



## Bush-spirit encounters in Warao life and lore<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The Warao society comprises approximately 30,000 individuals, roughly 75 percent of whom inhabit the wetlands of the Middle and Lower Orinoco Delta (Heinen and Caballero Arias 1992: 15; Heinen 1988: 592) (Map 1). The remaining 25 percent live in the Upper Delta and in regions adjacent to the delta. The concept of the Warao as a political unit, that is, as a tribe or as a "nation," is probably attributable to the colonial frontier. To the Indians themselves any such notion is alien, for they have never been organized into corporate chiefdoms. The largest sociopolitical aggregate to which a Warao feels he or she belongs is a regional group of four or five bands, each comprising on average fifty to sixty individuals. Thus, rather than admitting to a unifying political bond, local groups acknowledge a generalized cultural and linguistic affinity that embraces, at least as distantly related, anybody who speaks Waraoan as his or her native tongue. Included in this linguistic relationship are, for example, several Warao-speaking splinter groups of Lokono Indians in the southeastern sector of the delta (Río Grande and Amacuro), whose Arawakan ancestors have been in contact with Warao groups in pre-Columbian and especially in colonial times, when substantial numbers of both ethnic groups lived together in the same mission pueblos.

It is difficult to estimate how long ago the Warao first chose to live in the Orinoco Delta. In their oral literature narrators speak of distant times when the island of Trinidad was still connected with the mainland, some six or seven thousand years ago (Wilbert, J. 1993: 248). Unlikely as the recollection of so remote an occurrence might seem to be, archaeological evidence does support the presence

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of ancestral Warao in the area at that time (Rouse and Cruxent 1963: 38, 53). Furthermore, early explorers like Walter Raleigh (1770 [1596]) reported the existence in the Orinoco Delta of several regional Warao groups. Thus it is fairly safe to say that Warao-speaking Indians occupied these wetlands as far back as to a pre-European epoch.

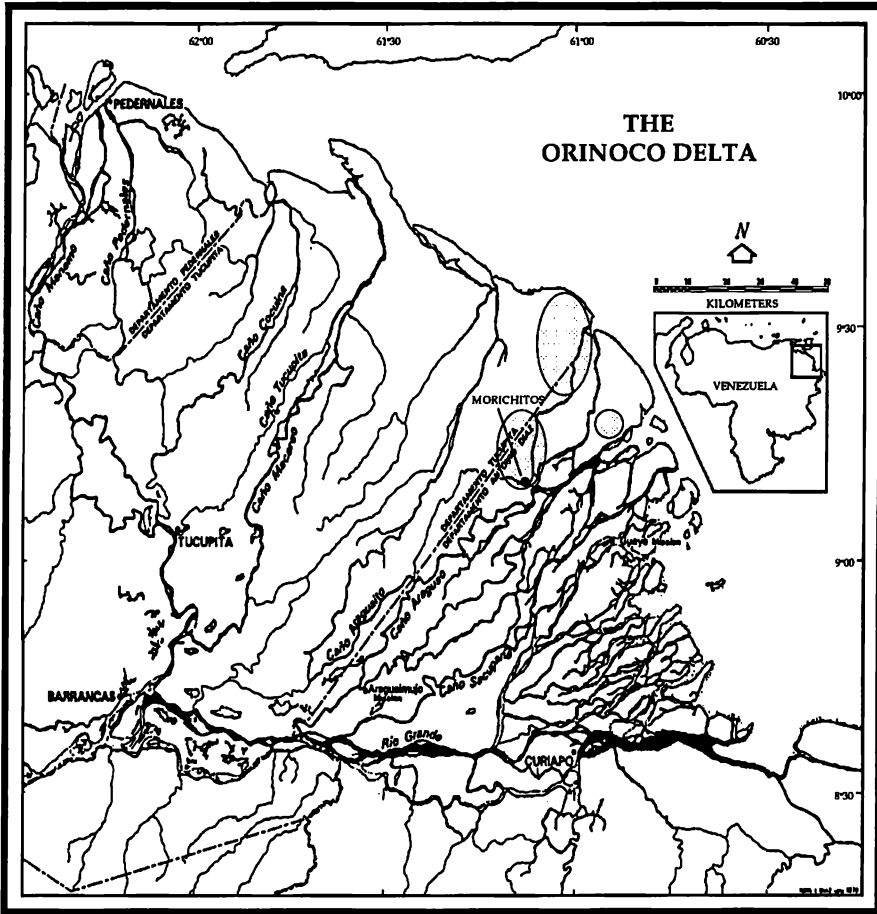
As this prolonged occupation of the deltaic wetlands would suggest, the Warao are traditionally an aquatic-oriented people of fishermen and swamp foragers. Throughout centuries of littoral adaptation they developed a habitat-appropriate technology and acquired the ecological sophistication necessary for effective exploitation of the diverse river, floodplain, levee, and savanna ecosystems of their marginal biome. Adaptive perseverance in the Orinoco Delta, however, came at a price, as environmental, biological, and sociocultural stressors specific to the region exacted a heavy toll from the population. By and large the Warao in their deltaic refuge appear to have escaped severe external pressures, such as internecine warfare, cannibalism, slavery and pandemics of exotic disease which decimated their neighbors (Wilbert, J. 1993: 145-146). And contemporary Warao have been given a relatively clean bill of health (Layrisse and Layrisse 1980: 160), although they are not immune to the equally dire and often catastrophic internal pressures of daily life in a largely hostile environment.

In this study I am attempting: (1) to document the nature of real-life bush-spirit encounters among the Warao; (2) to examine such encounters described in folktales as models of real-life encounters; and (3) to determine the psychosociological function of the encounters. Hypothetically, folktales about bush-spirit encounters predispose the enculturated individual to experience them in real life; encounters in folktales legitimize real-life encounters as normal events; and real-life encounters function as a psychological compensatory mechanism enabling the individual to cope with sociocultural and other stresses to preserve the natural world order of his or her society.

### **Research site**

I conducted field research for this study in the village of Morichitos (Ohidu Sanuka), situated on the west bank of the Winikina distributary of the central Orinoco Delta. Although the founder generation of this local band of Warao abandoned its traditional life-style of seminomadic swamp foraging as long as half a century ago (Map 2), its present members still retain many of their original nonagricultural ways. Furthermore, despite their manifest receptiveness for Western products and their occasional employment in Creole lumber mills and fisheries, Ohidu Sanuka villagers do not depend on wage labor for their livelihood.

Instead, the constituent families of Morichitos are subsistence-oriented. Fishing, a principal daily activity, provides the bulk of protein foods consumed. Crabs, snails, turtles, turtle eggs, several species of large rodents, and birds are also eaten. Although large mammals like deer, tapir, and peccary were traditionally shunned, they have recently, owing to Western influence, been accepted as food



MAP 2  
 TERRITORY UTILIZED BY THE WARAO OF MORICHITO  
 (Base map taken from Wilbert & Layrisse 1980: 2)

items. Substantial amounts of palm sago and wild honey are still harvested on a seasonal basis. And nowadays every family in Ohidu Sanuka maintains two or three gardens in varying stages of production. Cultivated crops include taro (which has replaced palm sago as the staple), bananas, sugarcane, and occasionally bitter manioc.

The Morichitos community of ninety-two residents includes several extended families. The founder couple exercises local authority. There are a number of polygynous unions, and postmarital residence is predominantly uxorilocal with bride service. Band exogamy is the rule. The kinship system is Hawaiian in type, and descent is reckoned bilaterally. Rites of passage for girls are performed by most families. Annual rituals of propitiation take place on a regular basis.

As in most local Warao groups, health care for Morichitos villagers is still provided by three different types of shamanic curers and a number of phytotherapists. Shamans, who are predominantly male, serve as ritual healers who treat illnesses caused by mystical retribution or spirit aggression. Illness of the former type are allegedly incurred by an individual who violates the moral code and the natural order. (I return to this cause of illness later on.) Spirit aggression causes punitive illness in patients guilty of such a transgression. Phytotherapists, who are predominantly females are nonritual curers who, though acting within the general framework of Warao religion, cure by means of a diversified pharmacopoeia of phyto-medicine (Wilbert, W. 1986: 110-112).

## Methodology

During the data-collecting phase, all Warao who wished to participate in the inquiry were invited to do so, regardless of sex or age. When initially only men came forward, I feared that the women's reluctance to take part would seriously bias the significance of the investigation. Three to four weeks later, however, the women gained confidence and volunteered to give accounts of personal spirit encounters. Informants, singly or in the company of others, narrated their memorates into a tape recorder. Their accounts were recorded in the village, on the rivers, or in the forest, whenever circumstances triggered the memory or encouraged an individual to narrate his or her experience with a bush spirit.

*Bush-spirit encounters in real life.*—The initial intent in recording memorates was to gain an understanding of their ethnopathological importance and to obtain answers to questions as to (a) the nature of bush-spirit encounters, (b) the conditions triggering such events, (c) the sequence of events experienced during an encounter, (d) the significance of encounters to ethnopathology, (e) clinical symptoms produced by such events, (f) prophylactic and therapeutic measures taken by health practitioners, and (g) long-term personal and social effects of having experienced an encounter. Very early in the project it became evident that memorates reveal remarkable structural similarity, permitting syntagmatic topical codification and standardization of analytical questions (Table 1).

After each report of a bush-spirit encounter informants were asked to elaborate on details in their memorates and to answer questions generated by the recurring episodic pattern of memorate structure.

*Bush spirits in folk tales.*—The second objective of the research project was to compare real-life bush-spirit encounters with bush-spirit folktales. The narratives were selected from a comprehensive corpus of 209 tales (Wilbert, J. 1970). In order to standardize the comparison, the criteria listed in table 1 for memorates were also applied to bush-spirit tales.

*Bush spirits and ethnopathology.*—Bush-spirit encounters are interpreted here as stress-triggered auditory and/or visual hallucinations involving supernatural ag-

gressors. They produce traumatic psychosomatic diseases. Interpretation is based on the analysis of memorates and folktales of bush-spirit encounters, prevailing biological and cultural conditions, and comparative library research.

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TABLE 1  
TOPICAL CODIFICATION OF MEMORATES AND  
ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS

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1. Number of individuals involved in the event:  
Are memorates group or single-person experiences?
  2. Sex and age of victim(s):  
Are memorates sex- and/or age-related?
  3. Activity at the time of the encounter:  
Are particular activities likely to produce spirit encounters?
  4. Physical setting:  
Are particular environmental settings more prevalent than others?
  5. Time:  
Do spirit encounters occur at particular times of the day or the night?
  6. Omen:  
What types of omens (visual, auditory, sensory) indicate the imminence of a spirit encounter?
  7. Experiencing of the spirit:  
Where is the bush spirit located when experienced (ground, tree, air)?
  8. Observer/victim:  
With what frequency does an observer become a victim?
  9. Spirit phenotype:  
Are there phenotypical similarities among bush spirits?
  10. Number of spirits:  
Do spirits appear as individuals or in groups?
  11. Eye contact:  
How often does direct eye contact result in complete spirit possession?
  12. Event:  
Are there similarities in the sequence of events in memorate accounts?
  13. Victim's response:  
What responsive options are available to a victim and which ones are chosen?
  14. Spirit's counter response:  
Does the bush spirit pursue or merely frighten the victim?
  15. Symptoms:  
What observable symptoms are caused by these events?
  16. Therapy:  
How do indigenous healers respond to spirit encounters?
  17. Explanation:  
Why do spirit encounters occur?
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## The field data

### *Bush-spirit encounters in real life*

Forty-seven memorates were collected in the course of the project. Presented below are summaries of a sample of six memorates that depict typical events surrounding bush-spirit encounters. In each instance the number of individuals present at the time of the sighting, as well as the sex and relative age of the victim, is indicated.

#### 1) *Single adult female victim*

One morning a woman embarks in her canoe to tend her garden, which is located on the banks of an island drainage canal. Upon arriving she receives an omen in the form of a premonition. She sights a human figure sitting atop a large tree, facing east. No eye contact is made. As fear overcomes the woman, she begins to experience blurred vision, which leads to uncontrolled trembling. She returns to her village. Upon her arrival she is in a hysteroidal state. The bush spirit does not pursue her. A shaman who is summoned identifies the bush spirit by name (Noikaba), thereby counteracting and then removing the danger.

#### 2) *Single adult male victim*

One morning a man is harvesting in his garden, which is located on the banks of an island drainage canal. He becomes aware of a woman, who seems to be his wife, attempting to seduce him. No eye contact is made, but the man notices that the woman's hands are disproportionately large and that she is hiding her feet in the peat of the bog. Identifying her as a bush spirit, he flees. He feels that she is pursuing him, and fright overcomes him. He begins to experience fatigue, cold, and the chilling of one leg from the foot to the thigh, but he manages to escape. That night the spirit woman reappears and wakens him. He summons a shaman who identifies her as the bush spirit Masisikiri. The bush spirit abandons the man.

#### 3) *Adult couple; male victim*

At dawn, an adult couple enters the forest by way of a canal to hunt for peccary. They hear an unusual and prolonged human cry, presumably uttered by a male, emanating from the forest canopy. The man feels faint and lies down in the canoe to avoid falling into the river and drowning; his wife paddles back to the village. The bush spirit does not pursue the couple. When the male victim begins to tremble uncontrollably, a shaman is summoned. He identifies the bush spirit by name as Bure, thereby removing the danger.

#### 4) *Three adult males; one victim*

At dawn, three men embark in a canoe to hunt for wild turkey in the forest. After the shooting of a turkey they hear an unusual moan of a woman from high up in the

forest canopy. They decide to leave the bird and return to the village. The spirit does not pursue them, but one of the hunters is victimized. He is overcome by fear, his head feels enlarged, and he begins to tremble uncontrollably. A shaman is consulted who identifies the sound his patient heard as that of Hebu Bure. He names the spirit and thus removes the threat.

5) *One male child victim*

One afternoon in the savanna, a boy goes aside to defecate. A young man of non-Indian characteristics appears and abducts the child. The child loses consciousness. Later on, family members find him under a palm frond. Overcome by fright and crying uncontrollably, the boy tries to convince his family that the bush spirit is still there, although he alone can see it. A shaman, after listening to the description, identifies the spirit as Banaru, who then retreats.

6) *Entire village; one adult male victim*

At dawn, two men embark in a canoe to fish in a nearby canal. They hear the sound of a deer, but it seems strange to them. From the direction of the sound an unusual wind blows toward them. The gust passes close to the ground (leaves of the trees are not moving) and ascends a tree. The fishermen head back to the village. One of them, who falls victim to the event, screams, becomes delirious, and loses consciousness. The two fishermen arrive at the village and the victim is laid in his hammock to rest. Several minutes later he awakens and perceives a bush spirit under the floor of the pile dwelling. He begins to tremble and to "cry like a child" as his house starts to shake. All the villagers witness this phenomenon. A shaman is summoned who identifies the bush spirit (Hiahokonamu) by name. The spirit abandons the house.

*Bush-spirit encounters in folktales*

A total of 95 bush-spirit tales depicting 145 encounters were culled from a comprehensive body of Warao oral literature (Wilbert, J. 1970). They explain the nature of bush spirits, establish the conditions under which the spirits are encountered (time, place, and to whom), reaffirm the power of the shaman in crisis situations, and detail the consequences of spirit possession. Bush-spirit tales relate conversations between victims and aggressors, revealing trickery and betrayal. Folktales of bush-spirit encounters are strikingly similar to memorates, although bush-spirit/human interactions in the former are commonly more aggressive than in the latter. Summarized below are five examples of bush-spirit encounters in Warao oral literature.

1) *Two adult males, one adult female; one male victim*

One morning two men and a woman embark in a canoe to tend their gardens. One of the men suddenly notices a beautiful woman, who tries to seduce him. Eye contact is made. When they embrace, the man experiences severe disorientation and nearly dies. But as he is a shaman, he is able to save himself.



2) *Adult male/female couple; female victim*

A husband and wife are in the forest collecting honey. The woman has a premonition of danger. Then two jaguars attack them and devour the husband. The wife becomes delirious, although she is not harmed. The jaguars had been sent by a jealous suitor to destroy the woman's husband.

3) *Extended family; multiple victims*

One night the members of a household notice the strange sound of several owls screeching in the company of bats. Bats come to suck the blood of villagers and owls steal their food. Many family members become ill and die.

4) *Three adult males; three victims*

One day three men are collecting palm grubs in the savanna when a stranger suddenly appears in their path. They find themselves unable to resist following the stranger, who subsequently devours them.

5) *Two adult males; two victims*

Two adult men are spending the night in the savanna when they hear an unfamiliar sound. Suddenly the shadow of a deceased Warao appears. The men hide while waiting for the spirit to leave. But both men lose their voices, become breathless, and die from fright.

## **The world order**

In Warao ideology the biological and nonbiological domains are integrated into a natural world order. Their categories, classes, and forms are in perfect internal and external equilibrium. Any untoward action that disturbs the equilibrium causes a corrective reaction that will restore the balance.

Bush-spirit encounters are experiences affecting different classes of terrestrial life. Because the intrusion of bush spirits into human life creates a disturbance in the terrestrial realm, bush-spirit encounters must take place within the paradigm of the natural world order in which every component plays a part in maintaining the equilibrium of the system.

Within the biological domain of the Warao world order component categories are identified by the root *arao*, "life." This root combines with specific qualifiers to form semantic chains that differentiate among the categories and classes of life-forms of the domain (Table 2). Thus, rather than being ranked hierarchically from lower to higher, individual categories, classes, and life-forms within this ethnobiological paradigm are ordered according to the spaces they occupy, whether water, ground, or air. Survival in both biological and nonbiological domains depends on the ability of life-forms to maintain themselves within the world order. Rank and innate advantage are of no significance in this egalitarian system, where merit for all life-forms, including humans, is vested exclusively in balanced complementary diversity.

TABLE 2  
CATEGORIES OF BIOLOGICAL DOMAIN

<i>Araotuma</i>	<i>arao</i> , "life"	<i>tuma</i> , "plural"	<b>all life</b>
<i>Honaya arao</i>	<i>honaya</i> , "water in"	<i>arao</i> , "life"	<b>aquatic life</b>
<i>Wakaya arao</i>	<i>wakaya</i> , "ground"	<i>arao</i> , "life"	<b>terrestrial life</b>
<i>Ahakarao</i>	<i>haka</i> , "wind"	<i>arao</i> , "life"	<b>celestial life</b>

As an example of a destabilizing action between life-forms of the same class (animal/animal) and its expected corrective, if a jaguar kills a hunting dog it is understood that its owner has the right and the obligation to retaliate by killing the perpetrator (Heinen 1988: 664). Destabilization of the balance between two classes of life (e.g., humanity/flora) of the same category (terrestrial) is precipitated by a phytotherapist who prepares a plant remedy when there is no need for it. The Mother of the Forest (Dau arani) is expected to retaliate by neutralizing the therapeutic properties of the misused species, which she considers to be part of her family.

An unsettling disturbance of the equilibrium between different categories (e.g., terrestrial/aquatic) would be caused, for example, by the use of a fish poison which would deplete the fish population in a creek. In times of need a local group might employ this method clandestinely (i.e., not talking about it or doing it in the late afternoon). It would thereby risk the retaliation of the Mother of Fishes (Homakaba arani), who would call upon her children to leave the rivers of the area (Wilbert, J. 1972: 88). The balance between the natural and the supernatural realms of the world order is destabilized when humans fail to provide the gods with the necessities of their existence: food (tobacco smoke), water (honey), and revitalizing energy (sago). In retaliation the supernaturals are expected to unleash devastating epidemics that kill large numbers of humans, thus jeopardizing their continued existence (Wilbert, J. 1983: 358).

Harsh as this *lex talionis* may be for the individual and for the society, maintaining the balance among life-forms, classes, categories, domains, and realms patently entails more than simply an intellectual balancing act. Mutual respect among interrelated coequals guarantees the subsistence strategies the Warao needed in order to exploit the finite resources of their habitat on a sustained basis. In turn, this need required them to situate plant and animal life squarely within the dynamic paradigm of their world order. Thus, for example, they organized the various life-forms of the flora in a horizontal way that agrees essentially with the Western concept of life zones (Table 3).

The flora, in Warao ideology, constitutes a class of the terrestrial category of life. Collectively floral species represent an animated society (*daunarao*) that shares the terrestrial world with humankind. Like human beings, plants constitute a society of living creatures, and the two societies maintain social and trade relationships with each other. The plant society consists of different life forms comparable to local races among humans. Each life-form has a particular location, history, and manner. For

TABLE 3  
HORIZONTAL SPATIAL CLASSIFICATION OF FLORA

Daunarao: FLORA	
<i>Naba amukohoya arauna:</i>	Riverine flora
<i>Nabarauna:</i>	Floodplain flora
<i>Inarauna:</i>	Flora of outside slope of the levees
<i>Hotarauna:</i>	Flora of summits of the levees
<i>Inahokorauna:</i>	Flora of inside slope of the levees
<i>Inahokoharawaharauna:</i>	Flora of transition zone between levee and savanna
<i>Harawaharauna:</i>	Flora of the savanna
<i>Ohidunarauna:</i>	Moriche palm groves of the savanna

example, the plant forms of the understory, consisting of bushes, vines, and shrubs, were variously created by Sea Turtle or by the Mother of the Forest. Plants of economic value to humans, like several palms (for basic materials and food) and *sejoro* reed (*Ischnosiphon* sp.) (for basketry), have often separate metamorphic etiologies; still others are *sui generis* and have always been regarded as "tree people" (*daunarao*). The floral society is governed by the Mother of the Forest, and interchanges between plant life and human life are controlled by the priest-shaman (*wisiratu*).

A further illustration of the interrelationship between floral and human classes of life is seen in the process of canoe making. Because of the mutual regard governing their world order, the Warao are traditionally prohibited from cutting down large trees. This prohibition, in fact, guarantees the well-being and the life of the tree people and is the primary benefit they derive from their reciprocal relationship with humans. To cut a large tree a canoe maker must obtain permission, via the shaman, from the Mother of the Forest. Permission may not be granted, depending on the skill of the artisan (*moyotu*) and on his record as a responsible member of society. From the Mother of the Forest's point of view, permission to fell a tree resembles a marriage license by establishing a contractual husband/wife relationship between the canoe maker and the tree, which is one of her daughters. Thus, rather than merely trading protection for a tree, such a marriage contract seals a kinship relationship between the life-forms of two coequal terrestrial classes, flora and humanity. It places onerous responsibilities on the artisan throughout the lifetime of the boat (Wilbert, J. 1993: 25-86).

Similarly, a phytotherapist (*dau yarokota arotu*) approaches the forest, not as an inert resource of *materia medica*, but with respect for anyone who solicits assistance. The request for help may be addressed either to a group of coequal neighbors or to a health practitioner cognizant of her responsibilities vis-à-vis the Mother of the Forest and her own society (Wilbert, W. 1986: 368-372).

*The fauna*, in turn, represents a biological group of life-forms whose subgroups are distinct classes among the three major categories (aquatic, terrestrial, celestial) of the world order. Animals, including humans, are thus classified according to a

vertical spatial organization, not, as plants are, according to horizontal niches of a single category (terrestrial). As the Warao see it, animals are classified according to the cosmic levels on which "they feel safest" and "where they sleep" (Table 4).

TABLE 4 VERTICAL SPATIAL CLASSIFICATION OF FAUNA	
<i>Honaya arao</i> : AQUATIC FAUNA	
<i>Naba arao</i> :	species that sleep in major rivers
<i>Hana arao</i> :	species that sleep in island tributaries
<i>Ina homakaba</i> :	species that sleep in flood forest lagoons
<i>Wakaya arao</i> : TERRESTRIAL FAUNA	
<i>Hobahi ekuya</i> :	species that sleep in the ground
<i>Hobahi araya</i> :	species that sleep on the ground
<i>Dahu arao</i> : ARBOREAL FAUNA	
<i>Dau ekuya</i> :	species that sleep in trees
<i>Dauna aukwa tanaya</i> :	species that sleep in the forest canopy
<i>Dauna akawaha</i> :	species that sleep in emergent trees

When approaching the animal world, a hunter must be cognizant of this organizational system and of the rules that govern human/animal relationships. Animals are not merely a source of basic materials and food. Large mammals are said to have "blood like our own" and are, as noted above, rarely or never killed. Included in this relationship of mutual respect are all the species that, like humans, sleep on the ground, *hobahi araya ubaya*: tapir, deer, and peccary. Game species are those classified as *honi ekuya ubaia*, species that "sleep in the water" (fish), *hobahi ekuya ubaya*, are species that "sleep in the ground," either burrowing or finding refuge under detritus (reptiles, armadillos, rodents, crabs), and *dau ekuya ubaya*, are species that "sleep in trees" (birds) (Wilbert, W. 1993). Major exceptions within their respective classes are river dolphins, monkeys, and tree sloths, which are not eaten. Dolphins are viewed as transformed women. Monkeys are compared with humans in ritual context, and local bands of humans seem to be modeled after howler-monkey troops. Again, to obtain basic materials from animal parts, like antlers for awls or monkey skin for drumheads, one must get permission from the "owners" of the parts and offer propitiation. Warao oral literature is replete with instances of retribution for violations of the natural world order. The severity of punishments for interfering with its harmony reveals the value Warao society places on freedom from fear-inspiring disorder (Table 5).

TABLE 5  
VIOLENT CONSEQUENCES OF SPIRIT ENCOUNTERS IN FOLK TALES  
(Source: Wilbert, J. 1970)

Abduction/Child abuse:	Narratives 28, 48, 49, 56, 191, 192, 197
Cannibalism:	Narratives 3, 48, 60, 152, 189, 192, 202, 204
Humiliation:	Narrative 136
Murder:	Narratives 37, 38, 40, 46, 53, 56, 71, 139, 141, 187, 188, 193, 199, 202
Rape:	Narratives 120, 147, 166
Slavery:	Narrative 151

### Bush spirits and ethnopathology

As spirit encounters are disease-causing events, it is appropriate to determine their position in the overall scheme of Warao pathology. Past ethnoepidemiological research shows that Warao health practitioners acknowledge disease as part of the human condition and that the origin of recognized ailments may be assigned either to natural or to supernatural causes (Wilbert, J. 1983; Wilbert, W. 1986). Warao ethnopathology does not offer a categorical term for the concept of "natural disease," which has nevertheless been identified as a covert category (Wilbert, W. 1986). Linguistically, natural diseases are distinguishable from supernatural diseases by the absence or the presence of the qualifier *hebu*, "spirit." All natural diseases lack this qualifier, whereas all diseases of supernatural origin carry it as either a prefix or a suffix.

Natural pathogens are identified as inert fetid gases found in stagnant pools or lagoons in which organic materials are undergoing decomposition. Air, water, and fomites (primarily filth) are vehicles for substances that affect an at-risk individual or a group of individuals. The pathogen gains access to the human body through the usual portholes (nose and mouth) or by way of cutaneous membranes. Once in the host, the noxious gas affects particular organs and/or regions of the body (head, thorax, abdomen), establishing pathogenesis and producing clinical symptoms.

The identification of natural diseases is essentially symptom-oriented. Occasionally, however, as in cases of gastroenteritis (*dokohi soho*), health practitioners use compound words to identify a disease with multiple symptoms. In all, the Warao recognize fifty-five natural health disorders, most of them grouped under febrile, respiratory, gastrointestinal, dermatological, or gynecological/obstetrical afflictions. Among other natural ailments are venomous and nonvenomous injuries caused by animals, insects, and sharp objects, as well as ear, eye, muscle, and other inflammations (Wilbert, W. 1986: 117-118).

Supernatural diseases are attributed to spirit aggression and object intrusion caused either by supernatural agents or by sorcery. Warao health practitioners distinguish two major categories of supernatural disease: exotic and endemic (Table 6).

TABLE 6 COVERT WARAO CLASSIFICATION OF SUPERNATURAL DISEASE	
<b>A. EXOTIC</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Old World epidemic diseases               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. measles</li> <li>b. yellow fever</li> <li>c. pertussis</li> <li>d. pulmonary tuberculosis</li> <li>e. malaria</li> <li>f. dengue fever</li> <li>g. poliomyelitis</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
<b>B. ENDEMIC</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ancestral spirits (celestial)               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. spirit aggression (<i>kanobo</i>)</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Sorcerers (terrestrial)               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. object intrusion</li> <li>b. asphyxiation</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Bush spirits (terrestrial)               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. spirit aggression (<i>hebu</i>)</li> <li>b. spirit possession (<i>hebu</i>)</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

*Exotic supernatural disease.*—Exotic supernatural diseases and their supernatural masters, mistresses, or owners (*arotutuma*) were introduced to the Warao during the colonial era (Wilbert, W. 1986: 38, 110-197). In disease mythology these owners are described as being of human form and as having lived among the ancestral Warao disguised as commoners. Chronically afflicted with particular diseases, they gradually contaminated the Warao. Eventually shamans, having discovered that they were spirits, not human beings, expelled them from the village to reside in the four directions of the Warao universe. Pertaining to the supernatural world order, Warao mythology portrays the disease masters Hebu Obodenke (dengue fever), Hebu Boroboro (measles), Hebu Obosabana (pulmonary tuberculosis), Hebu Muhu (poliomyelitis), Hebu Tororo (malaria), and Hebu Waiobo (pertussis).

*Endemic supernatural disease.*—Endemic supernatural diseases are caused by ancestral spirits, sorcerers, and bush spirits (table 6).

*Ancestral Spirits* are collectively referred to as *kanobotuma* "our old ones" or "our grandfathers" (ancestors). They seek revenge for offenses committed against them by humans. Diseases caused by ancestral spirits take the form of spirit aggression and object intrusion; their clinical symptoms are similar to those described for natural diseases. Often accompanied, however, by depression, indecisiveness, and apathy, they require shamanic intervention.

*Sorcerers* may often cause specific diseases over which they have control. In their effort to protect subregional territories against Indian or non-Indian invaders, they allegedly cause disease through object intrusion and asphyxiation. Object

intrusion is the implanting of a stone or the life essence of a particular animal in the victim's body. The curing shaman's failure to identify the pathogen and its owner lead to his patient's death. Asphyxiation is brought about by way of a magic noose of tobacco smoke, as evidenced in the symptomatology of respiratory disease. In all such instances of sorcery, the suspected supernatural origin of a disease is likely to intensify its pathological effect on the patient.

*Bush spirits* are supranormal entities residing in the natural environment. Often compared to the powerful jaguar, they are (with one exception) believed to be solitary predators. Like jaguars, bush spirits are neither infallible or omnipotent; nor are they perpetually on the prowl. They are, however, deeply feared.

### **Bush-spirit encounters as psychosomatic disorders**

According to the Warao, bush spirits are predators who roam the deltaic forests. They are supranormal (*hebu*) because of their uncommon morphology and also because they are shapeshifters who can transform themselves into wind, effortlessly destroy everything in their paths, hover over the ground, and possess a person through mere eye contact. Bush spirits can be controlled and destroyed by shamans. Their interaction with humans is invariably hostile.

The following accounts were provided by Antonio Lorenzano, the principal white shaman and headman of the Morichitos village. The first account describes the conditions under which a bush spirit may appear. The second is the memorate of a bush-spirit encounter by a woman, and the third is a personal memorate. In all three instances the bush-spirit aggressor is Hebu Bure, the vulture-spirit.

1) This *hebu* is dangerous when a Warao walks in the jungle looking for honey or turtles. Suppose that we are out looking for honey in the *sangrito* tree. In the company of several people we go looking for honey. If this *hebu* is present and happens to pursue a member of the party, he may be harmful. He may take that person and/or several others with him. His name is Hebu Bure. It works in this way.

If you look into the eyes of the *hebu*, you lose consciousness and feel nothing. You are possessed. When Bure wants to capture a man or a woman, he shows himself to the victim. Gazing into his hypnotic eyes, the victim becomes light-headed. Out of fear the possessed person runs aimlessly through the forest. Though the man's or the woman's feet are badly cut, no pain is felt. The *hebu* maintains a certain distance ahead of his victim, guiding him or her over the entire delta; from the Río Grande [south] to Trinidad [north]. At times the victim regains his senses only to find himself perched high up in the branches of the *Mora* [tree], whence he will probably fall to his death. A *wisiratu* [priest-shaman] like Bustillo must, therefore, go into a trance and begin to chant, calling out the name of the possessed person. He asks the *hebu* to bring the victim back. The *kanobo* [sacred rock representing the regional ancestral guardian spirit] of Bustillo finds the victim and brings him back to the place from which he had been abducted.

2) This story tells what happened to the mother of Zambrano. One rainy season she and her husband went to fish *hoko*, but, as they found nothing, they made their way back home by midday. When the woman needed to defecate, the husband went on ahead to wait for her. After some time had elapsed, he began to wonder what was keeping her. He called to her but there was no answer. Then he retraced his steps to the place where he had left the woman, but he found only her basket and her feces. Crying, he returned to the village. His people asked, "What happened?" "My wife has disappeared. I found only her basket and her feces, but she was gone."

The *wisiratu*, aware of what had happened, said, "She is not there; Bure took her." He consulted with his *kanobo* [ancestral spirit] for a long time, and when he finished he told the people, "We must now go to the spot where she was last seen." They all went to the place where she had defecated. The *wisiratu* called Hebu Bure with his rattle. Soon the people heard a low-pitched cry from high up in the trees, accompanied by a whirlwind. The shaman called again and the wind came down, getting lower and lower until finally it reached the ground. Only the action of the wind was visible. Suddenly the shaman jumped into the center of the twister and the wind dissipated, leaving the shaman with the woman, who had reappeared but was near death. The people took her back to the village, where the shaman chanted again to cure her. This time he was successful, but she remembered nothing about her ordeal.

3) Many years ago I was living at Nabasanuka with my wife Felicia. We had one daughter, Clementina. One day I said to my brother-in-law, "Brother-in-law, let's go fishing." "Let's go," he said. We prepared the bait and went by canoe to the Araguao River. The tide was going out, and at that time there was nobody in the place to which we went. The moon was full. I harpooned four *morocoto* fish; my brother-in-law harpooned five.

Suddenly we heard a voice, the voice of a woman. It was a beautiful voice. My partner also heard it. It was a long-drawn-out call from high up in the trees, and it seemed to come from very far away. There was no wind.

As I was at that time still new in the area and knew very little, I asked, "Brother-in-law, what was that?" "That is *hebu*," he answered. "It is Hebu Bure calling to her spouse to be on their way." "Is there *hebu*?" "Yes, there is *hebu*. It is Hebu Bure." The brother-in-law said, "One voice is far away and the other is near. Let's wait here." We waited, smoking. We tied the two canoes together. We waited, waited, and waited. Suddenly it began again, "Ahhhhh," the female was calling.

"Brother-in-law," my companion said to me. "It is best not to fish any longer. Let's go back to the village. Let's go tied together [the canoes]." I became very frightened. The voice did nothing to me the first time I heard it, but the second time I was very frightened. My brother-in-law said, "Don't be afraid. Sit on the floor of your canoe, and I will paddle for both of us." He tied the canoes together, at both the bow and the stern, and began to paddle.



I asked by brother-in-law, "Brother, you don't feel anything?" "No, I have not been affected," he said. But I was weak with fright. At the mouth of Hubasuhuru Creek the fear left me. That night we got as far as Nabasanuka. Right away we called the *wisiratu* [priest shaman]. "Hey, Governor, are you asleep? Well, get up!" We told him our story and he began to chant, chant, chant. "How did this happen," he asked.

"Well, we went fishing on the Araguao River and heard a voice. It was clearly a woman's voice." The *wisiratu* continued chanting. He finally made contact with Hebu Bure who spoke through the shaman's voice. "I was calling my spouse. I was not after the people. I wish no evil to these two. I was calling my mate to continue on my way. I intended no evil to befall these two." That is what Bure said. The *wisiratu* then sent the Bure away.

It is noteworthy that when the narrator was asked to explain what a bush spirit was, he spontaneously chose as an example Hebu Bure out of sixteen possible bush spirits I had recorded in the course of my research. Bure is considered the most powerful of all bush spirits, and the reason for the narrator's not being too seriously affected by him was his position as a shaman. As managers of the world order through personal governance, shamans do not easily fall prey to these spirits.

Etymologically, differing understandings of the term *bure*, "vulture," go a long way toward characterizing bush-spirit encounters (Barral 1979:74). The term identifies the spirit, describing someone or something called *bure* as deranged and as flying aimlessly. *Bure* refers also to a sound whose origin is unknown, and to erratic, uncontrolled eye movement. Its various meanings refer to agents of good, evil, or indifferent intentions; it connotes shadows, reflections, images such as drawings or photographs, sounds of voices and echoes, souls, and the wind (Barral 1979:188). Sixteen bush spirits in Warao religion appear as protagonists in the memorate collection. They are arranged in table 7 as six types according to their morphological characteristics.

Bush spirits are one of the few disease-causing agents that are visible to their victims. Warao ethnopathology identifies them by name, phenotype, and/or behavior patterns. Because the Warao biological classification system identifies all life types by the common qualifier *arao*, "life," it is difficult to determine whether anthropomorphism is a significant factor in bush-spirit ontology. What seemed more important to my informants was the fact that bush spirits are perceived as rationalizing, sentient entities. Still, in more than 80 percent of the memorates bush spirits were described as falling into the anthropomorphic (primate) categories of types 2 and 3. But they are usually chimeric; that is, they are composite entities, essentially humanoid with animal characteristics and/or anatomical abnormalities. Some of them seem to be modeled after the sloth or the howler monkey, covered with fur or dolphinlike skin, with huge teeth and disproportionate limbs (either too small or too large), reversed feet, or perpetually hemorrhaging.

Visible bush spirits of type 2 were always observed sitting in the crowns of large, tall trees. This observation may be an optical illusion created by the skylight

shining on a real monkey or a real sloth some thirty meters higher up in the canopy and expanding the image of the animal to produce a supranormal *hebu* effect. Normally bush-spirit encounters are experienced by single individuals, even when a person is in the company of others. I have recorded events in the presence of as many as twenty individuals. The Warao seem to find the sex of the victim irrelevant, although the majority of the recorded cases involved men. As to age, most of the victims were adolescents or adults. There is a correlation, however, between the occurrence of a spirit encounter and the hour of the day; most encounters take place in the crepuscular light of dawn or dusk.

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TABLE 7  
BUSH-SPIRIT PROTAGONISTS IN MEMORATES

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**Anthropomorphic (visible)**

**Type 1:** *Beings believed to be cannibals*

- 1.1. Hebu bahimo: Male, young, dressed
- 1.2. Hebu banaru: Male, young, dressed

**Type 2:** *Beings with deformities*

- 2.1. Hebu bure: Vulturelike, male or female, huge, furred
- 2.2. Hebu maituana ariawara: Slothlike, male, huge, large- or very small-headed, long-limbed, dolphinlike skin, entire body covered with long hair
- 2.3. Hebu muhu: Male human skeleton
- 2.4. Hebu nabarao: Male, large body, nude, small limbs
- 2.5. Hebu noikaba: Male, pale face, long hair, severed leg which bleeds continuously

**Type 3:** *Seductive beings impersonating loved ones*

- 3.1. Hebu masisikiri: Male or female, handsome or beautiful, adorned, enlarged hands, inverted feet
- 3.2. Hebu mehokohi: Sex unknown, shadow, soul
- 3.3. Hebu nabarao tida: Female, beautiful

**Anthropomorphic (audible, visible)**

**Type 4:** *Auditory being*

- 4.1. Hebu kaunasa: Male, tornadoes, waterspouts

**Anthropomorphic (audible, invisible)**

**Type 5:** *Auditory beings*

- 5.1. Hebu dakahototu: Male, uncanny cry
- 5.2. Hebu horobiamu: Male, call of a bird
- 5.3. Hebu nakarikari: Male, sound like axe blows
- 5.4. Hebu yari: Male, sound like paddle strokes

**Zoomorphic**

**Type 6:** *Animal spirits*

- 6.1. Hebu hiahokonamu: Sex unknown, quadruped, heavily furred
-

In most cases the victim was alerted or sensitized to an oncoming of a bush-spirit encounter by a premonition or an omen. Among the omens were an apparently human cry in the absence of humans, an unusual sound made by a passing animal, a wind passing near the ground, the rustling of leaves in the absence of wind or animals, and a drop of blood dripping from the canopy of the forest onto the path or into the canoe of a solitary traveler or a group of travelers.

Sometimes bush spirits were witnessed by one or by more than one individual in a group. The aggression of the spirit was usually directed toward a particular individual, even when he or she was within a group. As eye contact with the spirit was said to be fatal, none of the recorded memorates reported that eye-contact had been made.

Upon perceiving an omen, a victim had three alternatives: to remain on the spot, hoping that no bush spirit was actually there; to flee; or to intone a protective chant. In recorded encounters, no individual opted to stay. In several instances flight was accompanied by chanting (see below). Pursuit of the victim by a bush spirit is a common occurrence. Seizure by a bush spirit does not always imply death. Shamans suggested that "being taken" by a spirit often means that the victim will become the spirit's spouse. This concept is frequently a motif in Warao oral literature.

It is perhaps unwise to generalize about bush-spirit encounters on the basis of a limited sample of memorates, similarities may derive from environmental conditions and a customary life-style. For example, when most victims are adolescent or adult males, singly or in groups of two or three, the preponderance may be owing to sex-differential stress. But it may also simply reflect the facts that men's work requires them to spend more time in the forest than women do and that hunting and fishing parties rarely include more than three individuals. Furthermore, although bush-spirit encounters in our sample occurred in many different natural environments (floodplains, levees, savannas), most of them took place in riparian regions, where the Warao conduct most of their daily activities of fishing, gathering, hunting, and horticulture. It is not so easy to explain why, in bush-spirit encounters experienced by male/female couples, it is usually the man who is affected; the woman often remains sufficiently alert to take the victim home. That most victims are males may be occupationally conditioned, but it may also, as suggested above, relate to the differential stresses on males and females. What can safely be generalized, however, is the belief that without direct eye contact bush spirits cannot seize and keep a person forever. All victims of encounters who remember not to look into the eyes of the spirit will survive to tell their memorates. Any affliction they may incur in the terrifying experience can be cured by a fail-safe remedy, the defensive shamanic chant. In all but two cases in the sample, victims successfully employed this protective device.

### *Symptomatology of bush-spirit encounters*

Bush-spirit assaults cause mental and organic disturbances in the victim. An encounter begins when the victim perceives an auditory or a visual omen.

Informants make it quite clear, however, that noticing an omen implies only a potential danger. "If you do not think 'bush spirit,' no spirit will appear." If, however, an omen-bush spirit association is made, it automatically triggers certain traumas that manifest themselves in a variety of clinical symptoms. Normally bush spirits remain hidden to the Warao who is not a shaman. And it is precisely the role of the shaman to diagnose the atypical event and identify the particular spirit implicated in the incident from among a host of possibilities. Bush spirits differ from other spirits, however, is that they manifest themselves to the commoner in visible form and by precipitating a sequence of events usually including (a) acute and explosive hysteroid symptomatology lasting from three to four hours, (b) complete convalescence in one to two hours, followed by (c) prompt reincorporation of the victim into the society without lasting consequences. Table 8 lists the sequence of symptoms reported in the forty-seven memorates of the sample.

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TABLE 8  
SYMPTOMS OF BUSH-SPIRIT ENCOUNTERS IN REAL LIFE\*

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Chills
Dizziness, inebriated feeling, insomnia, malaise
Fear
Fear, nervousness
Fear, trembling
Fear, trembling, enlarged head
Fear, muscle weakness
Fear, stomachache
Fear, malaise, muscle weakness, dysentery
Fear, inebriated feeling
Fear, rampant, hysteroid symptoms, blurred vision
Fear, hysteroid symptoms, inebriated feeling, crying
Fear, fainting
Hysteroid symptoms, inebriated feeling, tongue-tied, impaired movement
Delirious, fainting
Diarrhea, vomiting
Muscle weakness, chills
Enlarged head, trembling
Enlarged head, blurred vision, darkened vision, impaired movement, trembling
Enlarged body, numbness, trembling
Fainting, death
Vomiting (black), death

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\*By event, not counting duplication of a symptom.

In table 9 these symptoms are grouped according to types of disturbance. Valid pathological deductions are not possible at this stage of investigation. Instead, the descriptions concentrate on observed behavior and the consequences of bush-spirit encounters as related by victims.

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TABLE 9  
SYMPTOMS OF BUSH-SPIRIT ENCOUNTERS  
ACCORDING TO TYPES OF DISTURBANCE

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PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTURBANCES

Fear, rampant fear, nervousness, crying, fainting, inebriated feeling, dizziness, insomnia, swollen head, enlarged body, delirious, hysteroid symptoms.

PHYSICAL DISTURBANCES

**Sensory**

Chills, chilling of an appendage, muscle pains, malaise, blurred vision, darkened vision, numbness.

**Motor**

Inability to walk, lack of coordination, impaired movement, slow movement, muscle weakness, lack of strength, trembling, uncontrollable trembling, dumbstruck

**Gastrointestinal**

Stomachache, vomiting, black vomit, diarrhea, dysentery

**Terminal**

Death

---

*Bush-spirit therapy*

The Warao believe in the therapeutic efficacy of protective chants that are specific for each bush spirit. It is, however, the name of the spirit that is distinctive; the chant itself remains essentially the same. The rhythm is steady and the intonation is monotonic. Characteristic of such chants is the self-confident, sarcastic, and almost taunting attitude of the shaman in confronting a bush spirit. Here is a translation of one such chant.

**BUSH-SPIRIT PROTECTION CHANT  
HEBU NAKARIKARI (THE TREE-CUTTER SPIRIT)**

You, are  
You are coming for (the victim), showing yourself  
Your are coming for (the victim), showing yourself  
Your name is, here it is  
Your name is, here it is  
Your name is, listen, your name is, listen:  
Hebu Nakarikari, hebu Nakarikari  
Hebu Nakarikari, hebu Nakarikari  
Your name is, I am naming you  
Your name is, listen

Your name, listen, your name, listen  
 Your name is, listen, your name, listen  
 Away from me, turn around, turn around, turn around  
 Away from me, turn around, turn around  
 Your name is, here it is, your name is, listen  
 Your name, listen, your name, listen  
 Your name, is, listen well, listen well:  
 Old Nakarikari, Old Nakarikari, Nakarikari

*Symptomatology of spirit encounters in folktales*

Table 10 lists the different symptoms mentioned in the sample of 95 bush-spirit tales analyzed for this study. In comparing this table with table 9, which pertains to memorate symptomatology, it becomes apparent that bush-spirit encounters in folktales are more traumatic and more often fatal than real-life encounters.

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TABLE 10  
SYMPTOMATOLOGY OF BUSH-SPIRIT ENCOUNTERS IN FOLKTALES\*

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Fear  
 Fear, fainting, hysteroid symptoms  
 Possession  
 Possession, inebriated feeling  
 Possession, petrification  
 Possession, pregnancy  
 Possession, rape  
 Possession, transformation into animal  
 Possession, disintegration of bones  
 Possession, disappearance, death  
 Possession, death  
 Possession, death by drowning  
 Death  
 Death by fright, dumb struck, difficulty in breathing

---

\*By folktale, not counting duplication of the same symptoms.

**Discussion**

Early in the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) called attention to subject matter in fairy tales (*Märchenstoffe*) which seemed symptomatic of mental health conditions in individuals and collectives (Ward M.S.). An abundant literature published since then probes into the fantasy world of children and its relationship to juvenile psychic development (Dieckmann 1966; Kienle 1959; Merian 1962-63), as well as into the psychological and therapeutic functions of fantasy in narra-

tive and storytelling for adult mental therapy (Bettelheim 1977; Bottigheimer 1986; Clinton 1986; Lévi-Strauss 1967; Meñez 1978; Geertz 1966; Grolnick 1986).

More recently, folklorists have paid increasing attention to memorates as a narrative form, approaching memorate analysis from the perspectives and with the methods of phenomenological social science (Cartwright 1982). Seminal in this respect was the publication of Honko's "Memorates and the Study of Folk Beliefs," wherein he demonstrates the application of the psychology of religion and of perception to the systematic study and analysis of spirit encounters. Hufford (1976a; 1982) and Pentikäinen (1973, 1978) also have contributed to the idea of using phenomenological approaches to the study of religious memorates. Emphasizing the importance of fieldwork methods, Hufford (1976b:73-74) calls for a "rigorously empirical approach" to nonprejudicial recording of data. He insists that the investigator in phenomenological research must have the utmost respect for the emic reality of personal spirit encounters (MacLeod 1959:73-74). Scholars advocate that special attention be given to the victim's attitude toward manifestations of religious belief, as well as to the social context and overall worldview in which spirit encounters occur (Bennet 1984).

Unfortunately, however, memorate narratives of South American Indian or non-Indian societies have thus far been ignored. In only a handful of cases have narratives been the subject of psychoanalytical research (Niles 1981:xviii). Coriat (1915) examined Yamana myths, dreams, and taboos and their relationship to psychoneurosis and recurrent homicidal outbursts. Freudian interpretation underlies Yampey's (1966; 1969) studies of the Apapocúva-Guaraní mythology. Zubiría (1968) has examined the Oedipal theme in mythology. Jungian approaches have been applied by Goeje (1943, 1947, 1949) to Guianan Indian visions, rituals, and mythology, as well as to an Afro-Guianan trickster figure. And Pagés Larraya (1982) has established extensive narrative collections of Gran Chaco Indians to serve as source material for his ethnopsychiatric studies (Califano 1985:216). Nevertheless, psychological studies of South American Indian narrative are fairly scarce, and none dealing specifically with the stress-related ethnopathological functions of memorates have come to my attention.

To interpret spontaneous episodes of mental pathology as symptomatic of psychic stress caused by environmental, biological, and/or sociocultural conditions, as I am here doing, is of course, not unique. Stress of one kind or another has been a critical variable in the etiologies of several ethnic psychoses in the non-Western world. Particular attention has been paid to the "running wild" of Fuegian Indians, to *susto* in Latin America, *windigo* (*witiko*) among northeastern North American Indians, *pibloktoq* or "women running about naked" among Greenland Eskimos, *arctic hysteria* of Lapps, Eskimos, and northeast Siberian peoples, *amok* in Southeast Asia, "wild man" behavior in New Guinea, as well as to other types of aberrant behavior (Kennedy 1973). At present, however, it is impossible to judge how widespread aberrant behavior triggered by spirit encounters is among South American Indians and to what extent etiologically critical stresses are accountable for its occurrence among the Warao. Yet their specific ecological and cultural

conditions suggest that stress may indeed be responsible for bush-spirit attacks. Stress may also account for the victim's regressive maneuvers which reveal his or her need for infantile types of assistance when suffering profound fear and anxiety.

If the revelations of aggressive retribution in memorates and bush-spirit tales have any validity, the stress on an individual striving to abide by the rules of the world order under the prevailing biological and environmental conditions must be severe. In fact, it must be so intense as to suggest that Warao survival has depended on the existence of a cathartic memorate syndrome of stress release and anxiety diffusion. Symptomatic of the phenomenon is that the victims of bush-spirit encounters most frequently are adolescent and adult males, although females are occasionally attacked. Bush-spirit assaults are recurrent, and thus they are expected to happen four or five times in the lifetime of an individual. The acute and short-term mental traumas they precipitate have no political, social, or religious advantages for the victim. Rather, they are considered "disease conditions" attributable to spirit aggression which do not stigmatize the victims as frail, vulnerable, mentally ill, or unstable. Complete recuperation is invariably attained within hours, or at most within a day after treatment.

Specific reproductive and health-related *biological stressors* include frequent pregnancies (at two-year intervals) and high fertility rates (7 children), a high mortality rate of reproductive women (twice that of reproductive men), owing to pathological complications of pregnancy and childbirth; frequent stillbirths, and a prepuberty mortality rate of 50 percent (Layrisse, Salas, and Heinen 1980:63-66). Annually, during the primary rainy season, endemic water-borne diseases afflict large numbers of the very young and the elderly; between the rise and fall of the floods two-thirds of the children may die (Barral 1964:69). Local flare-ups of Old World pestilential diseases, such as measles, influenza, and pertussis, are frequent; they have occasionally almost wiped out a local population.

*Environmental stressors* are largely attributable to the extreme aquatic and climatic conditions of the Orinoco Delta. They include brackish water invasion by the sea during the primary dry season; annual floods caused by Orinoco overflow in the upper delta regions; inundation of the lower parts of the delta by excessive rainfall during the primary rainy season, and high annual precipitation levels of 2,000 to 3,000 millimeters.

Besides having a negative impact on Warao health, these aquatic conditions also have grave consequences for Warao nutrition. Traditionally nonagricultural, the Warao relied on the starch of the moriche palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*) as their staple food. The availability of moriche sago, however, stands in an inverse relationship to rainfall. It is sufficient or even abundant in the dry seasons but scarce or altogether lacking in the rainy seasons. High precipitation causes seasonal hunger and periodic famines.

A somewhat unexpected environment-specific stressor is crowding. It is unexpected because, even with increased immigration of non-Indians, the population density of the Orinoco Delta is relatively low (i.e., 1:1.11 km<sup>2</sup>). Because of the swampy terrain of the marshlands, however, Warao populations are confined



during rainy seasons to ground-level settlements or raised riverfront villages, where personal living space must be artificially created. In villages of wall-less pile dwellings along the riverbanks, residents spend much of their lives on raised house platforms. If the architectural space of house floors is used as the basis for calculating population density, individuals have an average of roughly 4.4 m<sup>2</sup> (Wilbert, J. 1980:23). Under these circumstances it is difficult to find privacy. As discussions around the hearth or in the hammocks can be overheard by many people, village life is largely public. Furthermore, a seemingly unending traffic of children running through the houses shows little or no respect for personal or social sensitivities.

To mention one of the several *sociocultural stressors*, the maintenance of the natural world order entails regulation of food and raw-material allocation. For the most part shamans allocate resources to persons in good social standing. Retribution for "irresponsible" behavior is not, however, promoted only by the displeasure of ancestral gods or spirits. As particular life-forms (*arao*), they are just as important as all other life-forms in the world order. Rather, retribution follows wrongdoing because a particular action of another life-form upsets the systemic balance of the universe, which automatically calls for the restoration of its equilibrium. The threat of axiomatic punishment, making the individual aware that any action inadvertently or intentionally disturbs the balance of the universe, is likely to be a source of stress (Honigmann 1959: 640-641).

The creation by the Warao of a world order of balanced complementary diversity reflects the fragility of their habitat which demands an ecosystemic approach to its physical and biological components so as to guarantee sustained existence and exploitation (Wilbert, J. 1993:72). Preservation of the marginal deltaic ecology through application of a natural world order ideology and effective mental coping devices offers the individual and the society at large, if not abundance, at least a sustained existential minimum in a fragile and precarious habitat.

### **Abstract**

*Among the Warao of the Orinoco Delta in Venezuela, bush-spirit encounters trigger episodes of abnormal behavior and physical disorders. Concentrating on the residents of one local group, I recorded personal accounts (memorates) of such encounters and compared them with bush-spirit tales in Warao mythology. A formal correspondence between the two sets of evidence is hypothesized as owing to the internalization of mythic bush spirit episodes in childhood, which predispose the individual to experience real-life spirit encounters in adolescence and adulthood. Diverse stressors are regarded as critical precipitators of the bush-spirit syndrome, especially cultural stress stemming from the individual's obligation to ensure maintenance of the world order. This obligation is described by a ethnobiological classification system that recognizes humankind as a specific category of life, interrelated and on a par with all such categories and subject to the same ecological laws and social sanctions that ensure the order's equilibrium. Because bush-spirits, as pathological agents, are placed within the overall scheme of Warao ethnopathology, bush-spirit encounters are regarded as psychosomatic disorders. The clinical symptomatology mentioned in memorates*

is compared with psycho-physiological symptoms referred to in bush-spirit tales. Bush-spirit therapy through shamanic chant is described and an example is given. It is suggested that bush-spirit encounters function as a psychological compensatory mechanism enabling the individual to cope with biological, environmental, and sociocultural stressors.

### Resumen

Para los Warao del Delta del Orinoco (Venezuela), los encuentros con espíritus que habitan el bosque producen episodios de comportamiento anormal y trastornos físicos. A través de los integrantes de una aldea de esta tribu, se recopilaron testimonios de encuentros de esta naturaleza "memorates" y se compararon con la literatura oral de esta etnia. El análisis produjo una correspondencia entre las dos bases de datos, lo cual nos llevó a la hipótesis de que el fenómeno se debe a la internalización de episodios míticos por el individuo durante su niñez, que le predispone a experimentar este género de encuentros durante su adolescencia y vida adulta. Se postula que diversos estresantes actúan como elementos fundamentales de este síndrome, especialmente el estrés cultural, el cual proviene de la obligación por parte del individuo de asegurar el mantenimiento del "orden mundial". Dicha obligación está manifiesta en el sistema de clasificación etnobiológico el cual reconoce a la humanidad como una categoría de vida específica, interrelacionada y al mismo nivel jerárquico que las restantes, y sujeta a las mismas leyes ecológicas y sanciones sociales diseñadas para asegurar el equilibrio de dicho "orden". Debido a que esta clase de espíritus, como agentes patológicos, están contemplados dentro del esquema etnopatológico Warao, se considera a los encuentros como trastornos psicósomáticos. La sintomatología clínica revelada en los encuentros fue comparada con los síntomas psicofisiológicos descritos en las narraciones. La terapia correspondiente a través de canciones shamánicas está descrita y se presenta un ejemplo. Finalmente, se sugiere que estos encuentros funcionan como un mecanismo de compensación psicológico que permite al individuo manejar los estresantes biológicos, ambientales y socioculturales.

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