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Missionaries and Borders

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The Wakuenai are a Northern Arawakan people of the Upper Rio Negro River and its tributaries in Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia1. They include the groups known to outsiders as Baniwa in Brazil and as Curripaco in Venezuela and Colombia. The flourishing of evangelical Protestantism among the Wakuenai is documented from the missionaries' own point of view in Jungle Methods and Beyond Civilization by Sophie Muller. Fundamentalist missionaries have caused a deep schism in native social organization by forbidding converts to intermarry with Catholic and non-Christian Indians (see also Hill and Moran 1983; Wright 1981, ARC Bulletin No.). A similar division has been noted among the Eastern Tucanoan peoples of the neighboring Vaupes Basin in Brazil and Colombia(Goldman 1979:301).

In this report, I will not focus on the effects of missionization *per se* but upon how it is compounded in the case of the Wakuenai by a different process that has equally divisive consequences: the partition of ancestral lands among three nation-states. The location of Wakuenai lands in a triple border region was adaptive in earlier historical periods, since it allowed them

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to migrate temporarily into territories under control of affinally related phratries until the source of danger had passed. Wright (1981:152) has documented how this strategy served Hohodeni and other local groups of Brazil as a way of escaping the dangers of epidemics and revenge warfare (guerras de rescate). My work with members of the Adzaneni, Dzawinai, and Wariperidakena phratries along the lower Guainia river in Venezuela indicates that such migrations between the Guainia and Isana basins played an important role in allowing the Wakuenai to adapt to powerful outside forces. For example, the Wakuenai managed to survive the blood-thirsty wars of the 1920s when Tomas Funes, a rubber baron turned dictator, exterminated other Arawak-speaking groups whose territory happened to be situated solely within Venezuela.

Historical events have qualitatively changed since the second Rubber Boom of the 1940s, and Wakuenai lands have transformed from remote, colonial frontiers into modern international borders. Administrative, military, and economic institutions have multiplied and pervaded the region, and the borders between Venezuela, Brazil, and Colombia are becoming obstacles to the mobility and survival of Wakuenai sibs instead of an adaptive safety mechanism for escaping external dangers. The two principal rivers of Wakuenai territory, the Isana and the Guainia, both serve as markers of international borders along part of their lengths. Now each group must choose which country it will formally join, even if their village is ambiguously situated on an island half-way between the shores of two countries. The tightening of interna-

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tional borders has led to greater interethnic marriage with other Indian societies in each of the three countries and a dampening of traditional alliances that cross-cut the two formerly open boundary lines.

Since the late 1940s, American Protestant missionaries affiliated with the New Tribes Mission (and other Evangelical organizations) have worked among the Wakuenai in all three countries and have used their influence among Indian converts as a means for systematically repressing and undermining Wakuenai social customs and cultural beliefs. The missionaries prohibited bride service and cross-cousin marriage among their converts and declared all marriages with non-Evangelical Indians to be against the Divine Will of God. At the same time, the New Tribes missionaries worked to ostracize the remaining Wakuenai ritual specialists who chose not to accept the new faith and mounted a campaign to subvert beliefs in the efficacy of traditional ritual symbols. In the last decade, the missionaries' strategy has shifted, in Venezuela at least, to the establishment of new missions in semi-urban areas outside of traditional Wakuenai territory. The new missions are located near towns, such as San Fernando de Atabapo and Puerto Ayacucho, and are inducing Wakuenai families to migrate out of their villages in border areas.

The missionary policy of encouraging interethnic marriages so long as both the bride's and the groom's families are Protestant has gone hand in hand with the breakdown of Wakuenai phratries and sibs into three different cultural identities. The three emerging

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identities are best seen as different cultural orientations leading to different directions of historical change rather than corporate social groups. Villages representing each of the three orientations are located today along the lower Guainia and its tributaries in Venezuela. The three identities roughly correspond to the three national territories among which Wakuenai lands are divided and to the other indigenous peoples in each of the three countries with whom the missionaries have encouraged the Wakuenai to intermarry.

The Southern Wakuenai identity consists primarily of speakers of _lingua geral_, the old Tupi/Portuguese trade language spread by Jesuit missionaries, who are intermarried with the Wakuenai. In the great majority of cases, Yeral-(the term meaning _lingua geral_ in Spanish) speaking men are married to Wakuenai women, indicating a potentially asymmetrical relationship of wife-taker to more highely ranked wife-givers between the two groups. Many of the Yeral-speakers were, or claim to have been, members of Wakuenai or other Arawakan groups along the lower Isana river, but others are descendants of Tucano-speaking groups or _caboclo_ (mestizo) families. For the most part, Southern Wakuenai villages are clustered around the mouth of the Casiquiare River and nearby areas along the Negro-Guainia River. The Southern Wakuenai ident-ity is difficult to generalize about because Yeral-speakers are a very diverse category of indigenous and semi-indigenous people, Tucano- and Arawak-speakers, and Evangelical and Catholic believers.

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The Northern Wakuenai identity consists of Curripaco-(a dialect of Waku) speakers from the upper Guainia in Colombia, including such Wakuenai groups as the Adzaneni, Moriweni, and Tokedakena. Some of these people are intermarried with sibs of the Wariperidakena phratry from the Cuyari River, but a larger number are married with people of other Arawak-speaking groups from the region of the Inirida and Guaviare rivers immediately to the north of Wakuenai lands on the upper Guainia in Colombia. The extent of intermarriage between the Northern Wakuenai and these other groups is difficult to estimate from the Venezuelan side of the border, since only two or three villages representative of this cultural identity are living in the Casiquiare and lower Guainia region of Venezuela. Informants claim that the Curripaco of the upper Guainia are so thoroughly intermarried with the Puinave of the Inirida that there remains little difference between them. The main reason for this homogenization is that Puinave men and women married to Wakuenai spouses have become Curripaco-speakers and teach their children to speak this dialect so that they can be instructed in the lessons of the New Testament as translated by Sophie Muller (1976). In one Northern Wakuenai village which I visited, everyone spoke the Curripaco dialect and claimed to be descended from Curripaco-speakers. Only later while working in other villages did I learn that these people were Curripaco-speakers of Puinave descent. As a rule, the Northern Wakuenai are strongly Evangelical, and those who have migrated into Venezuela seem primarily interested in seeking social isolation from both

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neighboring, non-Evangelical Indians and the Catholic, *criollo* population who inhabit the towns of the region. Their villages are located in remote sites along the Casiquiare and San Miguel rivers, far away from the main channel of the Negro-Guainia River and closer to the New Tribes Mission headquarters at Tamatama on the Orinoco River.

The third cultural identity consists of a variety of Wakuenai sibs, or fragments of sibs, that belong to the Dzawinai, Adzaneni, and Wariperidakena phratries and that today are in the process of creating new social ties with Guarequena , Baniwa, and Arawakan-Yeral neighbors along the lower Guainia in Venezuela. For lack of another name for this cultural orientation, I will call it the Eastern Wakuenai to distinguish it from the previous two. The Eastern Wakuenai have maintained a more traditional sense of social and cultural diversity among themselves and have not extensively intermarried with their Baniwa and Guarequena neighbors. They are more traditional in their linguistic variation as well and include about even numbers of Curripaco and Curricarro-speakers together with a smaller number of speakers of a third dialect from the Cuyari region. They live in villages along the lower Guainia between Maroa and the mouth of the Casiquiare River and are interspersed with small Baniwa settlements and one large Guarequena town. Their current territory thus overlaps that of the Baniwa and Guarequena, and the three Arawakan peoples share access to hunting and fishing resources along the San Miguel river and other, smaller tributaries of the lower Guainia. Although there is

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still a lingering sense of hostility among some Baniwa families of the area who feel that the Eastern Wakuenai are immigrants "squatting" on Baniwa lands, for the most part there is an understanding that the Wakuenai inhabited the lower Guainia in past historical eras (prior to the Funes dictatorship of the 1920s) and that they have merely returned in recent years to reclaim their traditional rights. Beyond sharing of land and other ecological resources, the Eastern Wakuenai have become the focus of an emergent, Arawak-speaking cultural identity through participation of Baniwa, Guarequena, Yeral, and the Wakuenai themselves in traditional Wakuenai rituals and ceremonies.

Each of the three cultural identities found in Wakuenai villages of the Venezuela Amazon has distinctly different implications for the direction of future changes in the region. The Southern Wakuenai identity tends toward the formation of a regional, mestizo peasantry that produces food and other raw materials in exchange for manufactured items from merchants living in river ports of the area. The folk Catholicism found in many villages representative of this identity emphasizes the celebration of patron saint festivals which are often syncretized with native ceremonies and myths. The Northern Wakuenai identity, however, tends toward the formation of a rural proletariat that has cut itself off from any overt manifestations of traditional Arawakan culture. No sense of a pan-Arawakan identity based on a unity of diverse cultural traditions is possible in the Northern Wakuenai orientation, since they have followed the lead of

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Protestant missionaries in mounting a strenuous campaign to eliminate native social and cultural differences. The preservation of the indigenous language serves the dual purpose of homogenizing native sociocultural differences and reducing the likelihood that Indian converts will become part of the Catholic, mestizo population of the region.

The prognosis for Wakuenai cultural survival would be quite grim indeed were the above two cultural identities the only ones currently emerging in the Venezuelan Amazon. Fortunately, the Eastern Wakuenai identity shows signs of growing into a pan-Arawakan ethnic identity including a few Wakuenai sibs, the remaining Baniwa and Guarequena, and the Yeral-speakers who are, or who claim to be, Arawakan descendants. This emergent, pan-Arawakan identity both recognizes native social and cultural diversity and also uses indigenous ritual hierarchy and ceremonial exchange as models for social transformation and historical change. Given a relatively secure geographic and economic base, the chances are good that the Eastern Wakuenai can continue to develop as a cross-ethnic alliance in the Venezuelan Amazon.

notes

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