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The Ecology of the Barí: Rainforest Horticulturalists of Latin America

Stephen Beckerman & Roberto Lizarralde

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Unlike in many of today's large urban centers, members of extant tribal societies are fully involved in the production of their own food and in other practices that ultimately determine the group's long-term survival. The Barí Indians speak Chibchan, a language of Mesoamerican origin, and occupy the Maracaibo Basin in the Northern Amazon. In Colombia and Venezuela, they are known as Motilones, and their traditional territory is known as Motilonia.

In *The Ecology of the Barí*, Beckerman and Lizarralde first provide a rich historical, social, and environmental contextualization of the study topic before the book's main focus is introduced. The Maracaibo Basin, which lies between Colombia and Venezuela, is a natural Amazonian depression connected to the Caribbean Sea and surrounded by two Andean mountain ranges that meet to form a Y. The authors describe the region's wind and rainfall patterns, its diversity of soil and forest types, and its fauna. This environmental panorama is impressively detail-rich, especially when describing the physiobiological characteristics of the region that directly affect the ecology of the Barí. For example, the authors offer a beautiful description of the interdependence between the rainfall regime and the reproduction and migration of the bocachico (*Prochilodus reticulatus*, Curimatidae), a fish that, in the traditional Barí subsistence economy, constitutes half of their animal protein consumption.

Within the scope of this contextualization, a quick summary of key moments in the last 500 years of Barí history is provided. The authors narrate several cycles of contact and conflict between the Barí and the region's non-indigenous population. The first of these cycles includes the murder and enslavement of Indians by the first Spaniards who entered the Maracaibo Basin in the sixteenth century. At the other extreme, the authors call attention to reports from the first decades of the twentieth century where bombs and barrels of gasoline were dropped from aircraft on Barí villages. Clues to the identity of the attackers are not left unexplored by the authors and, even more striking, are reports from Indians who survived aggressions in the 1960s, relating incidents of home burnings, children being killed, and the poisoning of relatives. Having outlined the physical and social environment of Maracaibo, the authors begin to explore the three pillars that sustained Barí society until the mid-1970s: their traditional strategies for production, protection, and reproduction.

First, however, it is important to note that the description that follows refers to the period between 1960 and 1975, the "ethnographic present" of the book. According to the authors, this was the final period during which the traditional Barí way of life was relatively intact. It should also be noted that after Lizarralde's first contact with the Barí in 1960, he made more than 96 ethnographic expeditions, complemented by an additional 18 expeditions made by Beckerman. Traditional production was sustained within a tribal mixed-economy society based primarily on agriculture and fishing and, on a smaller scale, hunting and gathering. However, the Barí were always contending with what was perhaps their biggest challenge: ensuring a regular supply of food in a seasonally inconsistent and spatially heterogeneous environment. During the region's annual dry season (between January and March), the main Barí fishing technique, spearfishing, was most effective; in shallower and less turbid rivers, fishing productivity significantly increased. The beginning of the dry season also marked the time during which forested areas were converted into land suitable for cultivation. The drying-out of organic matter that occurred during much of the dry season guaranteed good burning and, consequently, the success of agricultural production during the rainy season.

The Barí lived in the valley and on the slopes bordering the Andes, which reach an altitude of approximately 600 meters. This terrain makes them square with another type of environmental variation: the number and size of the areas formed by alluvial soils decrease as one follows the rivers upstream. Alluvial soils are rich in nutrients and, therefore, are more suitable for agriculture. Therefore, with the increasing altitude of the terrain, it was necessary for the Barí to expend greater efforts in cultivation. This effort was reflected in the greater number of small (and also more ephemeral) fields cultivated in areas of higher elevation. In contrast, the fields were larger and more enduring in the lower areas. Fishing productivity followed the same pattern: the further upstream in the river, the lower the abundance and size of the fish compared to the lower and broader stretches of water.

Next, the primary factors contributing to mortality in Motilonia, including illness and homicide, are discussed. In parallel, the main Barí practices for minimizing the risk of these elements are also described. This chapter is the book's shortest but perhaps most impactful, due to its depiction of the cruelty with which many Barí were killed during the first half of the twentieth century, especially after 1914, as the first foreign oil companies arrived and the region experienced rapid agricultural expansion. Beginning in this period, homicides became increasingly numerous and brutal. The figure of the *pájaro*, the "professional Indian hunter," further emphasizes various groups' determination to exterminate Barí society in that period.

With respect to reproduction and demography, the authors describe a patrilineal and matrilineal society that embraces the practice of partible paternity. In this societal structure and organization, women have an autonomous sexual life and engage in as many extra-marital relationships as they choose. Beckerman and Lizarralde also empirically investigate several hypotheses of evolutionary ecology, a line of research virtually unexplored in the context of Neotropical horticultural groups. Using this approach, the authors are able to show, for example, that women who occupied more productive local ecosystems produced more children and that the most skillful hunters also had more wives and children. In contrast, two assumptions found no empirical support: that women who conceive girls during their first pregnancy had more children (because girls help to care for their siblings) and that sororal polygynous marriages (when a man has two sisters as co-wives) are associated with greater parental care.

The Barí always seem to have overcome their subsistence challenges of ensuring a regular supply of food in an unpredictable environment. The diversity of the plant species grown in their fields, which was lower than in other Amazonian contexts, was also significant. One explanation for this apparent anomaly is the Barí's possible origin in the Highlands, where the repertoire of cultivars is greatly reduced. The Barí may have descended from groups that colonized the Maracaibo Basin recently, in the last millennium. This hypothesis, however, is as yet unexplored, and should be pursued by archaeologists interested in the historical human occupation of the region. The centrality of fishing rather than hunting in Barí society is also notable. However, in periods of prolonged flooding, when the returns from fishing were negligible, hunting became the key activity for supplying protein for the local diet. Perhaps for this reason, regardless of the time of year, hunting never ceased to be practiced and refined among the men and always conferred greater prestige than fishing.

With regard to security, the authors straightforwardly conclude that sparse and semi-sedentary occupation was instrumental in the survival of a Barí society that encountered constant conflicts in both the pre- and post-colonial periods of its history. In addition, local customs, such as avoiding social interactions when sick, also seem to have contributed to this society's non-extinction after contact with epidemics brought from the Old World beginning in 1492. Despite the criticism that Beckerman's and Lizarralde's evolutionary approach to analyzing the Barí's reproductive practices may raise among some anthropologists, there is no doubt as to the merit of the authors' decades-long collection of qualitative and quantitative data and their lucid and honest analysis, which problematizes and even contradicts some of their previous hypotheses on certain topics.

Finally, the book enters the great debate about human ecology in the Lowlands of South America by engaging with the classic question, "Why are indigenous populations who occupy the headwaters of rivers and interfluvial areas small and scattered throughout the landscape?" The "counterfeit paradise" of Betty Meggers and the protein pessimism of Daniel Gross, in addition to the contributions of Robert Carneiro, Donald Lathrap, and Anna Roosevelt, synthesize the ecological and historical dialogue. Beckerman and Lizarralde, relying on their long experience with the Barí, do not hesitate to position themselves within this debate. They oppose a pessimistic view of the food supply in Neotropical

forests, arguing that inter-ethnic conflicts and the need for the protection inherent in them caused the dispersion that characterizes part of the region's indigenous occupation. The examples of affluent Amazonian societies found in the ethnographies of William Vickers (who studied the Siona-Secoya) and Philippe Descola (Achuará Jívaro) and in the archaeological records of Michael Heckenberger and collaborators (who explored the lower Rio Negro and Upper Xingu), as well as the ethno-historical portrait of the Amerindian wars by Fernando Santos-Granero, provide substance and support for their position. Ultimately, the complex puzzle of human ecology in the Amazon gains another piece, *The Ecology of the Barí*, which will certainly assist in the ongoing search for the overarching ecological and historical narrative that is envisioned for the region.