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# “Who Are These Wild Indians”: On the Foreign Policies of Some Voluntarily Isolated Peoples in Amazonia

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## Introduction

*Mayicho, punanu geni.*

*Kajitu tokanu pguta nyanumatya, ntomsatlu mayicho: Mayicho, pixakni ginkano. Pushpakanu – nchina.*

Amahuaca man, come here!

It seems that I spoke in Spanish when I tried to converse, calling the Amahuaca one: Amahuaca, it seems that the word came to me. Emerge – I said. (Nies 1972:95)

This quote comes from a story by Etelbina Cuchichinari Nachinari, a Piro (Yine) woman from the Bajo Urubamba River in Peruvian Amazonia, which described an attack on her kinspeople while they were hunting along the Mishahua River near her home village of Miaría. Etelbina’s nephew had just been shot with an arrow by a man from an indigenous group living in voluntary isolation, yet she responds with this extraordinary attempt at conversation and the call to “emerge.” She was clearly very frightened, since she was surprised she spoke to the man in Spanish, but she called upon him to “emerge,” that is, to stop remaining hidden from her.

Etelbina’s attempt at conversation with the “Amahuaca” man was actually an encounter with a Nahua man, whose people then lived in voluntary isolation in the headwaters of the Mishahua, a tributary of the Urubamba, and the Manu River. Etelbina clearly understood this man’s attempt to kill her nephew as a kind of communication, however lethal in intent, that could be responded to with speech, another kind of communication. As described below, the Miaría Piro and the Nahua people have had a very complex series of relations with each other, relations that varied from intermarriage to violent attacks such as this one. This paper builds on an earlier one (Gow 2011) where I argued that, in the absence of ethnographic fieldwork, our best understanding of indigenous Amazonian peoples in voluntary isolation come precisely from their indigenous neighbors, who are the other interlocutors in the “long conversation,” to use the characterization of ethnography made by Maurice Bloch (1977), in which they are engaged.

Indigenous Amazonian peoples in voluntary isolation have a very ambiguous status in relation to anthropological knowledge, precisely because ethnographic fieldwork among them is impossible. In this paper, I use as ethnographic examples three communities of which I have some personal experience. These are the Mashco Piro, who I have never met but who I have discussed with Piro (Yine) and other people who have met them; the Panará studied by my former student Elizabeth Ewart and who I have visited; and the Nahua, who I met as they began to make peaceful contact with their neighbors and who were subsequently studied by my former student Conrad Feather. In each of these three cases, the voluntary isolation of the community was marked by hostile and often violent relations with almost all neighboring communities over extended periods of time. Voluntary isolation is, therefore, at least for these cases, an aspect of *indigenous Amazonian* warfare. The question is less about warfare in general, as I discuss below, and more about what the specific forms of indigenous Amazonian warfare entail.

By definition, no anthropologist has ever done ethnographic fieldwork with indigenous Amazonian peoples in voluntary isolation, so that kind of knowledge seems irrelevant. But if that is so, what else is there? For two of my cases, the Panará and the Nahua, there exist good ethnographic accounts of what voluntary isolation meant to these peoples, but this ethnographic knowledge is precisely based on the fact that they had ceased to be in voluntary

isolation. Ethnographers of these peoples were not necessarily interested in voluntary isolation as such, but the communities they studied were very interested in their recent and often very disastrous experiences of contact and its continuing consequences for themselves. They had much to say about it.

If ethnographic fieldwork is central to anthropological knowledge, the latter is not restricted to it, for such knowledge also establishes what is appropriate and pressing for such fieldwork. Robert Heine-Geldern wrote in 1959:

A special session of the 4th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Vienna, 1952, was devoted to a symposium concerning urgent tasks of research. The speakers pointed out that numerous tribes, cultures, and languages which have never been properly investigated are fast disappearing and that this constitutes an irreparable loss to science. (1959:1076)

A committee to this end was established, and it went on to publish the *Bulletin of the International Committee on Urgent Anthropological and Ethnological Research*. The *Bulletin* published two articles relevant to the issue and peoples discussed here: Robert Carneiro's "Little-Known Tribes of the Peruvian Montana" (1962) and Georg Grünberg's "Urgent Research in Northwest Mato Grosso" (1966). Both articles discussed peoples in voluntary isolation and the urgency of studying them not as problems about voluntary isolation as such, but rather as scientific problems about the full coverage of existing cultural diversity before it inevitably disappeared. This issue was hardly new to anthropology, but it did highlight anthropological knowledge as an encyclopedic account of human cultural diversity. Neither Carneiro nor Grünberg expected these urgent researches to uncover anything radically new to anthropology but rather hoped they would provide important new contexts for the understanding of what anthropologists already knew about neighboring indigenous communities.

This paper is a reflection on the phenomenon of voluntary isolation in Amazonia, about anthropology's implication in the phenomenon's formation as a concept, and what anthropologists might profitably say about it as a phenomenon in the world. While knowledge based on ethnographic fieldwork might be minimal or even totally absent for people in voluntary isolation, anthropological research has produced a very impressive understanding of indigenous Amazonian social forms *in general*, knowledge that can be brought to bear on the question.

### Daimã's Story

In 2000, Daimã, a Yudya woman from the Xingu River in central Brazil told her host Tania Stolze Lima and her fellow guest, myself, a long and riveting story about her people's recent contacts with an unknown group of voluntarily isolated indigenous people. Daimã spoke in Yudya, which Tania translated for me, but Daimã speaks Portuguese very well, and thus she understood my questions in that language. She called the voluntarily isolated people *abĩ*, which the Yudya people habitually translate into Portuguese as *índios brabos*, "wild Indians," but which might also be translated as "enemies." Amazed by her story, I asked her earnestly, "Who are these wild Indians? Who might they be?" Daimã looked confused, and asked in turn, "What wild Indians?" as if my question was a total non sequitur to her story. Tania, initially as confused as me by this response, thought for a while and then laughed and said,

Obviously there were no wild Indians, the story is not about that at all! It is about the fact that the man who went out of his house at night to urinate, and saw the moon looking different. He was becoming a shaman!

Only the man who had seen the moon looking different claimed to have seen the evidence of the "wild Indians." Nobody else did.

Earlier, Daimã had told us a very long, and very gruesome, story about a man of her father's people, the Kajabi. For Daimã's mother's people, her father's people were, or until recently had been, *abĩ/índios brabos*/"wild Indians," and her story was about her personal experiences with a Kajabi man who had reactivated a "wild Indian" subject position in a particularly frightening and disgusting way, but one that made some sense to her father's people.

Daimã's mother's people had not done what that Kajabi man had done for a very long time, but it was an immanent possibility in the world and central to a very important Kajabi ritual.

Following up on the conversational theme of *abĩ/índios brabos*/"wild Indians," I had asked Daimã about other "wild Indians," the Manitsawá people, former neighbors of the Yudya. These people were assumed to have all been killed or to have died out: one of the last known Manitsawá people was a woman who had been kidnapped by the Suyá, then kidnapped by the Yudya in turn, and had died among the latter. There was, however, persistent speculation that some Manitsawá might have survived and were living in voluntary isolation in the region. It had been in this conversational context that, Daimã had told us the story about the man who saw the moon looking different. I had assumed that the *abĩ/índios brabos*/"wild Indians" in her story were these voluntarily isolated Manitsawá people. But, as Daimã made clear, there were no such "wild Indians," except from that man's point of view.

Daimã's failure to understand why I had failed to understand *her* story points, I think, to an important feature of the phenomenon of voluntary isolation. Anthropologists like myself habitually imagine that voluntary isolated peoples constitute an empirical problem regarding the empirical existence and existential conditions of an empirical human community: Who are these wild Indians? Who might they be? Daimã treated the *abĩ/índios brabos*/"wild Indians" as an immanent feature of her world, who may or may not have actually been present during the events described in the story, thus "What wild Indians?" There is no question that Daimã, Tania, and I would have agreed that had other Yudya people seen the same evidence of the *abĩ/índios brabos*/"wild Indians" as the man who saw the moon looking different, her story would have been very different and with seriously different implications. Daimã's story concerned the implications of this man's experiences with the *abĩ/índios brabos*/"wild Indians" for his coresidents as a whole. For the Yudya, such peoples are, as noted, an inherent feature of the world, and if they were indeed in the immediate vicinity of the village, as the man claimed, they posed an urgent *political* problem to its inhabitants. What might these people want from such unwelcome proximity, and how should the Yudya react?

### Voluntary Isolation

Because my interest is in what indigenous Amazonian social forms might have to say about voluntary isolation, I am not going to quibble about anthropological definitions. Glenn Shepard's (2016) definition seems to me robust enough. However, this anthropological concept of voluntary isolation has a history, one that originates in the relations between the Brazilian state and indigenous peoples living in its national territory. My source for this claim is Darcy Ribeiro's *Os Índios e a Civilização* (1982). The book was first published in 1977 but is based on much earlier essays.

Ribeiro makes several important points for an intellectual archaeology of voluntary isolation. He first makes clear, for Brazil, that what these peoples are voluntarily isolated from is "civilization," the cultural and social forms particular to the Brazilian nation-state. This "civilization" is intrinsically expansionary into all parts of the national territory, hence creating "frontiers of contact" with indigenous peoples, which inevitably involve conflict. Such conflict can only be peacefully resolved by intervention by either the Catholic Church or the state. Given the historical inadequacy of the Church to perform this function, the state had to take over in the form of the Serviço de Proteção aos Índios (SPI), founded in 1910. Aside from its general remit of "protection" of indigenous peoples, the SPI had a specific task of "attracting" and "pacifying" isolated tribes. Such "pacification" was explicitly opposed to policies of violent inhabitant replacement such as genocide but was equally explicitly at the service of the expansion of civilization into indigenous territories, an expansion conceived of as inevitable. The SPI developed very specific techniques of "attraction" and "pacification" that were explicitly part of the expansion of civilization, since they involved going beyond the "frontier of contact" deep into the territory of isolated tribes and forcing peaceful relations with civilization onto them. The mandate of the SPI was characterized by a very distinctive temporality marked by its inevitability.

For Ribeiro, "isolation" was a *sui generis* situation. He produced two tables of the "situation of indigenous Brazilian groups, in relation to their degree of integration into the national society," one for 1900 and the other for 1957 (Ribeiro 1982:229–262). The former classified

the indigenous groups as “isolated,” in “intermittent contact,” “permanent contact,” or “integrated,” while the latter introduced the further category of “extinct.” Ribeiro saw “isolated” groups as indigenous peoples who lived in areas not yet reached by Brazilian national society and who had little or no contact with civilized people. Some were defined as *arredios*, “withdrawn, asocial,” while others were *hostis*, “hostile.” And what they were withdrawn from or hostile to was civilization.

The specific modelling of isolated indigenous peoples by the SPI seems to me to have been the origin of our contemporary concept of voluntary isolation both in Brazil and elsewhere in Amazonia. The precise process by which this specific modelling migrated outward to other nation-states with indigenous Amazonian populations has yet to be written, but I would imagine that the international intellectual prestige of Ribeiro in his political exile from Brazil was central to it. In the case of Peru, his influence is overt. The 1978 publication of *Los grupos étnicos de la Amazonía Peruana* by Ribeiro and Mary Ruth Wise (the director of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Peru) saw the explicit importation of SPI criteria to define the “contact” status of that country’s indigenous Amazonian peoples.

### **The Anthropological Manufacture of Unknownness**

I asked Daimã, “Who are these wild Indians? Who might they be?” But one of the most interesting features of voluntarily isolated peoples in Amazonia is that the veil of mystery that surrounds them tends to be directly contradicted by the relative ease with which their recent histories can be reconstructed from archival evidence. Their indigenous neighbors tended to know who they were and quite willing to describe them to outsiders, often in great detail.

The title of an anthropological article such as Carneiro’s “Little-Known Tribes of the Peruvian Montana” tends to give to the anthropologically uninformed an entirely false impression of what the author actually meant. Carneiro did not mean the indigenous peoples he described were literally “little-known,” and definitely not unknown. Far from it, because the peoples in question were precisely well known to exist as peoples. The epistemic deficit referred to genuine scientific knowledge, that is, ethnography.

The Mashco people and their voluntary isolation are frequently discussed in the international media, and the emphasis is on their unknownness. However, the earliest known archival reference to them, based on testimony from their indigenous neighbors, dates to 1686. They can be traced from that date to the present with relative ease, again based largely on testimony from their indigenous neighbors (see discussion of the sources in Gow 2011). Piro people consistently testified that they spoke a dialect of the Piro language (see Parker 2015), and Piro and Amahuaca people intermarried with Mashco people (Farabee 1922; Dole 1998; Woodside 1980). The Mashco were hardly, therefore, unknown to their neighbors.

The anthropological unknownness of the Mashco has much to do with the semantic drift of *mashco* as a word in the local Spanish of the Madre de Dios area (see the excellent discussion in Lyon 1975). Initially used exclusively as a name for a community of speakers of a Piro dialect, it came during the wild rubber extraction era to be used as a generic term for all indigenous communities in the Madre de Dios area who were hostile to that industry. As such, *mashco* ceased to be the name of a specific people and came to designate a specific political position within the wild rubber extraction industry, which included both the Mashco themselves and speakers of the quite different Harakmbút languages, such as Arasairi and Amarakaeri. Anthropologists and missionaries then began to treat this local Spanish word as a name once again, but now for something quite different: first as a name for the Arasairi people, then for the Amarakaeri, then as a generic name for all speakers of Harakmbút languages, a category that excluded the original Mashco themselves. Once anthropologists decided that *mashco* was a pejorative name for Harakmbút peoples, the original Mashco were expunged from the literature, and the people to whom Piro speakers attached the name became anthropologically “unknown.” Needless to say, this process had very little to do with indigenous Amazonian social relations.

The Panará people came to international fame due to the attempts by the Villas-Boas brothers, working for the SPI’s successor organization Fundação Nacional do Índio (National Indian Foundation; Funai), to contact them before the construction of the BR-163 (Cuiabá-Santarem) highway through their territory in the early 1970s. Most of the Villas-Boas brothers’

information about these people came from their main indigenous enemies, the Mēbêngôkre, and they came to be known by a variant of their Mēbêngôkre name, “Kreen-Akrore.” Adrian Cowell’s famous film and book about the early phases of the attempted contact, *The Tribe That Hides From Man* (1973), emphasizes how very little was known about the Kreen-Akrore, but when they were finally contacted and anthropologists began to learn their language, it became clear that the Panará’s ancestors were remarkably well known, for they were the people known as the (Southern) Cayapó, who had originally lived very far to the southeast (see discussion in Giralдин 1997).

Gustaaf Verswijer’s account (1992) suggests the Mēbêngôkre had little difficulty in identifying the Panará as an already-known people, even if they had not expected to encounter them again exactly where they did. The Mēbêngôkre called the Panará *Krājókàr*, “The People with Shaven Heads,” but they also identified them with ancient enemies, the *Krājókàr-re*, whom their ancestors had fought while they too lived far to the east. It is entirely possible that the Mēbêngôkre had also told this to the Villas-Boas brothers, but if so, the latter would have had no reason to connect the Kreen-Akrore to the Southern Cayapó, long held to be extinct.

The Nahua case is more complicated because it seems difficult to actually reconstruct their history over the past century or so from archival evidence. They speak a dialect of the Yaminahua language and like other Yaminahua speakers in Peru say that they originally lived far to the north. From what we know about Yaminahua-speaking peoples from their own testimony and from the documentary archive, they most likely resided in the basin of the Tarauacá River, a southern tributary of the Juruá. However, there are two problems: Firstly, Yaminahua speakers like the Nahua consistently reused toponyms as they moved around very large areas, making it difficult to locate exactly where they were at any given point (Feather 2010); Secondly, Yaminahua-speaking communities are characterized by an extreme proliferation of ethnonyms, which is central to their own understanding of their social lives (Calavia-Saez 2006; Feather 2010). As such, it is very difficult, nigh impossible, to link specific subgroup names found in the archival literature to modern communities. Here, the problem of unknownness is not an effect of the historical trajectory of the Nahua’s ancestors being actually absent from the historical archive; rather, it is extremely difficult to trace in a historical archive produced by writers who imagined that collective names equalled communities characterized by continuity over time.

Feather reports Nahua oral histories as stating that their ancestors lived, until about 1910, on a river called the Pixiya, which he interprets to lie in the Upper Purús river basin. There they lived in active conflict with neighboring peoples who spoke the same language, and with outsiders (*nafa*). From the evidence presented by both Graham Townsley (1994) and Feather, it would seem that the cause of their movement to the Manu lay in a conflict with their Bashonahua/Nishinafa relatives. Due to these conflicts with other Yaminahua-speaking peoples, they moved into the Manu river system, and eventually settled in its headwaters, on the *Nefemaiya*, the “Clear Water River,” called in Spanish the Cashpajali, which in turn, ironically, derives from its Piro name, *Kajpagalu*, “Muddy River.” The Nahua lived in various separate villages, and were marked by a nascent split between two groups, a very common situation among the Yaminahua (Townsley 1994; Calavia-Saez 2006; Feather 2010). There was the group led by Maishato and that led by Naito and his son “Luisa,” a nickname derived from what the Nahua understood to have been the name of an outsider he had killed. These two groups had lived separately on the Pixiya River but joined together for the move to the Manu.

## Foreign Policy

Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote a virtually uncommented-upon essay called “La politique étrangère d’une société primitive” (The Foreign Policy of a Primitive Society), published in *Politique Étrangère*, a French journal dedicated to what we now call international relations. The article begins:

We do not usually think that a primitive society . . . could have a foreign policy. The reason is that primitive societies . . . appear to us as forms of conservatories, living museums: such that . . . we cannot imagine that they could have preserved forms of life either archaic or very distant from our own, if they had not remained little closed

worlds, completely isolated from all contacts with the outside. In thinking thus, one commits a very serious error of method. (1949:139; my translation)

I have left out of this quotation all the many caveats that Lévi-Strauss adds to the very term “primitive society.” For me, the key point here is not Lévi-Strauss’s assertion that “primitive societies” have an outside. This is almost a platitude these days, when nobody admits to the existence of isolated “primitive societies,” and everyone roundly condemns anyone (and especially earlier generations of anthropologists) who might be suspected of having suggested any such thing. To me, however, the key point Lévi-Strauss makes is that “primitive societies” have, at their very heart, an *attitude* toward their outside, an attitude that is fundamentally constitutive of their inside.

In an earlier article, first published in the 1942, Lévi-Strauss specified some of the social forms that this attitude toward the outside took for many Central and South American peoples. Noting the importance of dual organization in many of these societies, he wrote:

In South America, this institution, so widespread in other regions of the world, takes on an extra character: dissymmetry. At least by the names they carry, these moieties, in a large number of tribes, are not equal. There are the pairings, “the Strong ones” and “the Weak ones,” “the Good ones” and “the Bad ones,” “the Upriver ones” and “the Downriver ones,” etc. This terminology is very close to that by which the different tribes designate each other. (1976:338)

The isomorphism of the social interior and the social exterior for these peoples is central to Lévi-Strauss’s argument, and includes social relations that European thought has tended to consider antithetical: war and trade. He continues,

In this article we have precisely tried to show that the warlike conflicts and economic exchanges do not only constitute, in South America, two types of coexistent relations, but first-and-foremost two aspects, opposed and indissoluble, of one and the same social process. (1976:338)

An important implication of Lévi-Strauss’s argument is that the societies or cultures anthropologists are in the habit of identifying in South America are not bounded entities. This absence of boundary conditions is true in the profoundest sense. We are now used to a version of Lévi-Strauss’s critique of functionalism, because we all accept that our objects of study, any given community, is a fairly arbitrary abstraction from a much more complex set of connections. At its most banal level, this claim takes the form of the assertion that all human lived worlds are now linked through historically novel processes such as colonialism or globalization, a claim that simply resurrects the isolated society as a former condition of world history (Gow 2001). Lévi-Strauss’s claim for South American indigenous societies is quite different: here there are no isolated societies because the very interior of any given society is modeled on, or at least isomorphic with, its exterior conditions of existence.

The analysis proposed here necessarily continues through the work of a student of Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Clastres, and his celebrated book, *Society Against the State* (1977). It seems to me that Clastres’s work is a mature, but incomplete, meditation on a non-evolutionist political anthropology, and what a non-evolutionist political anthropology would look like. To me, Clastres’s genius is in noticing that a non-evolutionist political anthropology had to address the question of the “absence” of the state as a positive one rather than as a mere empirical observation. The state is not absent from indigenous Amazonian peoples’ lives; it is immanently present among them but actively resisted. We know this to be true on anthropological first principles. Human nature is one, and if we have the state, then they have it too. The difference is simply that we have historically allowed the state to happen, while indigenous Amazonian peoples have not.

Indigenous Amazonian societies place an extremely high value on political autonomy, both of the person and the group. The group is a group of autonomous persons, and it is also an autonomous entity in relation to other social groups. In trade relations, there is a marked resistance to dependency on other groups: they may have highly desirable things, but it is essential to weigh the desirability of these things against the potential loss of autonomy.

Similarly, in warfare, the social group does not try to extract itself from enduring social relations of enmity; rather it wants to maintain its autonomy in a landscape of enmity. This is the core of indigenous Amazonian politics.

The work of Lévi-Strauss and Clastres has been continued in more recent synoptic overviews of indigenous Amazonian sociality by Joanna Overing (1983, 1984) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2002), both of whom have shown how the social interior of these peoples is deeply connected to their social exterior. Fundamentally, they show that the foreign policies of these peoples historically owe nothing to their recent contacts with the nation-state. They were already there.

### On Genuine Unknownness

A perspective from the nation-state is not the ideal way to think about voluntary isolation because it is based on categories, often of a very bureaucratic nature, that fail to adequately align with indigenous ones. Indeed, following both Ribeiro and Clastres, such bureaucratic categories are not intended to align with indigenous ones, and the anthropological manufacture of unknownness owes a lot to this fact. But beyond *this* unknownness is a genuine unknownness caused by a failure of the anthropological imagination to think of what we know about voluntarily isolated peoples and their histories in terms of what we know about indigenous Amazonian social worlds more generally. By trying to identify specific voluntarily isolated peoples with identifiable “cultures” or “societies” taken as self-contained units, anthropologists have failed to address what we know about the external and internal politics of indigenous Amazonian groups *as indigenous Amazonian groups* within a wider social landscape.

Anthropological writing on the Panará people is heavily invested in the notion that the Panará people currently living in the Irirí area are the last survivors of the Southern Cayapó people, who are otherwise extinct. The extinction of the Southern Cayapó people (apart from the Panará people currently living in the Irirí area) has excellent anthropological credentials, with Curt Nimuendajú, Robert Lowie, and Ribeiro asserting it (see Giralдин 1997). But this is not true.

Odair Giralдин (1997) discusses a remarkable document written by the agricultural engineer Alexandre de Souza Barbosa, his account of a Southern Cayapó family he met near the confluence of the Paranahiba and Grande Rivers in Minas Gerais state in 1911. These people called themselves Panará and clearly spoke the same language as the modern Panará people of the Irirí area, as revealed by Barbosa’s extensive records. The available evidence suggests that the Southern Cayapó language was marked by at least two dialects (Vasconcelos 2013), but the dialect recorded by Barbosa is clearly the same dialect as spoken by the Panará people of the Irirí area. This means that, following standard linguistic principles, the two speech communities had separated recently, and possibly much more recently than is usually assumed.

Giralдин (1997) quotes Stephan Schwartzman as stating that the ancestors of the Panará in the Peixoto de Azevedo/Irirí area had probably moved there in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, but this seems much too early. They are not recorded there in Nimuendajú’s meticulous *Mapa Ethnográfica* (1981). But Nimuendajú does note that Karl von den Steinen recorded the presence of a people called Coroa in the headwaters of the Xingu in 1884, and that they were called Kaiamo by the Bororo. These people were almost certainly the Panará. During the wild rubber extraction period, the Peixoto de Azevedo/Irirí area would have been unattractive for a people determined to avoid white people, and it is entirely possible that the Panará only moved to that area as rubber collectors abandoned it. Most importantly, the Panará told Schwartzman that their enemies in the past were to the east and not to the west (quoted in Giralдин 1997). This suggests that they arrived in the Peixoto de Azevedo/Irirí after the end of warfare by the Mundurukú, Kajabi, and Apiaká who lived to the west. Their indigenous neighbors to the east, the Suyá, do remember violent encounters with them (Batista 2012), but they do not say where the Panará resided when these conflicts happened. Mēbêngôkre oral history definitely locates the Panará in the Peixoto de Azevedo/Irirí area by 1920 (Verswijver 1992). Careful analysis of Panará and their neighbors’ oral histories might be able to fill in this gap between 1884 and 1920.

We do not know what led one part of a speech community to remain near its original location by the confluence of the Paranahiba and Grande Rivers in Minas Gerais, and another



part of that speech community to move hundreds of kilometers to the northwest to the Peixoto de Azevedo/Irirí area, but we can imagine it was a very serious political event for both sides of that original speech community. Some went, and some stayed. This split, this dramatic political event about which we know nothing, must have been truly radical. Those who elected to leave embarked on an epic journey across central Brazil, through the territories of many enemy indigenous peoples, in order to have no further social relations with “white people.” Those who elected to remain did so in a social landscape increasingly colonized and dominated by such “white people.” Both groups continued to call themselves Panará and speak the language, but in remarkably different social circumstances.

In the terms of the SPI, one Panará group chose “isolation,” while the other chose “integration,” and rapidly enough, “extinction.” “Isolation,” “integration,” and “extinction,” are bureaucratic terms of the Brazilian state, and certainly do very little justice to the terms in which Panará people would have experienced their different trajectories. The dates here are instructive. Barbosa met the Panará family he described in 1911, a year after the foundation of the SPI, but this governmental organization never recognized them as an indigenous community requiring “protection.” Giralдин (1997) records the existence of another Southern Cayapó community as late as 1918, but because they were officially “extinct,” such communities received no state protection or assistance. We do not know what happened to these other Panará people because, to my knowledge, nobody has gone to the areas where they lived to find out. Ribeiro’s list of “extinct” peoples records an impressive number of communities that have since reappeared.

An equally dramatic political split occurred among the Nahua people in the early twentieth century, with one group throwing in their lot with the nafa, “outsiders, enemies,” and, more specifically, with Piro people. Because it is better documented, I discuss it at length here, and I try to keep close to the nature of Nahua and other indigenous testimonies. For ease of exposition, I follow Feather’s use of Nahua as a name for these people rather than the alternative names Parquenahua or Yora, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) transcription of the Yaminahua word, *nafa*, rather than its variants *dawa*, *nawa*, or *nabua*.

Kim MacQuarrie, who worked with the Nahua for six months in 1989 (1992:19), largely through Yaminahua interpreters from Sepahua, reported the following story from one Nahua informant:

*After having arrived, there in the Panya River valley, they [the ancient ones] made their fields. Afterwards they said, “let’s sow our fields,” and saying so they all went downriver. They went downriver and there they found remains of the nafa. “What tribe is this?” they asked. “Let’s go and find them in order to live with them.” That is what the ancient ones said. All of them went down river. One river bend from there the nafa heard them; the nafa had lots of rifles. They [the Nahua] couldn’t run. They looked at their guns, they greeted all of them.*

*With various guns they began going down [I assume it means they went down river, rather than knelt down]. Afterwards they [the nafa] took them to their homes. My grandfather, Shookiwerder, said “Go! The nafa have grabbed us, go!” He warned my grandfather Baishato of this. Baishato warned everybody. “Let’s go see,” said the ancient ones. The grandfather of my uncle, two of the grandfathers of my uncle, these two ancient ones came. [And then] they saw a large cow, and they heard a motor, “teke, teke, teke, teke,” that “spoke.” They called these cows “the children of the tigers.” They had never seen a cow.*

*Downriver they were living with them [the Nabua with the nafa]. It was down below that they captured them, with all of the guns. From there they went with the nafa. They went. They took all of the Nabua women. “Grandfather, we are not going to take you,” they told my grandfather, Baishato. “Don’t leave grandfather, we will come back for you.” After that they didn’t see them again. In the mouth of the Rowersbauya, from there all of them left. The nafa men made children of the parents of our aunt, Shaiya. They do not remember. The ancient ones which came, yes they do remember. We too remember ... they captured them in that stream valley, on the other side [the Manu River side of the Fitzcarrald Pass]. (1992:72–3)*

MacQuarrie places this event in the wild rubber extraction industry era, a period during which the Nahua were probably not living on the Manu, and in a social context, rubber-era

“slave raiding,” that had almost certainly ceased when this event happened. From what we know of the headwaters of the Manu River in the 1910s and 1920s, it is very unlikely that the Nahua saw cows or heard boat motors there. Indeed, this part of the story can plausibly be interpreted as based on a failed later attempt by members of Maishato’s group to follow the other group to their destination with the nafa on the Bajo Urubamba River.

MacQuarrie is clear that he was not proficient in the Nahua language, and relied on Sepahua Yaminahua, speakers of a slightly different dialect, to interpret for him. By contrast, Feather had spent years learning the Nahua language. Curaca, leader of the Nahua, told Feather:

*They had finished making their garden when Luisa said, “Let’s go and see where this river comes out.” As they came out at the mouth of the river they met a nafa, “outsider, enemy” sitting by a tree with a gun. The nafa raised the gun in the air (in an unthreatening manner) and gave Luisa some clothes. Luisa returned to the rest of his group and described how there was a group of nafa with a garden and houses. “They are good people, we will go and live with them,” he said and his group took their wives and children and went to live among the nafa. Maishato’s group was afraid and stayed in the Manu while Luisa’s group was never seen again. (2010:53)*

Feather’s account of Curaca’s story continues:

*Curaca speculates that [“Luisa’s people”] became the Piro who live today in Miaria, a village on the rio Urubamba . . . He told me “Sometimes we thought that they (their relatives) would come and collect us, but they never came.” (2010:53–4)*

Feather’s Maishato is clearly MacQuarrie’s Baishato, and presumably, MacQuarrie’s Shookiwerder is the man nicknamed “Luisa.” According to Feather, the Pauya (his *Paulla*, “Shell River”) is the Condeja, below the Cashpajali on the Manu.

Initially, Curaca’s account as related by Feather seemed utterly outlandish to me. No Piro people had ever claimed Yaminahua ancestry to me, and more importantly, no Piro person had ever attributed such ancestry to other Piro people. Further, the SIL missionary Esther Matteson, who worked with informants from Miaria, mentions no Yaminahua people living there in the early 1950s (1954), nor does the Dominican priest Ricardo Alvarez, who lived in nearby Sepahua from 1952 onward (1957).

However, there was a group of Piro people living in the right area and at the right time to correspond to Curaca’s story, and hence be the nafa, the “enemies/mestizos” that Luisa met in the headwaters of the Manu. These people were a group of Urubamba Piro led by a mestizo man from Yurimaguas called Martín Saavedra (Alvarez 1959). They had worked rubber on the Manu river for a Spanish boss called Baldomero Rodriguez, who they killed in 1910 during a series of uprisings against bosses in the Madre de Dios area in the last years of the wild rubber extraction industry. Saavedra and his Piro wife’s kinspeople fled to the headwaters of the Manu, where they remained in hiding for eight years until the “big boss of the Piro,” Francisco Vargas, persuaded them to move to the Bajo Urubamba. The Piro accounts of Saavedra and of his Piro affines, as recorded by Alvarez [1959], do not mention any Yaminahua people, or any other people, who joined them before their return to the Urubamba.

One problem in Alvarez’ account of Saavedra and his Piro affines is that he locates them, after 1910, in the headwaters of the Camisea, rather than the Manu. Admittedly, the distance is not that great, but the point is important because the Nahua accounts locate the encounter with the nafa on the Manu itself. Luckily, we have independent corroboration for such a location from a Piro personal experience narrative published by Matteson (1955), Virgilio Gabino’s account of an almost-lethal childhood encounter with a jaguar, told to Matteson in 1952. This happened when Gabino was living with his father on the Sutlija river (Piro: *Sotluga*), a tributary of the upper Manu, and located downriver from the Cashpajali and Condeja. Gabino states that he was about twelve when the jaguar attack happened, and he was an old man when I met him in 1981; this makes the 1910s a likely decade for the story. Certainly, no other Urubamba Piro people were living in the upper Manu area following the exodus of Saavedra and his Piro affines. Further, Gabino’s story makes clear that his father had a gun and live ammunition when the events happened, which conforms to the Nahua accounts. To reconcile the Urubamba Piro accounts recorded by Alvarez and the Nahua accounts, it is possible that the

new alliance of Saavedra's and Luisa's people moved from the Sutlija in the Manu into the headwaters of the Camisea precisely to avoid further encounters with Maishato's people.

It should be pointed out that Saavedra's and Luisa's people did not move directly to the village of Miaria, which did not exist at that time, but rather to Vargas' hacienda at Sepa, much further down the Urubamba. Historically, Miaria is an important Piro village site, regularly mentioned in accounts from the nineteenth century and earlier, and it was quickly re-settled as Piro people left Vargas's haciendas after his death in 1940.

One of the reasons this history is so obscure is that Urubamba Piro people did not, until after peaceful contact in 1984, consider the Nahua, including Luisa's people, to be Yaminahua speakers. Before the 1950s, when Yaminahua people began to move into the headwaters of the Inuya, a tributary of the Urubamba, Piro people would only have known about them, if they knew about them at all, as inhabitants of regions very distant to their own settlements: the Piro term *yaminawa* is absent from Matteson's 1965 Urubamba Piro vocabulary, although it is present in the later *Diccionario Piro* (Nies 1986). Indeed, it was only after 1962 that most Urubamba Piro people would have had any immediate contact with people who described themselves as Yaminahua, or who at least accepted that term. Further, there is no evidence that the Nahua people, including Luisa's, ever called themselves Yaminahua.

Instead, and since at least the 1960s, the Urubamba Piro people called the Nahua *mayicho*, which they translated into Spanish as "*Amahuaca*." The Urubamba Piro came into occasional conflict with the Nahua as they sought to use resources on the Mishahua River or use it to cross into the Manu/Madre de Dios river system. The word *mayicho* is not of Urubamba Piro origin but can plausibly be interpreted as a combination of Yaminahua *mai*, "country, region, land, earth," rendered as *mayi* in Piro, and the Ucayali Spanish suffix *-cho*, which is common in nickname formation. Could this name derive from the name of their leader at the time of separation, Maishato?

The usual Urubamba Piro word for the Amahuaca is *gipetuneru*, "Capibara People," a name that is well established in the historical literature: Piro *gipetuneru* and Panoan Amahuaca may even be semantic equivalents. This suggests that Urubamba Piro people were aware that the Nahua were different from the Amahuaca. However, in the early 1980s, before peaceful contact, the Nahua were locally assumed to be Amahuaca people. My experiences in Sepahua in 1981 suggest that the Amahuaca people living there did identify the Nahua as Yaminahua speakers.

A few references in the historical archive seem to record this alliance of Piro and Nahua people. In 1915, Vargas's hacienda at Sepa was attacked by an alliance of "Piro and Amahuaca" people, in an apparent attempt to kill him. The attack was repulsed by Vargas's Piro workers (Santos-Granero 2018). In 1947, the naval officer Guillermo S. Faura-Geig described Miaria as a "camp of Piro and Amahuaca Indians": this is likely an account of the actual refoundation of Miaria village (1962). Further, "Amahuaca" ancestry is claimed by or attributed to some Piro people, as recorded by both Alvarez and Matteson. This suggests that Curaca's story refers to an actual event, and that Luisa's people, a group of Yaminahua speakers, did become a component of the Miaria people. Luisa's people were probably few in number, maybe thirty in all, but in the context of the Urubamba Piro population at the time, about 300 to 500 people, they would have been a fairly substantial proportion of it.

We also know why Saavedra's people would have wanted an alliance with Luisa's people, for they were still stockpiling gathered wild rubber, and would have needed the labor. But there also seems to be have been a matrimonial motive. In MacQuarrie's version of the story, the narrator states:

*From there they went with the nafa. They went. They took all of the Nahua women.*

And further,

*The nafa men made children of the parents of our aunt, Shaiya. They do not remember. The ancient ones which came, yes they do remember. We too remember.*

Mixed marriages are at the heart of Piro matrimonial politics, and Saavedra's people, like Luisa's people, seem to have been few in number. In MacQuarrie's version of the story, Shookiwerder said:

*“Grandfather, we are not going to take you,” they told my grandfather, Baishato. “Don’t leave grandfather, we will come back for you.” After that they didn’t see them again.*

Curaca’s rueful comment was,

*Sometimes we thought that they (their relatives) would come and collect us, but they never came.*

These Nahua comments reflect the continual fission and fusion of local groups in Yaminahua-speaking communities’ histories as kinspeople fight and split from each other, sometimes later to reunite. But there is clearly something else going on here, for while Maishato’s people remembered their kinspeople among Luisa’s people, the latter did not reciprocate: “They do not remember.” Forgetting kinspeople has the same negative value for both Nahua and Piro people, but there is a key difference between the two groups. For the latter, to “be Piro,” *yine*, is to live in an aesthetically pleasing way, as *numolene*, “our kinspeople,” that necessarily means not living like “forest people,” and of actively rejecting such people’s claims to kinship. As the Piro say, “forest people” cannot be trusted.

### “Falling Out of the Forest”

Curaca told Feather about his thoughts on the traumatic events lived by the Nahua people in the 1980s:

*I thought we will no longer live in the centre of the forest; we will live by the banks of the river. This is the story of how we fell out of the forest. (2010:48)*

In Etelbina Cuchichinari Nachinari’s story, she reports that she called on the Amahuaca/mayicho man to “emerge.” She reports it in Piro as “*Pushpakannu-ncina*.” Arguably, Curaca and Etelbina’s statements are two sides of a single relationship.

“*Pushpakannu-ncina*,” “Emerge—I said.” The Piro verb is *gishpaka*, “to emerge, to move from an invisible interior state to a visible exterior state,” and is a critical ritual action for Piro people. Birth ritual, which establishes the potential for a new Piro person, occurs when the combined fetus + umbilical cord + placenta “emerge” from the womb into the social field of its potential future kinspeople. Equally, the major Piro ritual action, *kigimawlo*, “beadwork is placed on her,” a girl’s initiation ritual, starts as a girl “emerges” from her puberty seclusion, covered in painted designs, silver jewelry, beadwork, bells, and arm and leg rattles, into the sight of the assembly of “all the Piro people from along the river.” The girl’s initiation ritual condenses all of the history of kinship production into the body of a “new woman,” and provides her with the transformational potential to extend kinship into the future (Gow 2001). Further, Piro people describe their “liberation from slavery,” a process central to their recent history, as their collective emergence from the settlements of their former bosses and the foundation of new independent villages.

For Piro people, therefore, “to emerge” is a generative process of moving from a constricted hidden space toward an open and expansive one. “To emerge” also encodes the relationship between the “forest” on the one hand and the “village” and the “river” on the other. Moving away from the village or river is to “enter” the forest; to return is to “emerge” from the forest. To move by river between villages is simply “to go, to travel,” because at no point does it involve visual occlusion.

If we combine the Nahua image of “falling out of the forest” with the Piro people’s understanding of the meanings of space, we reveal an ancient pattern found in this area of Peruvian Amazonia. The archaeologist Donald J. Lathrap, in his book *The Upper Amazon* (1970), differentiated between what he called “backwoods” and “riverine” peoples, both in the Ucayali valley and in Amazonia in general. The former lived in marginal ecological areas, where soils were poor, and hence where it was difficult to make a living. The latter lived in much richer ecological areas, where soils were very fertile due to their constant replenishment by annual flooding—where it was easy to make a living. Clearly, “backwoods” is rather pejorative, and more appropriate terms would be “interfluvial” people, or “ridge dwellers,” to use the Nahua term. That said, Lathrap’s categorization is clearly meaningful to indigenous people in the

Urubamba area. Piro people are primarily oriented to big rivers, while the precontact Nahua people were primarily oriented to the ridge country of the interfluvial areas. Indeed, the force of the Nahua expression “falling out of the forest” lies not in the sense that they had ever lived “in the forest,” for they always lived in villages surrounded by gardens; it lies rather in the contrast between their former villages sites away from large rivers and the new village on the Mishahua mainstream founded by Curaca.

Curaca’s statement about “falling out of the forest” and Etelbina Cuchichinari’s call for the Amahuaca/*mayicho*/Nahua man to “emerge” are therefore two sides of the opposition between “interfluvial” and “riverine” peoples that Lathrap discusses. The Nahua actively avoided large rivers as village and garden sites precisely because they wanted to keep away from neighboring peoples. From a Piro perspective, this “living in the forest” is interpreted in the same way but with a very negative value. But there is more to this contrast than voluntary isolation, for it reflects a genuine difference in ecological orientation: the Nahua make large gardens on ridgetops and depend largely on hunting, whereas the Piro make considerable use of the dry-season beaches of large rivers and depend largely on fishing.

The Mashco are a more extreme version of this contrast, for they have historically clearly abandoned agriculture and any form of stable villages, a move certainly motivated by their political field, both external and internal (Gow 2011). The Nahua, who had and have many hostile interactions with them, contemptuously call them *tsaonafa*, the “sitting people,” because they lack hammocks and hence sit on the ground, which Nahua people will not do and regard with horror (Feather 2010). It is very unlikely that the Mashco people consider themselves to be “sitting people,” but that they do not make gardens or permanent villages is true. The available evidence suggests that, like the Nahua, the Mashco value mobility, but in a more extreme form.

A further sense of this relationship between ecological orientation and voluntary isolation can be found with the Amahuaca people, in the sense of Amahuaca-language speakers (Dole 1998). Their basic ecological orientation is almost identical to that of the Nahua apart from a greater dependence on maize. Unlike the Nahua, however, the Amahuaca appear in the historical archive on colonial Peruvian Amazonia both very early and regularly, with a shifting pattern of peaceful and hostile relations with indigenous neighbors such as the Piro and the Conibo. Amahuaca people are extremely difficult to represent as voluntarily isolated because they are extremely difficult to represent as historically unknown. This is true even considering when they were living in significant isolation from other people. For example, the Amahuaca people living in the headwaters of the Inuya River and studied by Robert Carneiro and Gertrude Dole (see Dole 1998) had, not long before, been living with few peaceful relations with other peoples, but nobody would have considered them “uncontacted” or “isolated” because their neighbors knew who they were, often personally. They or their ancestors had worked for rubber and lumber bosses in an oscillating cycle of approximation and withdrawal that also included lethal violence on both sides.

### On “Contact”

One of the most surprising features of voluntary isolation is the speed and apparent ease with which it can end. That of the Panará ended when a young man named Sokriti decided to see for himself what the enemies who had been relentlessly pursuing his people and leaving gifts for them were really like. A photograph of him doing this became iconic in the international media (see Arndt, Pinto and Pinto 1998). Subsequent accounts of “contact” for the Panará tend to downplay this moment, but it was unquestionably very important for Panará people, for Sokriti’s survival of his very reckless adventure weighed powerfully on their intense debates on what exactly to do next (Ewart 2013; pers. comm.).

The Panará people were subjected to the relentless intensity of an “attraction front.” The Brazilian state was not going to take “no” for an answer. The BR-163 was going to be constructed, and the Panará people had to be moved out of the way, come what may. Where they lived was about to become where “civilized people” would live instead. Internally, however, the Panará were engaged in an intense debate about the nature of what the Villas Boas brothers and their companions were doing. The older men argued that these “enemies,” like all enemies, boded the Panará people ill, while the younger men argued that their present-giving and lack

of violence suggested that they were good people and should be approached. The young man Sokriti resolved that debate, however fatefully.

Similarly, the voluntary isolation of the Nahua ended when a young man decided to peacefully approach lumber workers who he and his three companions had been trying to kill, and who in turn had just tried to kill him. It is not entirely clear who these lumber workers, *nafa*, were, but the evidence suggests that they were Piro or Asháninka men, people who, as we saw in Etelbina's story, would have been disposed to accept this "emergence."

That in both the Panará and Nahua cases young men initiated the end of voluntary isolation young men is very suggestive. Indigenous Amazonian warfare is essentially characterized by raiding, and it is one of the ways in which young men gain political respect in their communities. Further, raiding is a means by which to acquire the desirable things of enemy peoples, the generous distribution of which also furthers such a man's political trajectory. If such desirable things can be gained by peaceful means, the shift from raiding to trading apparently comes easily and quickly. As Lévi-Strauss (1976:338–9) noted, they are "two aspects, opposed and indissoluble, of one and the same social process." A new political history of indigenous Amazonian peoples could profitably begin there.

Lévi-Strauss's essay is not called "War and Peace," but "War and Trade." It is clear that for Lévi-Strauss, and for Clastres, Overing, and Viveiros de Castro as well, war in indigenous Amazonian societies is precisely *not* "trade gone wrong." For these peoples, war is an immanent feature of the world, and this is true even when they apparently no longer engage in it, or claim that they never did. As in Daimã's story, the position of the *abĩ/índios brabos*/"wild Indians" kind of perspective, even when it is not actually present in a particular series of events, such as those of the man who saw the moon looking different. War is simply how things can be.

For the SPI, "contact" was the end of "isolation" and the beginning of "pacification." The concept of "pacification" is simply a variant of the standard liberal assertion that modern states have an absolute monopoly on legitimate violence within their national territories. I suspect that this concept of contact as pacification strongly inflects anthropological understandings of voluntary isolation.

Glenn Shepard has made a key point about voluntary isolation in his description of a 2015 visit to Peru in the company of José Carlos Meirelles, a retired functionary of Funai, the successor organization of the SPI. Shepard writes:

Viewing numerous photographs of Mashco-Piro people approaching boats, receiving clothes, metal implements, food, even a Coca-Cola bottle, Meirelles commented, "Contact has already happened. You people are in denial" (2016:135).

Here, of course, "contact" is not an anthropological concept, but a bureaucratic one. But these Mashco people were never meaningfully voluntarily isolated from their indigenous neighbors, who knew a lot about them even if they had only violent interactions with them. Violence, for people against the state, is a genuine social relation.

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