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WHY ONE CULTURE STAYS PUT: A CASE OF RESISTANCE  
TO CHANGE IN AUTHORITY AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE IN  
AN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY IN THE NORTHWEST AMAZON

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Only recently have anthropologists begun to examine the effects of missionary activity on indigenous cultures. In 1970, Miller described a "breakdown" in Toba traditional ideology as a result of mission influence. A decade later, Schieffelin (1981) documented the dramatic reorientation of Kaluli social and economic organization as a result of missionary activity; this change, despite its pervasive nature, took place in merely eight years. These papers, (along with those of Beidelman 1974, Shapiro 1981, Wright 1981, and others) form the important groundwork from which a body of literature on missionization is now developing.

This paper<sup>1</sup> focuses less on missionary efforts per se, than on the resilience and creativity with which indigenous peoples respond to evangelization and its attempts to appropriate traditional authority. In the case related below, missionary intervention disrupted political and social existence at a settlement in Brasil's Uaupes Basin: the attempt to revise a traditional system failed. In short, kinship and rank remained the source of legitimate authority, and missionary efforts to install as chief a trader middleman were thwarted. The indigenous system was neither as passive nor as fragile as such systems are often represented.

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<sup>1</sup>The fieldwork on which this paper is based was carried out in approximately 24 months between 1978 and 1981.

The following case occurred among the Kotiria (known also by the names Wanana, Uanano, and Anana),<sup>2</sup> a linguistically-distinguished group of the Eastern Tukanoan family, inhabiting the Uaupes basin in Brasil and Colombia. With a population of 1600, the Kotiria are one of 15 to 20 linguistically exogamous<sup>3</sup> fishing and horticultural peoples who form an integrated, intermarrying system in the Northwest Amazon.<sup>4</sup> The group is divided into sibs, or named descent groups, inhabiting riverine settlements.

White contact has proceeded intermittently in the Uaupes area since the eighteenth century. The Indians of the Uaupes were subject to enslavement since the early eighteenth century; this practice culminated in the slave raids associated with the rising market for rubber between 1870 and 1912.

Salesian missionaries entered the Upper Rio Negro basin in 1915, offering the promise that slaving would be curtailed so long as they were present. The order established missions on the Uaupes River at Taracua in 1924, at Iauarete in 1929, and in Pari Cachoeira in 1945. The

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<sup>2</sup>While this group has been referred to in the literature by the lingua geral term Uanano (and its spelling variants), I have chosen to call them Kotiria, since it is the name which they call themselves and by which they are known to other Uaupes groups.

<sup>3</sup>The Cubeo (Goldman 1963) and the Makuna (Arhem 1981) are exceptions to the rule of linguistic exogamy.

<sup>4</sup>The number of groups estimated to be within this field depends upon definitions of group boundaries and the size of geographic area considered.

Indians chose to stave off the conquering and dividing power of the white slavers by relying on the mission and their promises. In this way, mutual interest promoted the Kotiria-Salesian relationship. Aside from protection from slavers, the Salesians also have furnished manufactured goods and medicines. In turn, the Salesians hope to induce more production from the Kotiria. While fostering dependency on the mission for survival and basic economic needs, the Salesians want to instill Western language, values, and culture. To this end, the Salesians' intervention in the life of a settlement is generally designed to undermine the traditional culture.

Among the missionaries' principal goals was to intensify agricultural labor in order to integrate the region into the national economy. The missionaries encouraged surplus production of food crops to be sold at the mission in order to: support the high number of mission personnel; increase missionary activities; and reorient the area's economy from a subsistence to a cash-crop basis, linking it to larger market systems. To this end, the missionaries encouraged males to spend less time fishing, and to contribute to the production of export crops such as cacao and coffee.

Replacing traditional leaders with younger men schooled in the mission's ideas was one means of realizing their goals. Ideally, the younger mission-educated leader would motivate villagers to cultivate cash-crops and to manufacture marketable products, such as modified traditional crafts. When the old chief of Curideri died, the Salesians attempted to install such a young man in his place. A crisis ensued.

KOTIRIA SYSTEM OF AUTHORITY, RANK, AND REDISTRIBUTION

Before we examine the case in which the Salesians attempted to usurp local power in a Kotiria village it is important to understand the traditional system of rank and redistribution among the Kotiria.

The chieftancy or headmanship of any Kotiria village is held by its highest-ranked male. His authority rests on his position as the senior living descendant of the founding ancestor of the local senior sib; he is the "oldest brother" in his generation, known as Mahsa Wami, "the People's Oldest Brother." He is also called Dahpu or "Head," a term which refers not only to his leadership role, but also to the anatomical head, which "leads," "organizes," and "speaks for" the human body. These functions of the anatomical head attach to the Head of the Kotiria village. More specifically, the term refers to the head of the ancestral anaconda, from whose body the exogamous language groups of the Uaupes originated. The highest-ranked male is also called Putoro, which has been translated both as "First" and "Chief." I will refer to the highest-ranked male as Mahsa Wami.

Kotiria chieftainship entails control over three major aspects of village life: fishing resources; labor; and ritual. A Mahsa Wami must hold sway over all three areas to lead effectively. Inability to harvest and redistribute fish, for example, will make it difficult for the Mahsa Wami to mobilize and coordinate labor. Control, then, implies the obligation to redistribute.

### Fishing Resources

In every settlement, prime fishing sites are controlled by the senior sib member. These sites are designated because weir traps installed there are particularly productive in terms of yield per man-hour. The Mahsa Wani may allocate these territories on a usufruct basis, or he may retain his prerogative of priority access, and organize the collective installation, maintenance, and harvest of the traps. Fish harvested from the regulated traps are shared by all village members in communal meals. Whenever there is surplus fish, the chief is expected to assemble the community to eat. Shared meals are also expected to precede any communal work.

### Labor

The chief mobilizes communal labor and coordinates collective work. Any individual who desires community participation in a project, such as the gathering of roof thatch, submits a request to the chief, who determines the project's priority. The chief then coordinates communal labor, carefully balancing collective projects against individual work such as gardening, so that collective and individual labor do not conflict.

I observed several kinds of community projects in Kotiria villages, including: the construction and maintenance of houses; the clearing and burning of gardens; and the intensive preparations for inter-sib

exchange of gifts, known as the po?oa ceremony.

### Ritual

The Mahsa Wami is the spokesman for the sib and the community. He must command leadership etiquette, display diplomacy in representing his sib to outsiders, and receive visitors with graciousness and eloquence. The Mahsa Wami receives and redistributes the gifts presented by other chiefs at po?oa ceremonies held in the chief's residence, a spacious dance house. His skillful display of oratory and ritual language reflects on the entire sib, and manifests high rank.

### Language

Among the possessions exchanged between groups is language, which holds special importance in the Uaupes. Received from ancestors, language is a key symbol of identity, uniting a named group. When two affinal groups come together, as they do to give or receive wives, or to exchange goods at subsequent ceremonies, they are also seen as exchanging their distinct languages. Each group's Mahsa Wami presides over these sib interactions. During such ritual gatherings, the chief must perform the specialized litanies which only the seniors know. This knowledge is the patrimony of ancestral inheritance. The litanies belong to the sib, but only the chief, who personifies its "Head," may perform them. The litanies are complex and their correct performance requires elaborate training.

THE CURIDERI CASEMissionary Intervention

The Kotiria village of Curideri (Turtle Egg Village),<sup>5</sup> with a population of 77, is a five-day canoe trip from the Salesian Mission of Iauarete. Curideri is occupied by two sibs: the senior Macaw-Eye sib and the junior Oppossum-Ear sib.

In 1975, the aged chief of Curideri, Bati Diani, died. His younger brother, Dahsiro, would traditionally have succeeded him; however, the Salesian fathers saw Bati Diani's death as an opportunity to exert their influence. A missionary arrived at Curideri and proposed as chief Pedro, a Portuguese-speaking member of the lower-ranked Oppossum-Ear sib. Raised partly in Sao Gabriel, the governmental post at the outskirts of the Uaupes region, Pedro was closely acquainted with national values.

Dahsiro, the senior Macaw-Eye in line to become chief, was outraged. He openly challenged the missionary, threatening to go to Iauarete to tear down the Brazilian flag. In response, the missionary ordered an open election, with Pedro as one of several candidates. At the election, Dahsiro announced, "The chief will be my nephew, Edu." As the son of Dahsiro's deceased younger brother, Edu was a member of the Macaw-Eye, the higher-ranking sib at Curideri. He spoke some Portuguese, but had not been educated in the mission.

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<sup>5</sup>All proper names (of places or people) are fictitious.



When the Salesian father called for a vote, Edu won: the lower-ranking sib had declined to vote, deferring to the higher-ranking sib's choice. The outcome suggested the strength of the traditional hierarchy.

After Edu won election, it soon became clear that the power structure at Curideri was far from settled. People complained that Edu was not a satisfactory leader. The former chief, Bati Diani, was frequently eulogized and praised for the "succulence" he had exhibited by: providing abundant fish; hosting many exchange dances to show the sib's prosperity and generosity; acquiring in return imported goods and specialized utensils for the community; representing the group eloquently with his memorable oratory; and receiving visitors graciously.

Unable to fulfill these obligations, Edu was said to be "dry." Edu had neither the desire nor the preparation to lead, but had accepted the role at his uncle's insistence. Without a dance house, without control over a productive fishing installation, he was not the sib head and therefore could not speak on behalf of the sib. As a result, Dahsiro was designated Mahsa Wami, and assumed this role in greeting all visitors. Furthermore, Dahsiro held dances and communal meals in the large dance house which he had shared with his deceased brother, the previous chief. It began to appear that the election had been a ploy to placate the missionaries.

The crisis was not soon resolved, however. Over the next two years, the chieftancy continued to be divided. As senior sib member, Dahsiro retained the ceremonial functions and prime resources of a chief: he

held control of the principle fish weir and the dance house; he hosted dances and communal fish feasts. To appease the missionaries -- who were mainly concerned with the allocation of labor -- he relegated to Edu, his puppet, the unappealing executive function of inducing and organizing the villagers' labor.

### Work Stoppage

Without the full spectrum of leadership roles, Edu had not the leverage to compel villagers to follow his initiative. He planned numerous work projects, including the construction of a large canoe to facilitate trade (of artifacts for manufactured goods) with the missionaries. But between 1978 and 1979 attendance at collective projects declined until only three people responded to Edu's calls to work: his own younger brother and the two visiting client sons-in-laws in service to the community. Edu was obliged to solicit people's participation in a house-by-house round of visits. At last, a sorcery threat and an overt breach of authority precipitated open confrontation between Edu and the villagers.

As tensions mounted, an in-law Baniwa shaman walked through the jungle from the distant Aiari River to advise Edu of a hallucinogenic vision. The shaman said that a near relative was planning to assassinate Edu through sorcery.

Two days later, Edu learned that a member of the lower-ranking Oppossum-Ear sib had planned to lead villagers in an open challenge to his authority by thatching a roof at the moment when Edu had scheduled

work on the trading canoe. The action was intended to be non-violent but decisive disobedience. Edu heard of the conspiracy at the morning communal meal on the day the canoe was to be built.

In Kotiria society, to shout, to address a complaint directly, or to show any emotion is considered not only inappropriate but shameful. As a consequence, the quiet is seldom broken. Conversation, although frequent, is kept at a discreet, low pitch; facial expressions and gestures are deliberately understated. To an unfamiliar observer, villagers' faces may often seem frozen — reminiscent of the unnatural formality of a daguerrotype portrait.

Despite these conventions Edu broadcast his anger and fear at the communal meal. He shouted in a tremulous voice:

You didn't go through me! You didn't come to me first! None of you works. I work alone. Now one of you is going to kill me. I do not sleep with your wives. I am not the proper chief. I was made chief by the mission. I am not the real chief. You are telling me this. Now one of you is going to kill me. I haven't slept with your wives.

A few days later, Edu called a meeting. Continuing in a similar vein, he told the villagers:

I have something important to tell you. One of you is wanting to put holes in me. One of you is wanting to give me poison. One of you is envious of the work that I am doing. But I am not speaking behind your backs and I am not sleeping with my relatives' women. I never go with other women for this reason: not to be poisoned, not to be killed. I am telling all of this to you. One of you wants to kill me. This is what a shaman told me.

The sorcery threat obviously worried Edu. It was a dramatic materialization of his greatest fear — a direct challenge to his role.

Since the threat and the villagers' confrontation occurred within days of each other, it is difficult to say which, if either, incited Edu to action. In any case, he finally undertook an effective course of action, asserting his authority. He made the rounds of houses, sitting in each to make the appropriate, ritualized but affectionate small talk. Furthermore, he announced that he was sponsoring a very large dance at which his son and other boys would receive life-breath names.

Then Edu set off on a fishing expedition which lasted four and a half days. When he returned in the evening of the fifth day, his wife smoked fish until the following morning. In the morning she visited each household with offerings of fish. Villagers commented with approval: several said, "This, at last, was chief's behavior."

In contrast, Dahsiro was dour. He complained that if "everyone" held dances in his house, he would be exposed to menstruating women and other elements which pose danger to a shaman. Dahsiro, aside from being in line for the chieftancy, also happened to be a powerful shaman. Nevertheless, Edu's naming ceremony — three days of uninterrupted hospitality — was considered a great success. In the weeks before I left Curideri, complaints about Edu had abated. On another visit several months later, I saw that Edu had expanded his house.

Though the power struggle between Dahsiro and Edu continued, the younger man had clearly established a measure of legitimacy. Ironically, while Salesian intervention had hoisted him to chieftancy, he began to assume that role in fact as well as in name only when he reverted to traditional styles of authority.

### Implications of the Leadership Crisis

Missionaries in the Uaupes are attempting to shift authority from descent, its traditional locus, to a power configuration which has, as its authoritative and economic center, the mission. To this end, they introduce new status positions that undermine the hereditary basis of chieftancy, and attempt to use their candidate for chief as a link between the village and the mission. The mediating chief is expected to encourage villagers to produce surplus agricultural products to be traded, on an individual basis, for manufactured goods at the mission.

At Curideri, the Kotiria did not accept the authority of the individual chosen in the election instigated by the missionaries. In Kotiria society, traditional authority is legitimized not by consensus, but by descent and concomitant control over redistribution. Rather than allow the mission to usurp the traditional power structure, the hereditary successor to the chieftancy named a figurehead. In effect, the traditional system, with the hereditary successor as Mahsa Wami, went underground. The missionaries nevertheless viewed the figurehead as chief: they failed to see that the hereditary successor assumed leadership and all of its responsibilities, except mobilization of labor. The Kotiria in this way resisted the challenge to their political integrity, and retained the principle of chiefly succession within the primogeniture line.

Although the ruse deceived the missionaries and to some degree

thwarted their goal, instability resulted due to the wrenching apart of the traditional Mahsa Wami functions: mobilizing labor; redistributing resources; and presiding over ritual. Partial resolution came only when the elected, compromise chief asserted his legitimacy by fulfilling the chief's traditional obligations.

Several symbols demonstrate that the leadership system at Curideri, and indeed the Kotiria concept of authority, remained intact despite Edu's election. First, Edu defended his limited authority by stating, "I do not sleep with your wives. I am not the proper chief. I was made chief." He makes these statements in the context of a plea to the villagers to forgive his incapacity to lead properly. In so doing, he hoped to communicate his political impotence in the hope that sympathetic listeners would forgive him his wrongs. A traditional symbol of usurpation, the appropriation of others' wives, is denied. An agnatic dilemma, namely chiefly succession within the sib, is inverted and expressed through a powerful affinal metaphor.

A second symbol shows that Edu worries about not only his power, but his life. According to Sahlins, "Every chief acts as conqueror when he comes to power," Hawaiians say. And even if he has not actually killed his predecessor, he is presumed to have poisoned him..." (1981, p. 24). At first, Edu makes no effort to seize Dahsiro's power. All power bestowed upon Edu emanates from Dahsiro. He has not threatened or poisoned Dahsiro; rather, Edu learns from the Baniwa shaman that he himself is the target of an assassination plot. Again, a traditional symbol of usurpation and power is inverted. "One of you is wanting to give me poison," Edu cries, fearing that his own authority and person

are endangered. Communication of this threat by an in-law may also be seen as the result of Edu's agnatic dilemma.

Poison as symbolic means of usurpation figures again in the episode when Edu asserts traditional authority, but now Edu is the poisoner. When Edu finally presides over a successful naming ceremony, a ritual previously in Dahsiro's province as Mahsa Wami, Dahsiro claims that Edu has brought him into the polluting presence of menstruating women. This exposure threatens his shamanic powers. With this poison — menstruating females — the pretender usurps his uncle's authority, and symbolically reverses his former impotence.

Edu prevails, but legitimation of his chieftancy hardly introduces the new system of leadership intended by the mission. Indeed, it represents a reassertion of the old. In his writings on "Deviance and Social Control," Murphy writes about a Mundurucu chief who finds himself in much the same position as Edu:

The contemporary Mundurucu chief is in a dilemma. If we look upon a boundary role as one in which both ends have to be played against the middle, we see the chief caught between the interests of the trader and those of his followers; these interests rarely coincide. It is a difficult position, but one that can be maintained by maximal adherence to the traditional behavior expected of chiefs and minimal acquiescence to the demands of the traders (1961, p. 58).

After considerable difficulty, Edu learns to take the route of "maximal adherence to the traditional behavior expected of chiefs." Initially, he lacked the resources and knowledge to emulate the style of leadership which is traditional at Curideri. The period of upheaval tests Edu, forcing him to learn and then implement the traditional forms

of authority, and compelling him to acquire the resources needed to gain recognition as a leader.

Lacking control of a fixed fishing facility which might yield a substantial harvest with minimal labor, Edu resorts to strenuous, single-handed physical labor. The fishing trip satisfies the villagers' expectations. At the same time, it suggests the leverage of the work force, which can move chiefs to distribute goods by withholding labor and recognition of the chief's political authority.

Edu's dilemma was that though a nominal chief, he could not be the "Head" since he was not the highest ranked sib member. The resulting disjuncture between "Head" and chief is not customary in Kotiria society; normally, as we have seen, the Mahsa Wami controls fishing resources, labor, and ritual. Because he was not "Head," Edu could not for some time redistribute goods obtained from fishing and exchange ceremonies. He was therefore, "dry."

The "succulence" which the past chief was said to have embodied might appear to be a personal attribute. However, this quality refers not to the person, but rather to the structure of redistribution. That is to say, "succulence" is the equivalent of maximal redistribution, and "dryness" the equivalent of minimal redistribution. In such a system, even charisma cannot replace redistributive capacity as a basis for leadership.



CONCLUSION

By presiding over the redistributive system of ritual exchange, the Mahsa Wami recycles surplus within the community, and in this way undermines the mission's effort to accumulate surplus for export. When the young chief installed as a result of the mission's intervention reverts to traditional leadership behavior, he therefore defeats the purpose of his election.

In the final analysis, the mission failed in its attempt to become the center of economic and political action at Curideri. As Dahsiro's puppet, Edu could not induce labor so long as he could not fulfill other chiefly functions, including redistribution and hospitality. The case indicates that unless he fulfills these expectations, a leader will not be recognized.

In summary, the Kotiria tradition of redistribution prevents the accumulation of surplus goods for export. The mission's effort to change this practice by introducing a new leader was doomed to eventual failure, since only through redistribution will a leader's authority be recognized by the Kotiria.

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