The Mehinaku among the Xingu Tribes

In 1887 the German explorer Karl Von den Steinen descended the Culiseu River to become the first European to enter a Mehinaku village. He viewed the Mehinaku from the perspective of nineteenth century European ethnocentrism, and saw them as savages and thieves. His account describes how he bullied the villagers with shouted threats, and on one occasion cowed them into submission by discharging his revolver into a house post. His scientific reports reflected his feelings, and the data from this first visit focuses primarily on population, village plan, and descriptions of a variety of artifacts. Subsequent research however, has shown the richness of Mehinaku culture and its special position with the larger Xingu system.

Mehinaku Tribal History. The Mehinaku are not record keepers or systematic historians. In recounting their past, they describe only several generations of ancestors before reaching "mythical times" (ekyimyatipa) when culture heroes and spirits created humans, social institutions, and the geography of the Xingu region. When questioned about historical events and ancestors, the villagers impatiently reply: "I never saw these things. Go ask an old man. I'm not from mythic times." Older villagers are more helpful but even their accounts reflect the villagers tendency to sever the ties between the living and deceased. Thus there is a taboo on mentioning the names of the recently dead, the house and property of the deceased are destroyed at the time of a death, and whole communities are abandoned if too many have died. No memorials commemorate the lives of past generations.

So far as the Mehinaku are concerned they have always lived in the Xingu basin in the region of the Tuatuari and Culiseu Rivers. The first village about which I have even tentative data is Yulutakitsi, a community of uncertain location which may have been inhabited 150 years or more ago. What makes Yulutakitsi especially intriguing is that the tribe was at this time

divided into two moities, each living in triple rows of houses facing across the central plaza. According to some villagers the social boundary was marked by a small fence across the middle of the plaza, but others state that the bench in front of the men's house served as the dividing line. According to Aiyuruwa, the present Mehinaku chief, "We did not marry a woman on our side. We married on the opposite side. And when someone on the opposite side died, we did not weep, or shed our belts and paints. Only they would mourn." The only possible remanent of this moiety organization among the contemporary villagers is the pattern of chiefs houses facing each other across the plaza, and the effort to orient houses towards their "opposites" on the other side of the village each time the community relocates.

The historical Mehinaku villages have been located north of the present Auiti village, on the Tuaturi river. The Mehinaku return to these communities each year to harvest the still-producing pequi orchards and make salt (KCl) from water hyacinths in a nearby lake. For the Mehinaku these sites are their traditional home. Even though the houses have long decayed and the plazas grown over, the abandoned villages on the Tuatuari, including Tselempuhi, Ketulapuhi, Tsuyapuhi, and others, are still fresh in their memories. The villagers left these communities for a variety of reasons, including the depletion of the fertile land; the proximity of many colonies of sauva ants; the occurrance of too many deaths in the village, and the belief that community trails and buildings had become too overgrown and delapidated to bother rebuilding. In the latter two cases, the move to a new village was often no more than a few hundred yards from the previous site.

Virtually all of the old villages are described nostaligically by the Mehinaku as bigger and better than their present community. In the past, it is said, the central plaza was surrounded by several rows of houses instead of just one. The people were free of the whiteman's epidemic diseases (even

colds were unknown), fish were more abundant, and gossip was less virulent. In part, this perspective reflects a "good old days" view of the past, but it is also true that the villages of the past were larger and certainly healthier. At the time of Von den Steinen's first visit, the Mehinaku had three separate villages, though one of these may have been a dry-season farm (uleinejepu) rather than a real village site. Today's population of approximately 85 is probably only a quarter of what it was in Von den Steinen's day. Even in recent times Mehinaku villages have had far more families, inhabitants, and houses than at present. One of the older men in describing the traditional village of Ulawapuhi he recalled from 40 years ago, drew a community of 16 houses representing a population in excess of 150 persons. This same informant led me through a village site abandoned fifteen years before, and listed 15 persons who had died in a measles epidemic and now lay in the graves beneath our feet.

The location of Mehinaku villages in their traditional territories was disrupted by the arrival of the Carib-speaking Txicão in the mid 1950s. The first sign of these intruders was a tripod of arrows left on a path near the village. The purposes of this message, according to the Mehinaku, was to instill terror. Subsequently the Txicão returned and attacked the villagers in their fields with a shower of arrows. Everyone raced home, while one of the men randomly fired the one gun that was in the village. The Txicão were temporarily frightened off, but returned to shoot arrows through the thatch walls of the houses at night and vandalize the community while everyone was away on a salt-making trip.

Finally, the Mehinaku chief was shot in the back with a Txicão arrow, and with the encouragement of the Villas Boas brothers the villagers decided to leave their present site and move closer to the post. The Yawalapiti had at that time had also moved from their traditional territory to escape the

Txicão. Now within a kilometer of the post, they were pleased to give the Mehinaku their former home, Jalapapuh, "The Place of the Sauva Ant". The two tribes further agreed that the Mehinaku could fish only in those areas of the Tuatuari that were close to their community. On the way to Jalapapuh, the Mehinaku stopped at the Auiti village, where they divided tribal territory at a grove of "wild banana" trees roughly midway between their villages. The Mehinaku agreed that they would not exploit the arrow cane in this area without the Auiti's permission. All of these negotiations, as they are now described by the villagers, were casual in tone, and occurred without compensation. Only resource areas were clearly demarcated as belonging to one tribe or the other, with large areas of forest and swamp remaining somewhat ambiguously Mehinaku, Auiti, or Yawalapiti territory.

When the Mehinaku arrived in Jalapapuh the chief of the tribe, Aiyuruwa, was in a hospital in Goiania recovering from his arrow wound. The actual location of the community at Jalapapuh was determiend by a Yawalapiti woman married to one of the villagers. She eliminated one location from consideration because her father had died at that site many years before. With her approval, the new village was situated several hundred meters from the Tuaturai in a location near former Yawalapiti gardens and pequi orchards.

Since moving to Jalapapuh the Mehinaku have constructed several new villages within a short distance of the original community. In the 1960s, after a series of measles and influenza epidemics had killed more than fifteen villagers, they relocated at a new site approximately two hundred yards away. In 1981, the villagers constructed yet a new community at the same location because the old one had become rundown and unattractive. As of my last visit (1977), there was little doubt that the Mehinaku considered Jalapapuh to be their own. They have no intention of returning to their traditional lands even though the Txicão menace has past.

Despite the frequency of moves and their new home on former Yawalapiti land, the Mehinaku have preserved much that is important to them in community layout and their relations with other tribes. The village is oriented in relation to the Tuatuari precisely as it was in the past. The sun rises over the Culĩseu, passes directly over the men's house in the center of the community, and sets over the Tuatuari. The east-west road from the Culĩseu port to the Tuatuari is thus still the "path of the sun." Moreover, since moving to Jalapapuh the Mehinaku's relatĩns with others tribes have intensified. The neighboring Yawalapiti intermarry more frequently with the Mehinaku, than in the past, and cosponsor important rituals. Posto Leonardo Villas Boas, with its constant flow of Xinguano vistors, is now only three hours from the village and is frequently visited by the younger men. In the past the Mehinaku were at the geographical fringe of the Xingu system, but now they are close to its center.

Mehinaku Identity Within the Xingu System. The Mehinaku are major participants within the interactional system of the upper Xingu tribes. In a manner similar to some of the other Xingu groups, they divide the world of humans into three categories, including wajaiyu, kajaiba and putaka. The wajaiyu are "wild Indians," who live beyond the boundaries of the Xingu world. In the past, the villagers have suffered attacks by the Txicão, Suya, and other wajaiyu peoples who have raided the Xinguanas for women and ceramic pots. One historic Mehinaku village is on a site where a Suya was killed by the angered villagers, and is hence still named Suya Place (Suyapuhi).

The Mehinaku attitude towards the wajaiyu is intensely negative. According to one of the villagers, "They kill you in the forest, They steal children and attack the village at night. They never bathe... They sit on the prows of their canoes and defecate into the water. They eat frogs and snakes and mice. They rub their bodies with pig fat and sleep on the ground."

The Mehinaku explain the differences between themselves and the uncivilized wajaiyu in terms of mythology. In ancient times the Sun made the Xingu tribes, and gave to each a place to live and a way of life. The wajaiyu (said to be the offspring of animals in some myths) never received the rituals, implements, and culture of the Xinguanos. Lacking human culture, their speech is likened to the slobbering of pigs and the barking of dogs. Lacking proper institutions, they are wild and unpredictable. "Hence," explains one of the villagers, "They are not like us, they do not wrestle in the afternoon. They do not know how . And so when their stomache is hot with anger they club each other to death instead."

The wajaiyu are the antithesis of what a human should be, and are held up to children and others as flagrant examples of everything that can be wrong about human behavior. Yet recently, free from the threat of assault, the villagers have been able to interact peacefully with individual wajaiyu tribesmen in soccer games and as trading partners. These exchanges have been encouraged by the PNX administration, and it is likely they will broaden in scope and intensity in the coming years.

Quite different from the wajaiyu are the kajaiba, or whitemen. Like the Mehinaku themselves, the kajaiba is a child of the sun. His technological civilization is a gift of the Sun, and his special customs and physical appearance is perpetuated by following his culture and especially by eating his unique foods. One of the villagers explained the significance of food in creating the differences among Xinguano, wild Indian and white man: "your semen is made from coffee, milk, soup and hot chocolate; from rice, from beans, and from the flesh of animals. From Guarana as well. Your semen, like these foods is therefore sweet. And so your children are big because your food is sweet. But our food is different. Our food is tasteless, and so our semen is different. And so our children are small and different from

yours. It is for this reason that the children of the Japanese and the wild Indians are different from us. Their food, and their father's semen, is different from ours."

The Kajaiba is explained by myth and theories of human nature, yet he remains difficult to comprehend. The young men who make frequent trips to the Post and the Jacarei air force base do not return with greater understanding of the white man, his power, and his limitations. The villagers who have visited well-to-do homes in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro come back with an almost magical sense of the Kajaiba's power and riches. They are unable to understand the limited supplies that are available at Posto Leonardo, the politics of the Post's relationship to FUNAI, and the bewildering changes in Park directors and Post personnel. The soldiers at the air force base at Jacarei are especially frightening to the villagers, who have occasionally been abusively received when they have visited to trade. Despite a generally positive experience with the whiteman, the Kajaiba remains profoundly disturbing to the villagers. It is surely significant that in the Mehinaku system of dream interpreation the whiteman is an omen of diasese, which is itself known as "kajaiba ipyana," or "the white man's witchcraft."

The Mehinaku and the Other Xinguanos. According to the Mehinaku, all of the Xinguano tribes are of one origin (with the possible exception of the Trumai, who are said to be "a little bit like wild Indians"). "All Putaka (Xinguanos), point out the villagers, "eat the same foods." Hence it is reasonable that they are similar. But among the Putaka there are differences, the major one being that of language. "Only those who speak our language are like us", said the chief in a speech on the village plaza. The only tribe speaking a similar language is the Waura and they are sometimes referred to as "our others" by the Mehinaku to express their kinship and closeness to the Waura and their distance from the other Xinguanos, who may simply be called

"others".

The matter of common speech is of greatest importance to the villagers in expressing connectedness, since they are only comfortable in languages they fully control. Men and women who marry into other tribes are reluctant to speak the new language poorly, and learn to understand it long before they will speak it. Even after full spoken command of the language is achieved, the Mehinaku are still reticent about using it in public situations. As one young man who had lived for five years in his wife's tribe put it, "you should not speak your father-in-law's language."

The Waura variant of Arawakan is intelligible to speakers of Mehinaku, but the languages are not the same. Many basic vocabulary items are different, as are verb endings and the phonemic system. As a result, only a few of the Mehinaku claim to speak Waura as if they were natives.

The major Xingu language groups are characterized by the Mehinaku as having similar characteristics. The Carib-speakers are held in lowest repute, and are said to be rude and intimidating on their visits to the village. The Carib tribesmen are also siad to have violent tempers and to be the most dangerous witches. Criticism of the Tupian speakers is more muted, but they are still regarded as less civilized than the Mehinaku and the other Arawakan peoples. "The Kamaiura grand fathers," one villagers maintained, "were cannibals. Even today, they are just barely Xinguanos." It is no accident that the Mehinaku refer to the Kamaiura as Kamaĩ enula, or "corpse eaters."

Trade and Specialized Manufactures. Virtually all of the observers of the Xingu system have pointed to the barter of specialized trade items as an important basis of the system. The Mehinaku take the same perspective, and often pointed out to me that the despised "wild Indians" never knew how to trade until they entered into peaceful contact with the Xinguanos. "They

just killed and stole until Orlando made them stop."

The traditional Mehinaku trade specialty, manufactured even one hundred years ago in Von den Steinen's time is native salt (KCl) made from the ash of a water hyacinth during the dry season in August. At this time all the villagers who are able to make the trip go to a traditional village site where each family works to produce the salt. The salt is a key element in Mehinaku cookery, and it is also esteemed, though to a somewhat lesser degree, by the other Xinguanos. Throughout the year they show up in the Mehinaku village to trade hard wood bows, ceramic pots, and shell necklaces and belts for large quantities of salt. Members of other tribes also come to the Mehinaku for cotton, which the villagers manufacture in quantities that go beyond their own needs.

The trade system from the Mehinaku perspective is valued both for the goods it supplies and for the system of peaceful interdependence that it establishes. The monopolies on shell belts and ceramic pots, for example, would be relatively easy to break if the Mehinaku were inclined to do so. For many years, Kaiti, a Waura woman married to the chief, has produced high-quality ceramics which she trades to the Mehinaku and to Xinguanos who visit the village. But as of my last visit, none of the other Mehinaku, including even Kaiti's daughter, had fully mastered Kaiti's skills. "Mehinaku women" the villagers explained, "do not make pots. Only Waura women are ceramicists." As one of the men put it, summarizing the advantages of the trade system, "they have things that are really beautiful and we have things that they like. And so we trade, and that is good."

Ritual. The Mehinaku and their ceremonial culture are central to the Xinguano religious system. Many of the most important ritual songs are sung in Mehinaku, and many of the spirits that are also recognized in other villagers appear to have Arawakan names. According to Basso, for example, the Kalapalo

sing ritual songs in Mehinaku, even though this Carib-speaking tribe does not understand Arawak.

In common with the other Xinguanos, the Mehinaku participate in major intertribal festivals that commemorate the inauguration of the new chiefs and the piercing of the ears of village boys (Pihika), the mourning the recently dead (Ata Kaiumãi), rainy season trading festivals (huluki), and a host of lesser ceremonies. The villagers regard the participation of the Xinguanos as a critical element in the rituals, and dispatch ceremonial ambassadors (waka) to deliver their invitations with stylized speeches and gifts. In recent years, the Mehinaku have jointly cosponsored at least two such rituals with the Yawalapiti, reflecting a perceived closeness and positive evaluation of this tribe.

The Mehinaku ritual system in terms of its general structure of "sponsors" and "makers" of ceremonies is similar to that of the other Xingu tribes. The system is sufficiently open-ended, however, to allow local variations of rituals that have no counterpart in the other Xingu communities except the closely-allied Waura, and possibly the Yawalapiti. Chief among these rituals are those associated with the harvest of pequi in the late fall of each year. According to Mehinaku beliefs, the orchards are the home of spirits, who are the true "owners" of pequi. These spirt-owners are propitiated in the course of rituals which are spaced-out over a period of approximately six weeks, during which the spirits, impersonated by the villagers, are brought into the village, ritually fed, and then sent back to their orchards with prayers for more pequi in future years. Among the spirit-owners of the orchards is matapu, the spirit of the bull-roarer, who is the focus of an important three-day ritual. In the course of the ritual the villagers make bull-roarers which are hung in the men's house and are tabooed to the women of the tribe. Although other Xingu tribes make bull-roarers they

do not appear to be the focus of serious rituals, and in some cases the bull-roarers appear to function primarily as toys and items to trade with tourists.

Intermarriage. The flow of trade-goods and ceremonial services from tribe-to-tribe is part of a larger system of exchange whose principle component is people. Visits to other tribes are motivated by a desire to trade, to escape boredom or social pressures at home, to attend local rituals in other villages, and especially to seek a spouse in another tribe. The Mehinaku prefer to marry at home (approximately two-thirds of all marriages are within the community) but often there is no spouse of suitable age or degree of kin. The sclution is to obtain a spouse by activating ties that already bind the villagers to other communities. At present there are close kinship connection with all of the upper Xingu tribes other than the Auiti, and these links serve as a basis for additional intertribal marriages. The most recent intertribal marriage of which I am aware, brought together a granddaughter of the present Mehinaku chief with a Yawalapiti, thereby further solidifying the already close relationship between these tribes.

The Mehinaku contract marriages with other Xinguanos only as a last resort because the villagers do not like to lose the presence and support of their children. Since no regular rule of postmarital residence binds offspring to the community, parents are at risk of seeing both sons and daughters leave home after marriage. An additional difficulty to marrying into other groups is that the in-married spouse is often treated badly. According to the Mehinaku, the Carib and Tupian speakers are said to be especially hard on their in-laws from other tribes. One young man described to me how he was the victim of cruel practical jokes because he had "stolen" a potential spouse from his in-law's village. At night, he found his hammock filled with ashes and earth. When he slept, intruders twanged the hammock

cords to awaken him. During the day, his efforts to whoop and be sociable with the other men would be answered by sarcastic imitations from behind the houses. Only after his wife had her first child did the hazing come to an end.

Unlike the tribes they criticized, the Mehinaku appear to treat outsiders with more courtesy and gentleness. Hazing and aggressive conduct to in-married spouses occurs (one Txicão woman--a "wild" Indian from the Mehinaku perspective--was actually driven away from the village after marrying a Mehinaku man) but it is more muted and gentle than among other tribes. The villagers experiences among the other Xinguanos has tended to reinforce their conviction that only Arawakan tribes, and among the Arawakans only Mehinaku are truly well-mannered.

Seen from without, the Mehinaku are part of a larger society of Xingu peoples who are minimally different from one another. In terms of the major cultural regions of South America this perspective is undoubtedly correct. But from the point of view of the villagers themselves, they occupy a unique role within the larger Xingu system. The contrasts of trade monopolies, rituals, and patterns of intermarriage differentiate the Mehinaku from the surrounding tribes. The villagers history and special position within the larger system are the basis of their sense of uniqueness. Despite their resemblances to the other Xinguanos the Mehinaku are above all Mehinaku, and take pride in themselves as a special human community.