


12-15-2017

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Recommended Citation

Whitaker, James Andrew (2017). "Guns and Sorcery: Raiding, Trading, and Kanaima among the Makushi," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 4, 158-172.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol15/iss2/4>

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Guns and Sorcery: Raiding, Trading, and Kanaima among the Makushi

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Introduction

The history of the Makushi Amerindians in Guyana contains recurring themes of slave raiding, trading, and kanaima sorcery. Neil Whitehead (2002:206, 222–23, 250) has hypothesized—based on colonial documents and fieldwork with the Patamona—that the rise of kanaima sorcery among the Makushi is related to the history of slaving, the introduction of guns, and other colonial pressures from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He suggests that kanaima practitioners gained new socially recognized roles as assassins when the use of guns altered patterns of raiding and warfare with clubs, which were the traditional weapons of warfare among the Caribs, Makushi, and other Amerindians of Guyana. As such, kanaima emerged as a stealth force that could be used to counter the predations suffered by the Makushi and other Amerindians. This essay will provide new evidence—based on colonial documents and fieldwork with the Makushi—in support of this hypothesis and will further elucidate the connection between raiding, trading, and sorcery among the Makushi.

The goal of this paper is not to provide an explanation of the origins of kanaima. Rather, it is to further a hypothesis as to how colonial pressures (slave raiding, trading, guns, etc.) opened up new spaces for the application of this form of violent sorcery. Kanaima sorcerers engage in acts of ritual homicide—frequently disguised or shape-shifting as jaguars, giant otters, or other animals—that prepare victims' bodies for postmortem extraction and selective consumption in order to transfer human essences to a mythic being named Makunaima (associated with creation) in exchange for continued patronage and provision (Vidal and Whitehead 2004:61; Whitehead 2002:131, 146, 221–22; Whitehead and Wright 2004:6). Whitehead identifies this exchange as the ritual goal of kanaima; however, the exact benefits of this exchange for individual kanaima sorcerers remain somewhat unclear both in Whitehead's account and in the accounts of my Makushi interlocutors. Although Makushi accounts of kanaima vary as to its goals—some suggest it is related to Negi/Makunaima, while others do not state a specific overarching goal—it is important to note that the identity of the victims as enemies, affines, or even consanguines appears largely irrelevant to kanaima. Whitehead (2001:240; 2002:58, 61, 76, 90, 93, 129, 243) notes that arbitrary persons (including local women and children), as well as relatives of the killer, may be victims of kanaima among the contemporary Patamona, and that the selection of victims may be based upon revenge, envy, payment, bullying, random encounters, personal offenses, or other variables. This and other aspects of Whitehead's descriptions of kanaima among the Patamona are generally consistent with Makushi accounts.

The Makushi describe kanaima killings in fairly consistent detail, but there are several variations in stories of kanaima attacks. It should be noted that these narratives constitute a *de facto* storytelling genre for the Makushi. However, although the Makushi tell stories about kanaima attacks, suspected attacks, and close encounters relatively freely, there is notable concern among some that talking too openly about this topic might attract kanaima violence, arouse suspicions about whether one is secretly a kanaima, or otherwise result in undesirable consequences. There is no general effort to suppress knowledge of kanaima, but individual Makushi persons usually do not want to be seen as sources of such knowledge.

In almost all kanaima stories, the victim is alone at the time of attack. Kanaima do not usually attack pairs or groups of people. The most common version states that a person is walking alone and perceives rustling or movement ahead of them. They stare at the odd movement, which is a diversion, and a hidden person comes behind them and strikes them

on the head. This causes them to lose consciousness. In many accounts, the victim is said to perceive a person-like being that looks like a jaguar, a giant otter, or another animal before being struck and losing consciousness. This is variously said to be a *kanaima* disguised in the skins of an animal or a *kanaima* that has actually transformed into an animal through the use of magical plants colloquially called *bina*. While unconscious, the *kanaima* pricks the victim's tongue with snake's teeth to cause it to swell and prevent subsequent speech. The *kanaima* puts pressure on the abdomen to cause intestinal protrusion and then cuts or “ties” the intestines. Some describe the *kanaima* as inserting a packet of herbs into the intestines and breaking bones. The victim eventually wakes up, returns home, and subsequently becomes sick. The individual runs a high fever, cannot speak, and sometimes experiences uncontrollable diarrhea until death, which is typically within three days or less. After the victim is buried, the *kanaima* returns to the grave and through one of several methods obtains necrotic substances, usually described as blood, from the victim. They are led to the grave by a sweet smell—it is sometimes described as similar to pineapple—that is caused by the actions performed on the victim's body during the attack. If the *kanaima* is unable to get to the body, they “get fits” and involuntarily transform into various small animals, such as the armadillo.

Kanaima sorcery consists of regional and cross-cultural phenomena—there are similarities between Patamona, Akawaio, and Makushi accounts of it—and a set of beliefs and practices that cannot be reduced to colonial pressures. The extremely violent manner in which *kanaima* kill their victims and their need to return to the body after burial are driven by concerns beyond the more basic goals of assassination (Whitehead 2002:231). At their roots, *kanaima* practices do seem to be based in broader frameworks of belief and are probably much older than the nineteenth century. The association between *kanaima* and *Makunaima* goes back at least to the early nineteenth century (Hancock 1835:44). Among the Makushi, *Makunaima* is frequently known as *Negi* and is considered the malevolent brother of the benevolent *Inshkirung*—both mythic beings associated with creation. Although these broader beliefs underpin regional *kanaima* practices, colonial pressures emerging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led to new adaptations and socially recognized applications of *kanaima*.

The Makushi and Slaving Raids¹

The first known appearance of the Makushi in recorded history occurs in the context of slaving raids conducted against them in 1740 by Luso-Brazilian slavers led by an Irishman named Lourenço Belforte (Hemming 1987:30; QFGBB VI 1903:99–100; Williams 1932:13–14). During the eighteenth century, the Makushi were caught between Luso-Brazilian slaving raids and those carried out by Amerindian proxies (mostly Caribs and Akawaio) of the Dutch (Whitaker 2016a; Whitehead 1988). Such raids against the Makushi were frequent during the eighteenth century and continued into the nineteenth century (CBGHBM 1898:9–10; Hilhouse 1825:37; Whitaker 2016a:40). For example, John Hancock (QFGBB VII 1903:2), Robert Schomburgk (Hemming 1987:262), Charles Barrington Brown (1875:146), and other nineteenth century visitors to the Makushi were told of impending slaving raids.

Memories of these historical experiences of slaving raids have been passed down among the Makushi. During annual fieldwork visits (2012–15) to the Makushi in Guyana, I encountered oral histories pertaining to these raids. For example, I was told on one occasion that:

The Portuguese used to catch the Makushi for enslaving them for coffee plantations, tobacco plantations. So many of them came running north. And when they did, the Caribs came hunting us. They called us the lesser people. And the Dutch gave the Caribs guns and powder to bring us to the coast and enslave us. So, they [the Makushi] were being caught in both directions.

This interlocutor's mother-in-law's mother had been enslaved in Brazil and thus had personal ties to this history of enslavement. It is notable that guns (provided to the Caribs by the Dutch) are mentioned in this account. As discussed below, possession of this weaponry by the Caribs and other Amerindian slaving groups, as well as by Luso-Brazilian slavers, appears

to have complicated Makushi efforts to counter such hostilities. Another interlocutor explained how the Makushi survived this period of slaving:

They [the Portuguese] would take the men as slave[s] or kill them out. They would leave the old women. My mother used to say that they would usually kill out the men. Some friends of mine, their parents used to tell them that there would be signs from the animals. The fox would say: “Fly away, *bu-mong*.”²² Because this is how foxes sound at night. But when they are sending you a message, they would be more aggressive sounding. When they were sending you a message. And she asked the elderly person: “How comes you know?” And she would say: “When a fox would send you a message they would interpret it and say ‘The fox is saying our enemies is coming back to kill again and take away our little girls.’” And then they would see the Brazilians coming with their lassos, and the Caribs would bring their clubs to hit them. So they would bury the girls and some of the men too. And an old lady would sit out by the fire and yell out: “Why you coming again? Don't you know you already killed out our men and took our women? Why don't you go away?” And that is why we believe we still have Makushi peoples.

Consistent with recorded history, this story reveals the adoption of a strategy of hiding, as well as strategies involving animals, to circumvent slaving raids. The notion that elderly women would be left to meet the raiders is consistent with accounts of nineteenth-century explorers who describe encountering Makushi villages with only elderly men or women present. For example, the Schomburgk brothers write of finding Makushi villages with only women in them (Hemming 1987:263; Schomburgk 1876:46). Richard Schomburgk mentions Amerindians hiding, fleeing, or having anxieties about attacks and slaving raids (Schomburgk 1922 [1847]:325–26; 1923 [1848]:50, 64, 145). Patamona oral history also suggests that villages were sometimes left with only elderly women and children (Whitehead 2002:225). Although it is not possible to give a precise terminal date, slave raiding against the Makushi seems to have mostly ended around the mid-to-late nineteenth century. However, the theme of elderly women as saviors of their villages is reflected in contemporary Makushi stories that depict these women saving their villages from otherly beings, such as giant bats and large birds. Similar stories were told to Schomburgk (1876:30–31).

Several sources between the 1810s and 1840s claim that Makushi persons were sometimes involved in the “sale” of their relatives as slaves. John Hancock (1835:45–46) recounts being offered a Makushi male youth in exchange for minor trade goods and mentions Makushi men “selling” their sisters-in-law (affines), as well as their brothers' children (consanguines), upon the death of a younger brother (QFGBB VII 1903:2). Richard Schomburgk (1923 [1848]:250) likewise mentions the “selling” of relatives by the Makushi. John Henry Bernau (1847:35–36) writes that the Makushi “have the cruel custom of selling each other as slaves. If the husband dies, his wife and children are at the disposal of the eldest surviving brother, who may sell or kill them as he pleases.” Robert Schomburgk (1848a:87–88) also mentions claims, which he admits that he cannot verify, that the Makushi sometimes sold their kin. Elsewhere, as provided in Peter Rivière's (2006b:161) compilation of Schomburgk's writings, he suggests that a gun was the price of a “marriageable girl” among Amerindians (in general) in the interior of British Guiana.

Robert Schomburgk encountered groups of Caribs who were traveling to the Makushi territory with guns and other goods to trade for—or to otherwise capture—Makushi slaves (Rivière 2006a:127, 133, 168). Due to a death, which Schomburgk suggests caused fear and uncertainty among the raiders, one Carib slaving raid against the Makushi transformed into a nonslaving trade expedition (Rivière 2006a:207). This group of Caribs claimed to have “given up all idea of enslaving, and [stated] that they were merely going to barter for hammocks, cotton, dogs, &c &c” (Rivière 2006a:207–8). Since death among Amerindians in Guyana is traditionally associated with sorcery, it is quite likely that the Caribs on this occasion were dissuaded from the planned raid by their belief that the Makushi (through kanaima or other practices of sorcery) had caused the death. This reveals the potential efficacy of sorcery as a curb against such predations.

It could be that the guns mentioned by Schomburgk were actually for raiding and not for purposes of trade. The claim that they were intended for trade may have been a ruse. However, slave raiding and trading appear to have existed at this time as an unsteady and fuzzy continuum on which guns lay at both ends.³ Whitehead (2002:54) notes the “fine line” that divides raiding from trading and discusses Hillhouse's (1825:22–23) descriptions of how the Akawaio opted for raiding (rather than trading) when villages were poorly defended, how possession of guns could tip the balance towards raiding for the Akawaio, and how *kanaima* (*itoto*) attacks were used as adjuncts to Akawaio warfare. Raiding and trading were alternate yet interrelated means of exchange in the region during the early-to-mid nineteenth century.

Slave trading (particularly that involving kin) appears to have occurred against the background threat of reprisal raiding. Hancock claims that the Makushi “selling” of relatives was “continually encouraged by the trading Caribs,” and that the Makushi complained of this to his expedition (QFGBB VII 1903:2). The “sale” of relatives thus occurred under duress and instances of Makushi persons transferring their relatives to the Caribs should be understood within the context of similar raids made at the time by Luso-Brazilians, Caribs, and others. Matrimonial exchanges may have sometimes been a means of establishing village links, trade relations, or other “alliances” for the Makushi, but the overarching context of raiding and threats of raiding (implicit or explicit) in these cases makes “alliance” motivations less primary.

Another issue that arises with the Makushi “sale of relatives” is that the nature of such exchange is not entirely clear in the available sources. Makushi trade at the time was mostly (if not entirely) based in bartering—both Hancock and Schomburgk allude to a bartering of trade goods, such as guns, for people. Barter is a form of exchange that frequently differs in both form and content from market exchange (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992). Barter frequently involves cultural meanings, expectations, and even social obligations that go beyond the economic transaction itself and that are frequently absent or obscured in money-based market transactions.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to ascertain fully the broader meanings of the Makushi “sale of relatives” from the available sources, but it appears likely that such exchanges (occurring within a context of raiding and duress) involved transformations or perhaps manipulations of existing customs, such as bride service and men's roles in relation to a deceased brother's wife and children. Trade goods may have been used as a substitute for bride service obligations and customs involving widowed sisters-in-law may have facilitated the acquisition of persons by slavers.

Slave raiding and trading led to a number of transformations for Amerindian societies in the region. During the eighteenth century, the Jesuit missionary Joseph Gumilla noted the effects of a colonial market for slaves on Carib patterns of raiding (Edmundson 1904:14–15). Whitehead (1988:2, 57) explains how the status of war captives in the Guianas transformed over time as Europeans created a market for such slaves. He writes:

The European presence itself changed the nature of inter-tribal relations by intensifying, for example, Amerindian raiding for economic and political gain. Moreover, Carib groups were themselves destabilized by this process since there were critical differences between indigenous and Europeans notions of slavery. Thus the Amerindians ultimately integrated their captives, as wives or *poitos* (son-in-law), into the kinship network, while the Europeans treated their slaves as commodities, exploiting and discarding them as their economic usefulness dictated (Whitehead 1988:2).

However, the raiders were not the only ones who experienced transformation due to the colonial development of a slave market and raiding for Amerindian captives. References to Makushi persons “selling” their relatives suggest that the victims of such raids also sometimes underwent sociological transformations as a result of slaving. In most cases, as mentioned, these latter transformations were likely attempts at adapting existing societal patterns—such as the obligations of elder brothers towards the spouse(s) and children of younger brothers—to minimize or mitigate against additional hostilities from slave raiding groups. By selectively “selling” relatives, Makushi villages or kin groups may have avoided wholesale capture and slaughter by the Caribs and other groups armed with guns obtained from Euro-

pean colonists. However, the occasional normalization of slave raiding into slave trading (whether of kin or non-kin) does not imply the erasure of violence—whether as duress or retaliation. Even today, one of the major motivations mentioned for a kanaima attack is the abrogation of affinal obligations, such as when a man marries or impregnates a woman and then abandons her. In such cases, the man is said to have “fooled up” her family, and retaliation through kanaima violence is thought likely. The residuum of warfare within the regional trade network, in which violence and other forms of exchange continued to coexist, further illustrates this application of kanaima within contexts of exchange.

Delayed Reciprocity and the Regional Trade Network

In the nineteenth century, the Makushi were involved in a trade network with other regional Amerindian groups.⁴ A limited picture of this network emerges from colonial texts. Blowpipes, cassava graters, and curare poison were key items in this trade. The Makushi specialized in producing hammocks, various crafts, and a potent form of curare (Flint 1880:49; Rivière 2006a:186; Schomburgk 1841a:558). The Taruma, Guinau, and Makiritare (called M-iongkongs by Schomburgk) specialized in producing cassava graters (Rivière 2006a:358; Rivière 2006b:147; Schomburgk 1848b:231–32). The Guinau and Makiritare also specialized in providing the materials used to make blowpipes (Rivière 2006a:347; Schomburgk 1841a:561; Schomburgk 1922 [1847]:352). The Arekuna were said to obtain these materials, manufacture the blowpipes, and distribute them to the Makushi in exchange for curare (Flint 1880:49; Schomburgk 1873:32; Schomburgk 1841a:558; Schomburgk 1922 [1847]:333).

There is insufficient space here to fully delineate this trade network, which spread over a wide geographical area and involved many Amerindian societies, but a key point of interest here is Robert Schomburgk's mention of delayed reciprocity between the Makushi and a group of Guinau and Makiritare. During his travels, Schomburgk witnessed these groups engaging in trade and writes that:

though the Guinaus saw the Macusis for the first time, they nevertheless trusted to their word that they would send the payment by one of the men who were to accompany us to Pirara (Rivière [ed] 2006a:358).

Elsewhere, he suggests that these groups may have had sustained contact (Schomburgk 1841b:420–21). However, although it is quite faint in Schomburgk's account, this observation seems to point to a system of delayed reciprocity in operation at the time in the interior of British Guiana. By reciprocity, I do not mean to imply that there was an explicit system or conception of private property ownership; however, there does appear to have been a mechanism for enforcing the more general economic circulations surrounding regional barter and trade. This point becomes much clearer in light of ethnographic data from my fieldwork with the Makushi in Guyana.

Delayed Reciprocity and Kanaima Sorcery

Makushi oral history reveals that the threat of kanaima sorcery ensured the system of delayed reciprocity in the regional trade network. Trade partners who failed to meet their obligations in trade might become targets of kanaima violence. When I asked about historical patterns of trade in 2013, I was told:

Last trading I know of [occurred] when I was a little boy. We used to go and trade hardware; we used to buy it from the city—gun, cutlass, hardware, file. They used to carry it [to the] Arekunas to trade it for cassava grater. They buy those. That was like in 1950s, 40s, and 30s. That was the trading route from here right through heading to the Orinoco. It took them one month to go and come. But they knew the route to reach there and they would take the time and go. I don't think there's anybody who knows it now. The last guy was *tosbao* [village leader] for a few times, but he passed away this same year. His father was an Arekuna. He used to tell us about

the trading and about how they made enemies because they did not keep their obligations.

This reference to obligations refers to agreements that a trade partner would return within a specified time, bring the trade item previously promised, and complete the exchange. The Makushi commonly mentioned the Arekuna when talking about such trade and obligations with delayed reciprocity.

Several Makushi interlocutors mentioned past trade with the Arekuna in Brazil or near Mount Roraima for cassava graters and blowpipes. Mount Roraima has long-standing significance for many Amerindian societies in the region and is located on the border of Brazil, Guyana, and Venezuela. Other interlocutors claimed that graters were also obtained from the Akawaio and/or the Patamona. I was told in 2014:

They [the Makushi] used to go across there [to Roraima near the Arekuna] and barter for graters. I think it was the Arekuna who made the stone graters. And they go all the way over the Roraima to get the grater. And they would carry hand axe and other things. And they would say that they would come at a certain time to return the trade. And if they didn't come by then, then they would get mad and go and get the one who didn't come back on time.

The general pattern that emerges is that a Makushi person or group of persons would travel a long distance to trade for graters and other items. Consistent with nineteenth-century writers' accounts, the Makushi claim today that they specialized in producing curare, hammocks, and various crafts in the past. If they failed to return and complete the exchange within the agreed-upon time frame⁵—three months was sometimes given as an example—then a *kanaima* would be dispatched to kill them. For example, I was told that:

The Arekuna were the producers of the cassava grater and they would barter with whatever you brought from here. I think that it is still—you have to go with a guide and a person to interpret your language—the way it works. Maybe I go and they trust me with an extra grater and maybe I promise them a gun. And if you don't show up, they coming for you. That is part of the warfare. They hide for you and catch you.

In this account, a direct relation is made concerning trading, *kanaima*, and warfare. Failure to meet trade obligations by not completing the exchange resulted in *kanaima* violence. As such, an element of warfare coexisted and continued alongside trade within the regional trade network.

In addition to these references from oral history, there is also some evidence from colonial texts that *kanaima* were involved in the regional trade network during the nineteenth century. Robert Schomburgk (1841b:414–17) describes convincing a Makushi man from the Kanuku mountains to demonstrate the preparation of the Makushi curare poison. He writes:

The manufacturing of the poison was however delayed for some days, for the object, as I was told by the chemist, of observing previously a rigid fast, in order to prepare himself for the important business. Meanwhile Kanaima, an influential Macusi chief from the Rupununi, arrived on a visit to Pirara, and for what purpose I know not: it is enough to state, that he knew how to prevail so far upon the manufacturer of the poison that he retracted his promise, and refused to prepare it in my presence. (Schomburgk 1841b:414–15)

Although the use of the name *Kanaima* (which is sometimes used as a nickname) does not necessarily mean that this man was a *kanaima* sorcerer, his ability to prevent the poison maker from demonstrating the preparation to Schomburgk, after he had agreed to do so, suggests that he had some means of strong persuasion. Since revealing knowledge of the poison's preparation would endanger the Makushi position in their regional trade network—

the Makushi depended on a relative monopoly on curare poison in their trade with other Amerindian groups—we can infer that Schomburgk's account likely reveals a kanaima intervention. Although separate from the enforcement of delayed reciprocity, this incident suggests that kanaima may have played a more general role in guarding Makushi interests at this time.

Warfare, Exchange, and Kanaima

Makushi oral history recounts stories of Carib hostilities against Makushi villages and resistances to these incursions. However, the relative lack of guns by the Makushi helps to explain why many of these stories—e.g., the story of the Carib raid on the Makushi village of Surama—highlight the Makushi fleeing and later using surprise attacks. Clubs could not readily counter guns, but stealthy reprisals could strike fear and serve as a countervailing force in the face of gun warfare. Kanaima sorcery came to be applied as a means of retaliation against external predation and perceived threats from others. Although sorcery and the fear of sorcery had the potential to destabilize society, as discussed below, it came to be instrumentalized and sublimated with a protective function in the face of transformed patterns of violence and warfare. Over time, this function expanded into an array of roles involving outsiders, which explains the application of kanaima violence during the twentieth century to cases where trade obligations related to delayed reciprocity might fail to be met. However, in cases of slaving, trading, and matrimonial alliances, which each have the potential for both violent and nonviolent forms of exchange, kanaima sorcery emerged as a continuing element of warfare coexisting with other forms of exchange.

Lévi-Strauss (1976 [1942]) has argued that warfare and exchange (commerce) are interrelated phenomena for many indigenous societies in Amazonia.⁶ For the Makushi, this interrelatedness is associated with the historical emergence of socially recognized roles for kanaima sorcery. Emphasizing historical slaving against the Makushi, Whitehead (2002:206) writes that:

Given the historical links between kanaimà, the advent of gun warfare in the highlands, and the fact that the Makushi were incessantly preyed upon by others, especially the Karinya [Caribs], kanaimà may have first emerged strongly at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as a defensive technique in the face of new and overwhelming military force.

He suggests that the Makushi used kanaima violence as “a defensive technique against the slaving predation” of Akawaio, Carib, and Patamona raids (Whitehead 2002:136). Unable or unwilling to militarily block these predations, the Makushi resorted to stealthy reprisals by means of sorcery.

Whitehead (2002:137–38, 209, 222–23) further suggests that kanaima took on expanded roles of a guerrilla and otherwise surreptitious nature with the introduction of guns into warfare, since the use of guns by enemy groups would have dramatically increased the casualty rates for club-wielding warriors. Whether due to inadequate access to guns, insufficient population density to mount effective defenses, or unwillingness to incur the heavy losses resulting from direct warfare, this hypothesis suggests that the historical rise of kanaima was associated with a need for the Makushi to fight their adversaries through nontraditional and surreptitious means. Kanaima attacks sometimes served as “adjuncts” in the history of Makushi warfare (Whitehead 2001:240; Whitehead 2002:54–55, 129–30, 222–23; Whitehead and Wright 2004:5). Unlike warriors, “who offered open combat with clubs and arrows, the kanaimà made secret war, especially when the enemy had guns” (Whitehead 2002:139). Although the kanaima phenomenon likely predates the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the colonial market-driven and gun-facilitated increase in slave raiding at this time gave impetus for new applications of kanaima violence. The gun-based military superiority of the Caribs and other slaving groups likely led to a normalization of slaving through trade (with resulting transformations in Makushi kinship practices) and a subsequent injection or expansion of kanaima violence into exchange relations. The continuing coexistence of warfare in Makushi trade reflects the latent threats of violence that would have spurred such exchanges.

I found further support for the association between the introduction of guns into warfare and the socially recognized application of *kanaima* violence during fieldwork with the Makushi. In 2015, a Makushi man was discussing *kanaima* with me one morning. I asked how villages in the past dealt with killings performed by *kanaima*. The following conversation occurred:

- Interlocutor: They used to have the wars with clubs, but when they start gettin' the shotguns, ramrods, they turn to the assassin [*kanaima*]. With guns they just shoot them with clubs down.
- Me: *Kanaima* attacks began when shotguns came in?
- Interlocutor: Yeah, when they get guns they put down the clubs and start secret attacks at night, like assassin.

I was similarly told in 2013 that “wooden club and gun couldn't mesh” in combat. The introduction of guns in warfare and raiding put the Makushi in a vulnerable position. The availability of guns varied among Amerindian groups—e.g., the Akawaio had greater access to guns than the Patamona and *kanaima* provided a means for equalizing these disparities (Whitehead 2002:135, 139). The Makushi had less access to guns than the Caribs and Akawaio, both of whom had closer economic and military ties with Europeans than did the Makushi. In most cases, the Makushi had somewhat limited relations with Europeans during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Hilhouse 1825:36–37). Therefore, the Makushi had to rely to a greater extent on clubs and were placed at a distinct military disadvantage.

Sorcery versus Clubs

The diminution of the club-wielding warrior, due to the introduction of guns and the colonial suppression of warfare, and the suppression of the *piazong* (shaman), due to missionary influence, led to newly adapted and expanded roles for *kanaima* without traditional checks on their violence (Whitehead 2002:53, 104, 206, 222–23). Among the Patamona, warriors and *piazong* traditionally provided checks on excessive *kanaima* violence, while *kanaima* may have sometimes provided similar checks on warriors (Whitehead 2002:53, 104, 138, 230). Although the relationship between warriors and *kanaima* is historically complex, an implicit structural opposition (alongside a tense and occasional military alliance) emerges between the club and sorcery (Whitehead 2002:104, 137–39, 228–31). In at least one case from the nineteenth century, it appears that a *kanaima* was able to instrumentalize the power of the war club and to bring its wielders under his control (albeit temporarily) for the interests of sorcery.

Around 1845–46, an Arekuna man named Awacaipu, who was said to be a *piazong*, gathered almost one thousand Amerindians together in the Kukenam Valley near Mount Roraima with promises of equality with the European colonists and led many Amerindians to their death in mass homicide (Appun 1893 [1864]: 341–42; see also Posern-Zieliński 1978; Roth 1921). After having them dance and drink cassava beer nightly for some time, Awacaipu told the gathered Amerindians that Makunaima had communicated to him that he would make them equal to the European colonists and give them “white skins” if they would club each other to death over a three-night period (Appun 1893 [1864]:343–44). He said that the slain would subsequently be resurrected with “colour and manners equal to the whites” at the next full moon, that they would descend from Mount Roraima, and that they would have dominance over the other Amerindians (Appun 1893 [1864]:344). Awacaipu started the killing by clubbing several people around him, which set off three nights of homicidal clubbing that are said to have resulted in up to four hundred deaths (Appun 1893 [1864]:345–46). Eventually, the time came for the prophesied resurrection. When it did not occur, the people became enraged and Weh-Toreh's father clubbed Awacaipu to death (Appun 1893 [1864]:346–48).⁷ Clubbing is the traditional method used to kill a *kanaima* (Whitehead 2002:52, 111, 228).

This story is significant for the present discussion of kanaima sorcery for two reasons. First, it appears from the reference to Makunaima that Awacaipu was likely a kanaima practitioner in addition to (or perhaps instead of) being a piazong shaman. Vidal and Whitehead (2004:61; see also Whitehead 2002:146; Whitehead and Wright 2004:6) write that:

Awacaipu claimed that his vision of how the Amerindians could gain equality was received from the creator-being Makunaima, who is also central to the practice of kanaima assault sorcery.

This is more than a mere association. Although Appun (1893 [1864]:343) claims that Awacaipu's goal was to achieve regional dominance over all of the Amerindians, the story can also be read as a case in which a kanaima managed to extract human essence for Makunaima on a mass scale. As already noted, the goal of kanaima sorcery is the transfer of human essence to Makunaima. Second, it appears in the story that the kanaima was able to realize this massive transfer by manipulating the warriors present into using their clubs against each other.

According to Appun (1893 [1864]:343), the mass killing was initiated by Awacaipu in order to eliminate "all those present who were capable of bearing arms." I am doubtful of Appun's interpretation that Awacaipu's primary motivation was to achieve paramount dominance over all of the regional Amerindian groups. However, it is notable that he suggests that the warriors (those who might bear arms) were Awacaipu's primary targets. If we are to understand the relationship between kanaima and club-wielding warriors as basically one of structural opposition, the story of Awacaipu appears to represent an instance where a kanaima was able to obtain control over warriors and turn their club-wielding violence to his own ends while plausibly operating within the outer limits of his instrumentalized role.

Posern-Zieliński (1978:108–9) suggests that the events in the Awacaipu story are related to the ingressions of the colonial front against regional Amerindians. This is undoubtedly the historical background of the episode, which is reflected in the theme of inequality within the colonial context, but the broader themes of the story also evince ongoing internal struggles for power and the limits of kanaima. Awacaipu's stated goal was to bring about Amerindian equality with European colonists. Although this narrative may have served to obscure his deeper motivations, Awacaipu was tacitly fulfilling the new role of kanaima as a check on external threats and predation. However, he went further than this and promised an ontological transformation to end colonial inequality altogether. Awacaipu went beyond the norms of kanaima sorcery and sought to invert both the colonial hierarchy and the hierarchy existing between warriors and kanaima. In doing so, he exceeded even the expanded socially recognized role of kanaima. This extreme example occurs around the end of the slave-raiding period in the region and reveals the limits, the inversionary potential, and perhaps also the culmination of the socially recognized role of kanaima as an instrumentalized and defensive force against external predation.

This situational (and temporary) triumph of a kanaima over warriors ends with the restoration of societal norms of dominance and violence. A surviving warrior clubs the sorcerer-prophet to death—thus ending the excessive antisocial⁸ violence resulting from Awacaipu's abuse of his newfound role—and symbolically reasserts the dominance of the war club over sorcery. However, with the correlated rise of gun warfare, this club-wielding power had already diminished and its counterpart (kanaima) was still gaining strength. The social recognition of kanaima as a curb against external predation ultimately enhanced its capacity for expanding the potential scope of internal predation. The story of Awacaipu indicates that the instrumentalization of kanaima violence as a check on colonial encroachment, as well as other forms of concurrent predation, was not always effective and had the potential to pose an existential threat. Although the Makushi are not mentioned by name in the story of Awacaipu, the account centers around one of their primary trade partners—the Arekuna. Furthermore, the story of Awacaipu reflects the broader regional aspects of the transformations that were occurring at the time among the Makushi and other Amerindian societies in British Guiana.

Ethnological Considerations

Kanaïma sorcery is a difficult topic of study and presents many challenges for ethnographic fieldwork and description. It is complicated by the variations found across Amerindian societies, between accounts of members from the same society, and among anthropologists' ethnographic descriptions. For example, Audrey Butt Colson's (2001) descriptions of Akawaio kanaïma (itoto) do not emphasize the cosmological themes highlighted in Whitehead's (2001; 2002) writings on Patamona kanaïma. In the Makushi accounts that I encountered, there is little mention of shamanic journeying by kanaïma, which Whitehead places as central to Patamona accounts. The descriptive variance on this topic sometimes reveals cultural differences, while at other times it reflects different ethnographic approaches and priorities. However, the similarities in Akawaio, Makushi, and Patamona accounts of kanaïma are sufficiently developed to warrant consideration of kanaïma as regional phenomena.

One of the major differences between Patamona and Makushi accounts pertains to the Hallelujah religion. Whitehead (2002) generally describes piajong, kanaïma, and Hallelujah as three separate, competing, and sometimes overlapping forms of shamanism in Patamona history.⁹ Akawaio and Patamona accounts of the origins of Hallelujah attribute it to a Makushi shaman-prophet named Bichiwung, who was eventually killed by a kanaïma (itoto) sorcerer (Butt 1960; Butt Colson 1971; Butt Colson 2001; Staats 1996; Whitehead 2001; Whitehead 2002). However, neither Hallelujah nor Bichiwung are practically ever mentioned in Makushi accounts in my experience. Many of my interlocutors were not even sure what I meant by Hallelujah and none of them had heard of Bichiwung, although there is a slightly similar story about an incestuous false prophet named Joang. This relative lack of cultural memory pertaining to Hallelujah is in keeping with the notion that the Makushi discontinued Hallelujah practice in the distant past. Although I did hear a few elderly Makushi interlocutors mention that they had participated in Hallelujah religious practices in surrounding villages long ago, which indicates that there is still some historical memory of Hallelujah among the oldest generation of Makushi alive today, younger Makushi generally claimed to have little or no knowledge of Hallelujah.

There has also been disagreement over whether kanaïma is considered legitimate by the communities where it is practiced. Whitehead (2002:221) suggests that the Patamona reluctantly accept kanaïma. However, Butt Colson (2001:225–26; see also Butt 1956) claims that it is never legitimate for the Akawaio. Although the Akawaio view kanaïma (itoto) as illegitimate, they do consider some other forms of sorcery-related revenge, such as “blowing” or taling, as sometimes legitimate (Butt 1956:53). In my experience, the Makushi are positioned in the middle on this debate. The Makushi do seem to view kanaïma, as Whitehead (2003:77) suggests for the Patamona, as an existing tradition in continuity with a distant past. The statement that “kanaïma do what they have to do with you” (frequently heard among the Makushi) could be interpreted as indicating a measure of legitimacy. I sometimes witnessed a seemingly paradoxical combination of fear and excitement in some villagers—as well as disbelief in others—when there was news that a kanaïma might be in the village. However, I never heard the Makushi say that contemporary kanaïma violence is legitimate, although some did suggest that it played a legitimate historical role in warfare. In the present, as Butt Colson (2001) describes for the Akawaio, kanaïma sorcery is viewed by the Makushi as a distinctly antisocial and predatory practice that is motivated primarily by envy, jealousy, and evil-mindedness.

Lastly, the Makushi frequently told me that kanaïma sorcery has waned in recent decades. Although they do not deny that there are or were Makushi kanaïma, they generally associate kanaïma with the Patamona. The Makushi and the Patamona each tend to view the other as the source of kanaïma. This association of kanaïma with other Amerindian groups, which I observed to sometimes include in-married affines among the Makushi, is common in the region (Butt Colson 2001; Whitehead 2001) and is consistent with Rivière's (1970) discussion of the sociological functions of sorcery. However, as Whitehead (2001; 2002) suggests, contemporary discourses of kanaïma also implicate Europeans and Westerners as potential victims and may be associated with new vectors of development. When I asked about the plants used by kanaïma, I was told:

It is a bad plant. It is not here or we would be kanaima too. It is good to get rid of your enemy, but bad at the same time because you become the person that kills your whole family using that. It's dying now. They are trying to keep it hiding, but it is dying. I have not seen a kanaima attack [here] in nearly thirty years. It still happens in the Patamona territory.

My interlocutor went on to say that “the Patamona are the real kanaima. They killed my friend a few months ago. This is serious business. Two white men have gone down. Around 2007 and 2008.” These statements reflect Makushi views of kanaima as potentially useful but dangerous, as associated with others (particularly the Patamona), as a receding element of traditional culture, and as a threat to both Amerindians and outsiders, particularly those with predatory proclivities.¹⁰

Conclusion

Building on Whitehead's earlier work on kanaima sorcery, which he called dark shamanism, this essay has further developed the hypothesis that kanaima took on defensive functions among the Makushi in response to predation (primarily slaving) and gun warfare. From a historical point of view, kanaima became a useful adjunct to warfare at a time when the Makushi were subjected to frequent slaving, raiding, predatory trading, and other abuses. This set of colonial pressures created the context in which kanaima emerged within recorded history in the early nineteenth century. At that time, the enemies of the Makushi were increasingly armed with guns, while the Makushi had limited access to European weaponry. In attempts to forestall, resist, and mitigate external attacks, they alternately fled from their attackers, implemented defensive strategies, and sometimes sought to transform predation into quasi-peaceful trading relations. In the process, they harnessed the ritual practices of sorcery called kanaima as a means of surreptitious resistance against their enemies.

Within these contexts, kanaima emerged as a socially recognized means of assassination and reprisal against gun-wielding enemies that could not easily be countered by traditional club warfare. As such, ritual sorcery temporarily played a prosocial role under a pressurized set of colonial circumstances. However, these were situational applications, rather than the origin of kanaima, and such defensive uses only provided for a temporary sublimation of its practices. As the external threats fuelled by colonialism (particularly slaving raids) waned, kanaima ritual sorcery continued as before as an antisocial predatory practice against both kin and nonkin and against both allies and enemies. As the story of Awacaipu reveals, the curbs against external predation were capable of manipulating traditional defenses and producing internal predation on a massive scale. In this rapidly changing political environment, warriors, shamans, and sorcerers vied for power against one another as guns, missions, markets, and other tentacles of colonialism's reach and spread waxed and waned in the region.¹¹

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the American Philosophical Society (Lewis and Clark Fund), the Central States Anthropological Society (Leslie A. White Award), the School of Liberal Arts at Tulane University, and the Department of Anthropology at Tulane University for helping to fund my fieldwork among the Makushi in Guyana. I would like to particularly thank William Balée, Laura Rival, Judith Maxwell, and Jason Nesbitt for their support with this research. Thanks are also due to Bill Fisher (editor of *Tipiti*) and to the anonymous reviewers, whose comments and suggestions were very helpful. I would like to especially thank the Surama Village Council, the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, and the Environmental Protection Agency in Guyana for granting fieldwork permissions. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Neil L. Whitehead. A legend has developed among the Makushi and Patamona in Guyana concerning Whitehead and the pots that he “troubled” near Paramakatoi.

Notes

¹ See Whitaker (2016a; 2016b) for more on the history of slaving raids against the Makushi, regional trade, and kanaima. Some sections of this article overlap with the fifth chapter of my Ph.D. dissertation on the Makushi in Guyana.

² The exact Makushi word being used here is unclear. It resembles the word *pemong* that means “people” in Makushi. It also resembles the word *manung* that means “little sister” in Makushi. Younger females are frequently referred to as *manung* by older people irregardless of their actual relation to them.

³ Ferguson (1995) also points to the narrow line that divides raiding and trading.

⁴ Butt Colson (1973; see also Coppens 1971) describes a similar trade network in the region during the 1950s. The Arekuna and Akawaio emerge as primary trading societies in this network. Minimal references to the Makushi may reflect that their position in the network was undermined over time – possibly due to declines in curare trading.

⁵ A *quipu*-like device was sometimes used for this purpose. A Makushi interlocutor explained to me in 2013 that: “They would have a string and they would make a knot here, and a knot here, and knot here. And they count, one moon, two moon, three moon. And when they see a new moon they would loose one. And they know that you would be back before whatever moon, when you told them, and if you are not back by that moon, then the promise is broken.” These knotted strings were previously observed by Ribeiro de Sampaio (Edmundson 1906:241) and Im Thurn (1880:482; cf. Im Thurn 1901:142). The Makushi similarly used a notched stick to count days (Schomburgk 1922 [1847]:157).

⁶ See Ewart (2013) and Whitehead (2002:235) for more on the interrelationship between warfare and exchange.

⁷ This story was told to Carl Appun (1871:257–65; 1893 [1864]:318, 341–48) by Weh-Toreh (also Arekuna).

⁸ Kanaima violence is antisocial and inimical to peaceful village life (Butt Colson 2001:231–32; Whitehead 2001:235, 237, 240, 242–43; Whitehead 2002:103–4, 111, 132, 209, 237).

⁹ Further research is needed on the relationships among these shamanic forms. When read in relation to the above interpretation of the story of Awacaipu, the early involvement of kanaima in the Hallelujah religion may suggest more of a manipulative exploitation of (rather than merely a competitive resistance to) emerging regional forms of religiosity than has previously been suggested.

¹⁰ Whitehead (2002:46, 104, 130, 182; 2003:77; see also Vidal and Whitehead 2004:72) suggests that kanaima are hyper-traditionalists who resist outside influences and currently resist various forms of predatory development.

¹¹ See High (2015) for more on the relationship between warriors, violence, and victimization in Amazonia. See Carneiro de Carvalho (2015) for more on how the Makushi today relate to the nation-states (particularly Guyana, Brazil, and Venezuela) that succeeded colonial regimes in the region.

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