinal women— a linkage noted by Arhem (1980) and S. Hugh-Jones (1979: 5).

Because a man's public status rests on his access to women, a wife's adultery becomes a direct challenge to his claim for adult independence. Such challenges are often met with violence (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 292).

<sup>9</sup> C. Hugh-Jones (1979) provides a spectacular account of the meaning of Barasana sexuality.

To a certain degree, this is why gang rape is so "ideal" a threat in those Amazonian societies where it is found:

Gang rape is a peculiarly appropriate sanction... because it simultaneously reveals... women's inability to forge social relationships through the use of their sexuality, asserts the controlling and even creative power of male prowess, and affirms male solidarity in the face of women who disrupt their bonds (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 297).

In some instances even a woman's close male kin approve of the rape, although they do not participate in it.

Although I did not witness or hear of any physical violence directed at women in the Vaupés, I do not claim that it does not occur.<sup>10</sup> It does appear however, that this type of violence occurs far less in this region than among the Yanomamo, and that this is evidence that Vaupés women have higher status and more power than Yanomamo or other women who are physically attacked by men.<sup>11</sup>

Sorensen (1984: 186) refers to descriptions by Goldman and others as instances of gang rape. What Goldman is in fact saying is that:

...as the ultimate act, men take women, the wives of their phratry mates, into the bush and copulate, couples changing partners as often as they like... this ritual sequence is to be understood as somewhat more than sexual consummation. It is also an act of mass adultery. (1963: 239).

While Goldman does not say explicitly is that women willingly participate. The impression given is one of an orgy rather than gang rape. Apart from non-consenting sex perhaps occurring as a part of bride capture,<sup>12</sup> the available literature does not suggest any forms of institutionalized rape in the Vaupés. And with the exception of Sorensen, no other authority on the Vaupés has reported a case of institutionalized rape. Although I did not hear of any cases of rape while in the region, some authors do mention sexual violence against women, and rape does occur in myth.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> E. Reichel reports physical violence against women in the Mirití region; she also reports mass adultery at the end of certain ceremonies.

<sup>11</sup> However, this is problematic. Although the lack of violence *à la* the Yanomamo may seem to indicate greater female power, and perhaps the oft-made observation that bullies are insecure applies, this would imply that men who do not have to resort to violence or threat of violence in a given situation have far more real power. The same applies to marital stability vs. instability (e.g., as among the Sharanahua and Yanomamo); while stability might seem an indication of female power, it can be argued that Tukano males are just as interested in stable marriages as females, if not more, and marital stability would therefore be another indication of men being able to control their women. What makes the difference is what the women want and get, when their goals are different from men's; a complicated topic to research.

<sup>12</sup> Although rape of a captured bride does not seem to occur in Arhem's cases -see his Appendix I (1981) its function as a part of bride capture would be quite different than that for institutionalized rape, especially gang rape.

<sup>13</sup> G. Reichel-Dolmatoff reports conflicts arising over "violation or rape of women" (1971: 149), and E. Reichel (personal communication) reports physical violence against women in the neighboring Mirití region. Kaj Arhem also told me of a case of rape of a white woman among the Makuna.

In sum, although reliable data on the frequency of male physical violence against females, sexual or otherwise, in the Vaupés are missing, the idea is not a foreign one. But institutionalized rape, in the sense of a recognized practice for punishing women, does not seem to exist.

The question of sexuality leads us to compare wives to sisters, for certainly one crucial difference is that men have sexual access to potential and actual wives, but not to their sisters. This is of course also true in more complex societies and the West, but the consequences are different.

Clearly sex and marriage are not the same, but Collier and Rosaldo make the point that members of small-scale societies do conflate sex and marriage for some purposes and that this results in incest prohibitions and similar themes having the power for organizing social relations that they do (1981: 291). Collier and Rosaldo argue that sexual access marks the establishment of both male autonomy and adult cooperative relations, and it is this that turns wives into valuables to be exchanged and guarded (1981: 292).

It is here that the conjoining of social structure and maleness and femaleness becomes so crucial; both wives/sweethearts and sisters are women, and can be spoken of and treated, practically and symbolically, in similar terms. But they differ in terms of descent. Sisters are symbolized as feces in the Pirá-paraná area of the Vaupés because they must be "lost" in order for the system to work (C. Hugh-Jones: 1979). In some ways sisters embody several crucial Tukanoan structural contradictions regarding women. In a Tatuyo myth<sup>14</sup> (Bidou, 1979), a sister takes pity on her brother masturbating against a tree trunk and offers herself. Significantly, she is sexual out of concern for her brother. It is my impression that improper sexuality in affinal women is usually attributed to selfish desires, sexual and nonsexual. Such sisterly concern is laudable perhaps, but it is nonetheless incest, and leads to conflict. While the opposite—marrying or sleeping with affines—is not by definition immoral, it can be dangerous, and definitely lacks many of the benefits sex with one's female agnates would provide.

Even more beneficial would be some sort of sex with one's male agnates, as noted by several analysts of the Vaupés. Goldman for example, speaks of "bisexuality" to refer to symbolized sex between male agnates. Collier and Rosaldo's model of uni-sexual (male-male) reproduction aptly describes the exclusively male and agnatic "never-never land" fantasized in some parts of Vaupés ritual.

Tukanoans themselves can be seen to express this conflict, as Arhem (1987) shows in his discussion of two contradictory ideal types of Makuna marriage. One ideal marriage is bride capture. The other is the exchange of sisters between true cross-cousins. Arhem connects the first to descent and the second to alliance models of society. "Marrying far away" and bride capture can be seen as expressing the idea

<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps advisable at this point to remind the reader that the cultural integration in the region means that, with exception of Goldman's Cubeo and, at times, the Makuna studied by Arhem, when the Hugh-Joneses or Bidou (or any other authority on Tukanoans), speak of Barasana or Tatuyo culture and society, all the married women in these "societies" are by definition not Barasana or Tatuyo.

of maleness vs. femaleness where (from a male perspective) femaleness represents the other, the unknown, the wild, the mysterious, even the enemy that must be subdued, tamed, and incorporated. Arhem's discussion of shamans rendering newly arrived brides "safe" is pertinent here (1987: 137). The other ideal represents alliance in its peculiar Amazonian garb, bringing affinity close and domesticating it with the intimacy and emotional safety of siblingship. Of course this has consequences for the symbolic meaning of sister, which takes on an anomalous and pivotal quality. In addition to the merging of wife into "affinal sister," hopefully accomplished by an on-going alliance relationship, sisters are exchanged, furnishing another equivalence between the two women. The same can be argued to happen between the two men, and much evidence exists to support the idea that when all goes well brothers-in-law achieve a modified brotherly relationship. And of course brother and sister are equivalent with respect to some characteristics, in particular local descent group membership. Thus sisters are anomalous, they are both "women" and "not women," in terms of certain gender characteristics. This is perhaps one reason why incest is such a recurring theme-- it symbolically highlights this anomaly and joins it to the women-as-sexual theme found throughout Amazonia.

On the other hand, "women" are often symbolically merged with "wives." Wives and potential wives create competition among males, which must be managed and downplayed, and therefore "women" are seen as detrimental to male solidarity. Several authors writing about gender (e.g., Collier 1974; Denich 1974) refer to wives as the proverbial cat that takes the blame for disruptions to lessen disputes between male agnates. Also, women-as-wives, as noted above, quintessentially represent "the other."

Sisters are "potentially creative" only by leaving. Individual women are both creators and destroyers, but from the point of view of the local group the creative part, though necessary, involves risk-- an association with other, alien people who are not incorporated into the local descent group. It is one's own kinswomen who carry out a kind of destruction: as C. Hugh-Jones (1979) has noted, sisters destroy the generation group at the longhouse because they leave it when they marry. Wives differ from sisters in important respects for men; similarly, wives differ from lovers. Most particularly, given the patrilineal/patrilocal, settlement-exogamic pattern, taking a lover in the Vaupés is a serious endeavor. If one is male, taking a lover most often means committing adultery with the wife of a co-resident agnate. Yet losing a lover does not involve some of the dangers of losing a wife. In some respects the sex-with-lover relationship is dangerous in ways parallel to the sex-with-sister one. Both of these male-female relationships involving immoral sex show by contrast what is difficult about the moral sexual relationship with one's wife. Sex with a sister involves a known person who, as the Tatuayo myth shows, might be motivated by concern for her brother, as opposed to being interested only in her own desires. And while adultery is dangerous, it does not produce some of the anxieties present in the husband-wife relationship; if a lover leaves, one is not demoted to bachelor status again, forced to eat with one's mother or sister, without

a mother for one's children. If hunting for wives is likened to hunting for game, as is asserted by both the Hugh-Joneses' and G. Reichel-Dolmatoff's informants, we have a theme involving the idea of sexual violence and male dominance that does not apply to sexual relations with forbidden women. It seems that interaction with any kind of woman presents problems, as most of the culture heroes in Tukanoan myths discover.

From a man's point of view, wanting to be either a good husband or good lover will automatically conflict to some extent with performing other roles well-- as a "fierce" member of a patrilineage, a symbol of the descent group's strength. This struggle does not apply to women; conflicts between descent-group role expectations and expectations derived from the wife/mother role arise only when a dispute occurs between the two families (and they live in different settlements) and a woman's loyalties are torn.

Since only women play the roles of mother, sister, wife, etc., the sexual politics built into a patrilineal/patrilocal social structure will contribute to any negative conceptualizations of women found in these societies. Like other people, individual Tukanoans seek to manipulate action to their own best interests, which rest on a very important man's or a male group's ability to successfully convince, persuade, or coerce flesh-and-blood women --be they sisters or wives-- to accept something they do not initially want. T. Langdon (1975: 28) and Arhem have discussed this thoroughly with regard to marriage-making in the Pirá-paraná, as I have for the Inambú Tukanoans (Jackson: 1983). C. Hugh-Jones attributes male dominance in part to such gender politics: "the practical political supremacy of men" (1979: 256).

This built-in divergence of interests is illustrated by the separate interests between the sexes in marriage-making. From a woman's point of view, she would like to be a close FZD; there are no advantages, at least immediately apparent to me, in being a bride captured by a group of men or in marrying far away. Indeed, from many statements from Vaupés informants about trade-offs made at marriage-making and the above discussion about why marriage is seen as an achievement for men and not for women, marriage itself may offer relatively few immediate advantages for a woman, especially when compared to what it accomplishes for men. But despite some male domination, it is the case that men cannot completely control their wives via methods available to men in bridewealth and more complex societies, either in terms of guaranteeing marriage for life (or until the husband opts to terminate a given marriage, which appears to occur very seldom in the Vaupés), or in terms of controlling wives' behavior. A Tukanoan father cannot oblige his daughter to marry the man he has chosen for her nor can a Tukanoan husband threaten repudiation and divorce as, for example, Muslim husband can. Tukanoan wives, especially in the first years of marriage, do run home-- and whether or not the men find them and bring them back or not, it is significant that wives run home when disgruntled or want to exert authority, as compared to, for instance, committing suicide, an option chosen by some unhappy pre-revolutionary Chinese wives who could not run home so easily. We can see that in societies like those of the

Vaupés, actual or threatened male violence towards women is actually one of the few options available to men, singly or in groups.

This takes one a long way in accounting for why so many expressions can be found in Vaupés culture about the danger of the female principle and the danger of flesh-and-blood women— for instance, that men should not warm themselves by the fire (a female symbol— see C. Hugh-Jones 1979). All over Lowland South America personifications of the female principle in the form of powerful female spirits threaten mortal men (see, e.g., Chapman 1983, on the Selk'nam). According to the Makuna, Romi Kumu, the ancestress creator, becomes furious when the men play the Yuruparí flutes, becoming dangerous to men "just as Juruparí is dangerous to women and children" (Arhem 1980: 22).

Seeing the danger the powerful female poses to men's interests takes us a long way in trying to account for why male adulthood is associated with fierceness and creativity, and linked to fertility and the forest fruit Yuruparí rituals. Collier and Rosaldo note that heterosexuality often "comes to take on conflict-laden connotations and...views of male adulthood tend to associate masculine creativity with men's use of force" (1981: 292). The author suggests that, ironically, male violence can be a sign of a lack of other forms of power over females, or at least a sign of male insecurity about such lacks. Terrorist tactics and torture do not work as well as internalized justifications of the status quo, and so when such tactics appear, a possible conclusion is that the more subtle and ultimately effective forms of social control do not operate. This interpretation indicates that data on actual or threatened male sexual violence, and especially institutionalized gang rape reveal not only the importance of sexuality in the sex-gender system, but how insecure men can become over controlling their women.

This seems a much more plausible and elegant explanation than a compensation model that postulates that since women create life men must match them by being creative masters of culturally created aggression and death in hunting and warfare. While in some ways Vaupés women are seen as more natural and men more cultural, this is not at all a simple equivalence (Ortner 1974; Jackson 1983: 181).<sup>15</sup>

From the preceding discussion we can see that in the Vaupés, heterosexual relations, both approved of and disapproved of, at times appear as a trap. From this it is a logical pass to concluding that women— from a male point of view— make for problems, period. But it is clear to us that women-as-category and as flesh-and-blood beings are often problems because of stereotyped cultural norms. Women can be seen as convenient scapegoats, useful for diverting attention from fissures in the united front of male agnate solidarity.

<sup>15</sup> Strathern (1980) argues that in our own culture the formulation of a nature/culture dichotomy out of a set of meanings "rich in semantic ambiguity" is the result of ideological intention; Wagner (1975) has written a whole book on this intention.

This is perhaps related to the mythic theme of a male paradise, a childlike (or at least adolescent and pre-marital) utopia of undisturbed and at times eroticized<sup>16</sup> brotherly solidarity, reunion with parents (ancestors), free feeding (one is not dependent on women), etc.: the unisexual (male-male) or bisexual agnatic model of reproduction mentioned above. When these models emerge, in myth and ritual, a fraternal image results; an association concerned with men's issues such as initiating new members, teaching them the secret handshakes, as it were, and instilling attachment and loyalty. The interaction in this fraternity is harmonious, for it is women who cause trouble (see Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 296). Thus, some of the associated activities involve sending messages reinforcing the "men only" concept: in the Vaupés during the major Yuruparí ceremony, "Women are symbolically sent back to where they came from, outside and beyond male society" (S. Hugh-Jones 1977: 210). While it is quite true that women, in myth and in histories of disputes, do in fact make trouble, to a certain extent they are also patsies; the social system uses them as built-in agents provocateurs.

In actuality, a male-only Tukanoan world would be an unrecognizable place, since to a large extent for Tukanoans "Politics are sexual politics because, whatever else they may concern, relations among men are organized through men's claims to women" (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 314). This is not to downplay the importance of the principle of patriliney, but rather to emphasize how crucial and problematic is the role played by Tukanoan women as creators of the links between brothers-in-law, between father and son, and between father and son-in-law.<sup>17</sup>

One can now understand better why ritual may often invoke the notion of male fierceness and institutionalized sexual aggression against women. The Cubeo mourning ceremony, often with blatant symbolic sexual aggression, and the forest fruit harvest ceremonies involving the Yuruparí are Vaupés examples. Other rather spectacular ones are found, for instance, among the Mehinacu (Gregor 1985) and the Mundurucú. The battle of the sexes, as the Murphys point out, is not fought by individual gladiators, as in our society, but by armies (1974: 112).

A society dominated by women would appear catastrophic to Tukano men; the mythical one certainly does. But in some ways, to a Westerner the foundations of such a society are intriguing because, as Bamberger points out, the mythical scenarios of a rule by women, although the opposite of a Golden Age, do not suggest that "the only or even rightful place of women is at the hearth because of her child-bearing capacity" (1974: 279).

This is also what the Murphys conclude. Unlike surgeon generals who say Western women cannot rule because of raging hormones, Mundurucú men concede that women are able to rule. They should not have power because when they had it they did not use it properly— an argument couched in moral rather than biological

<sup>16</sup> See Langdon (1975) and Sorensen (1984) -who interprets the male homoeroticism he reports as at times a ploy to lessen husbands' brothers' sexual interest in their wives.

<sup>17</sup> See Shapiro, 1985, on the neglected role of women and of brother-sister ties in the organization of marriage.

terms. While misogynist, the myths are moot about the ultimate cause of women's immorality. They certainly do not imply that female biology makes women weak and powerless; if anything, the reverse is suggested.

What are women's immoral acts that make them unfit rulers? Greedy sexuality, trickery and self-interest. The Bará version of the Yuruparí myth makes it clear that women did not want to use their nature, specifically their sexual nature, appropriately-- to have children, to reproduce society.<sup>18</sup> Over and over women are pictured as not wanting to act for the collective interest, as men purportedly do. But to a large extent this is also built in because, finally, in some crucial respects women-- all women-- are excluded from membership in these agnatically constituted communities. Sexual women, whether sisters or wives, are not seen as acting for the collective benefit of society because they cannot--the system does not permit it. Sisters are fence straddlers, destined, like feces, to be potentially creative only by leaving, being sexual with non-agnates. In so doing they make room for wives, but wives are all non-agnatic "others." Hence, the salience of the theme of brother-sister incest. It grapples with the contradiction built into this form of patrilineal structure: sister is sexual woman and sister is agnate, but these two roles cannot be played by the same person. When they are-- as in the beginning of the Tatuvo myth-- they poignantly illustrate the classic patrilineal dilemma. So many things would be unproblematic if "sexual woman" and "female agnate" could be the same person. And in some ways more perfect still would be unisexual (male-male) reproduction. This is ultimately a consequence, not of built-in male chauvinism, but of the patrilineal social structure in which the Tukano males find themselves living out their lives and making sense of through symbols.

Descent and alliance take very different forms in Lowland South America than in Africa. The "emphasis on the corporate properties of descent groups, on genealogical reckoning, and on the analytic distinction between descent and patrilineal affiliation" (Shapiro 1985: 3) do not make the Atlantic crossing very well. In the Vaupés gender difference is far more crucial a factor and principal symbol.<sup>19</sup> If we are to think about first principles in the sense of logical givens-- in order to analyze a kinship terminology (see Scheffler and Lounsbury 1971) or to understand how biologically conceptualized male and female principles are used in a culture's symbol systems-- one must still investigate these empirically rather than hold a priori assumptions about them.

I have made an argument locating gender relations in the social, rather than the natural, order of the Vaupés. I do not deny the the importance of the natural-- that men and women, whether they be in the Amazon or elsewhere, are biologically

<sup>18</sup> According to E. Reichel (personal communication), Yukuna and Tanimuka women of the Mirí speak of menstruation and childbirth being given to women after the Yuruparí was taken from them and the men took over. A clear connection is made here between women's reproductive capacity seen as linked to men's and patrilineal interests and the overthrow of female rule.

<sup>19</sup> Crocker's points about the principle of sexual dichotomy being paramount (in all the Gê systems as well as the Bororo: 1979, p. 295) apply to the Vaupés as well.



different. But as has been pointed out for other patrilineal societies, although at times female imagery symbolizes females, at other times it symbolizes sexuality--proper or improper. Or affinal relations. Or, more generally, "the other." All of these symbolic roles female imagery plays have in turn influenced how women are conceptualized, and none of these symbols is automatically primary. An analogy is that while food often symbolizes sex, sex can also symbolize food. As Collier and Rosaldo 1981 point out so eloquently, theories about sex differences all too often founder just at the point where they emerge from unexamined assumptions about the universal givens of nature.

## Conclusions

Partly because the forms male dominance took in the Vaupés seemed quite different from its forms in the West, and partly because male dominance was so clearly structured into Vaupés society, I was led to ponder this and write about it (1983 and 1986). It was comparing what I had observed and read about in the West of male domination and what I had read of other patrilineal/patrilocal societies that led me to suggest that Vaupés women had a surprising amount of power at their disposal. None of what I am pointing out about patriliney is news; what is important is to understand the particular configuration found in the Vaupés.

The above does not intend to speculate on how the system in the Vaupés originally came about, or about ultimate, final causes. But it is important to locate gender relations in a context of economic and political relationships, regardless of the form of justification they might take (e.g., being described and justified in an idiom of naturalness, specifically that of female nature), especially since we in the West also look to nature to describe the major divisions in our social world. In Tukanoan culture, nature-- female nature-- can be a symbol standing for something else just as much as other symbols ultimately can refer to nature, and hence we must guard against assuming the primacy of a particular symbol-referent relationship.

## Abstract

*Tukanoans of the Northwest Amazon in general fit a model proposed by Collier and Rosaldo that analyzes small-scale "brideservice" societies and argues that the particular forms of social and economic life found in them play a significant role in constructing inequalities between the sexes and their notions about masculinity and femininity. However, in certain crucial respects Tukanoans do not fit this model-- for one thing, they lack brideservice. Understanding how Tukanoans depart from the basic model sheds light on why Vaupés specialists have evaluated the relative position of men and women differently. The paper contrasts practical male dominance with symbolic expressions of it, arguing that Tukanoan social structure blocks men's efforts to translate symbolic dominance into action.*

## Resumen

Por lo general, los Tukanos del noroeste amazónico se encuadran en un modelo propuesto por Collier y Rosaldo, el cual analiza pequeñas sociedades que efectúan el servicio matrimonial (*brideservice*). Este modelo acepta que en dichas sociedades, sus particulares formas de vida social y económica juegan un papel significativo en la creación de desigualdades entre los sexos y los conceptos de masculinidad y feminidad. Sin embargo, en algunos aspectos importantes, los Tukanos se desvían del modelo— ya que no reconocen el concepto de servicio matrimonial. Comprender los aspectos en que los Tukanos no cuadran en el modelo básico, da luz al porque los investigadores que trabajan en poblados del Vaupés han venido evaluando en forma diferente la posición relativa de hombres y mujeres. Este artículo contrasta el "dominio práctico del hombre" (*practical male dominance*) con sus expresiones simbólicas, aceptando que la estructura social de los Tukanos bloquea los esfuerzos del hombre para convertir el dominio simbólico en acción.

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