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Desire and the Work It Does: Alterity and Exogamy in a Kotiria Origin Myth from the Northwest Amazon of Brazil

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The father of a friend of mine used to say, “I was lucky—I married your mother. You’ll have to marry a stranger.”

—Verna Gillis

Introduction

After three decades of debate, the model known as a “symbolic economy of alterity,” intended as a means through which we might understand the native peoples of lowland South America, continues to engage our attention and to generate further debate. It has been listed as one of three elements in an “Amazonian package” of characteristics thought to be shared throughout the basin (Londoño-Sulkin 2012, 2017), and it has been credited with the growing prominence of Amazonian studies in contemporary anthropology.

According to the model, as outlined by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the paradigmatic forms of symbolic exchanges—affinity and cannibalism—are transformations of one another that serve as cosmological operators in overcoming dangerous otherness (*alterité* or alterity) by performing the vital acts of incorporation necessary to the perpetuation and reproduction of social life (paraphrased from Viveiros de Castro 1996; see also 1992, 2002).¹

Many endorsed the model outright, producing a flourishing and rich literature of ethnographic detail and ethnological insight. As well, the model generated a lively dialog, wherein each turn presented a unique reading of the collective corpus, yet referred to prior work to create a cumulative, extended chain of signification. In the highly productive give-and-take a couple of talking points emerged as sites of contestation. The most prominent among these were the roles of affinity and predatory cannibalism.

A number of researchers—largely Anglophone—including Stephen Hugh-Jones, Cecilia McCallum, Fernando Santos-Granero, Evan Killick, and Mike Cepek, questioned the appropriateness of cannibalism as a model for all of Amazonia. Hugh-Jones, for example, expressed reservations regarding the presumption of “cannibalistic predation as paradigmatic of affinity or exchange” for the Eastern Tukanoan Barasana, writing, “Such exchanges are more concerned with how and why predation can be avoided” (Hugh-Jones 2013:364). A number of emergent strands probed components of the model. Two excellent examples are Luis Cayón’s *Pienso, luego creo* (2013), in which he finds alterity and predation of a cannibalistic kind in the Makuna balance of positive and negative reciprocities between humans and animals, and Luiz Costa’s *The Owners of Kinship* (2017), in which he explores the alterity inherent in the relationship of Kanamari newborns to their parents.

To this discussion I add the case of the Kotiria (also Wanano),² a group of Eastern Tukanoans of the Vaupés River basin in Brazil and Colombia. I explore an undertheorized Kotiria foundation myth that I find to be an apt context in which to consider a symbolic economy of alterity. Insofar as the myth allows us to consider the transformative, incorporating power of cannibalism in a region of the Amazon basin where it is thoroughly unexpected, it endorses some of the model’s more debated components, including its emphasis on predation. At the same time it suggests ways for rethinking several aspects of the model.

I hope to show that the narrative provides the conceptual grounding for a social schema of irreducible difference requisite to Kotiria identity and to suggest its role as a fundamental, ontological foundation for Eastern Tukanoan affinity and exogamy. In my orthodox inter-

pretation, affinzation (i.e., the production of affinity) is the transformation at the center of a symbolic economy of alterity. It is the necessity of affinity in the production of kin which I find to be axiomatic to the model. I question, however, the role of cannibalism as a driver, replacing it with *desire*, and recognize cannibalism as a *procedure* that results from and satisfies that desire.

Although not named as such, the concept of *alterity* has always been at the core of the anthropological endeavor. The term has roots in a long tradition of Continental philosophy concerned with questions of Others—the French *alterité* and the German *Anderssein*. The approach to alterity taken by anthropologists has been most directly influenced by the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was engaged in the wider interdisciplinary conversation in the 1950s and 1960s. The recent Amazonian synthesis combines several themes from his immense oeuvre, including (1) a general concern with the Other, including the ethnographer (1966 [1962], 1973 [1955]); (2) affinity (that is, exogamy) as the positive transformation of the incest taboo; (3) affinity as the basis of kinship (1963 [1958], 1969a [1949]); (4) the transformative powers of predation (including cannibalism) (1966 [1962], 1969b [1949], 1976, 1984:143; and (5) the equivalence of marriage and sexuality with predation and consumption (1966 [1962] 105–6; 1976.

A symbolic economy of alterity rests on the centerpiece of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969a [1949]): that society, to reproduce itself, requires the incorporation of an (affinal) Other. Among the structural entailments to this principle are the dangers of the unknown Other; the sociocosmological transformations necessary to the “making of affinity”; and a notion of reciprocity as “the most immediate form of integrating the opposition between the self and others” (Lévi-Strauss 1969:84).

This corpus of work inspired several productive applications to lowland South American anthropology, including those by Joanne Overing (1975, 1981, 1984, 1986), Patrick Menget (1988), Julio Cesar Melatti (1976, 1979), Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (1978), Pierre Clastres (1980), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1984, 1986, 2001), and Bruce Albert (1985).

One cannot consider the Other in self-consciousness without pointing to Hegel’s project on consciousness. In his discussion of Recognition (*Anerkennung*), Hegel (1977 [1807]) established that a consciousness of the self is possible only through intersubjectivity—i.e., through the prior recognition of an other self-conscious subject (*Andere*) whose own consciousness is capable of thinking and acting in the world and for whom the self is an *object-of-consciousness*. We will return to this point later.

The Northwest Amazon

The Vaupés River is a headwater stream of the Rio Negro, whose meandering flow delineating the border between southeastern Colombia and northwestern Brazil is the site of the Eastern Tukanoan Sprachbund, one of the greatest concentrations of linguistic diversity in the world. The area is home to some 35,000 people, speaking fifteen or more languages, who participate in a network of intermarriage across an area (roughly 40,000 square kilometers, the size of Denmark) that extends into Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela. The long-distance spousal exchanges are driven by an understanding of the language group as a kindred, requiring that people marry outside it into a different language group—a practice known as linguistic exogamy.

I am concerned here with speakers of Kotiria, a northern branch of Eastern Tukanoan, whose 1,400 speakers live along the banks of the middle Vaupés River from Santa Cruz in Colombia to Arara in Brazil. Kotiria villages run along the river margins, with seven settlements upriver in Colombia and ten downriver in Brazil. The two clusters of villages are separated by the Querarí River, a northern affluent of the Vaupés, and by a series of villages belonging to the Cubeo, neighbors and in-laws of the Kotiria who speak a different Eastern Tukanoan language.³

The Kotiria think of family relatedness in terms of a system of *koroo* (pl.), within which relation to one another is predicated on a belief of shared ancestry through the father. As such the group may be referred to as a patrikindred and its members as patrikin. Each *koro* (sing.) is known by the name of its mythical founding ancestor plus the suffix *-pona*, meaning “children of” and attached to a *dubinia*, closely translated as “sitting place” (Chernela 1988, 1993). The members of a *koro* call one another brother and sister and share a feeling of con-

nectedness, or what Marshall Sahlins (2013) called “a quality of intersubjective belonging.” For the Kotiria and for most speakers of Eastern Tukanoan languages, speech is one such shared quality.⁴

The same logic that asserts that the *korō* constitutes a single, shared, collective body (*k# korō*) also prohibits marriage within it. Persons must therefore marry into a different *korō* than their own. Persons belonging to *korōa* with whom the Kotiria maintain ongoing, long-term marriage exchanges are known as *phaña* (in-laws). Local conceptions of consanguinity and affinity do not allow for passage between the two, even as female affines and occasional male affines live among their in-laws. These spouses and their kin are known by the term *Paye Mahsa*, or “Other People.”

When they marry, daughters generally move away from their own *korōa* to live with their husbands’ relatives. A woman’s marriage is therefore experienced as a loss to her family. That loss is offset when women from the in-law groups (*phaña*) marry Kotiria men and produce Kotiria offspring. It may also be repaid in the next generation, if the offspring of out-marrying Kotiria women marry Kotiria spouses. Such affinal relations, and their associated scorekeeping, are marked by ambivalence and insecurity. When they wrote in 2016, Kristine Stenzel and Velda Khoo reported that the Kotiria continued to adhere to linguistic exogamy (2016:80).

A Kotiria Origin Narrative

The following translation is a close rendering of the account narrated by Anastasio Cordeiro⁵ in 1979 in Yapima, a Kotiria village located in the Brazilian portion of the basin not far from the upriver Cubeo settlements in Colombia.⁶ My comments are in brackets.

In the beginning, before they were human, a band of Proto-Kotiria, the nomadic Nibtin Dusuria, lived in the Dohkasaku tree in the forests of the Querari River. While trekking through the forest, they came upon a clearing where they saw women gardening.

The Nibtin Dusuria adorned themselves in red body paint and appeared before the women as beautiful men. “Where did you get that red stuff?” the women [now identified as Cubeo] asked. “Come and give us an exchange dance!” The ancestors accepted, saying, “OK—make beer for us and we’ll give you a po?oa exchange dance.”

*Some time later they held a po?oa ceremony. The Kotiria Nibtin Dusuria offered the red body paint to the Cubeo women, and the women gave beer in return. They danced all night. They were still dancing when, in the darkness before dawn, bolts of lightning struck the dance house. In the flashing light, the women’s brothers [now called brothers-in-law] caught sight of their sisters. They saw their sisters being devoured—their flesh sucked dry—by the jaguar tooth necklaces worn by the Nibtin Dusuria. The neck ornaments (*dabsia*) were attacking and killing the women! The men’s sisters fell down and turned into piles of bone.*

The brothers-in-law shouted at their sisters, “They are swallowing you up! This happened because you wanted it!” They asked their sisters, “What kind of people are these?” The Nibtin Dusuria fled into the forest with the Cubeo brothers-in-law in pursuit.

*Arriving at the tree home of the Nibtin Dusuria, the brothers-in-law heard the sounds of dance flutes and the laughter of their sisters. There were many people! A Cubeo said to his brothers, “Your women are doing this! I don’t know these people that took them away. Let’s burn them out!” They collected kindling wood and set fire to the tree house. The Nibtin Dusuria ascended into the sky with the flames, then fell down as drops of water: *sira, sira, sira*. They were transforming into humans—the first Kotiria people. *Aaaaaaaah!**

In the fire the Proto-Kotiria went up to the sky and came down as raindrops on Yo?soku mountain. There they changed into human clothing and spread out to make their longhouses. After all this, we appeared as humans. This is our beginning.

Discussion of the Narrative

Encounter

Anastasio Cordeiro, who told this narrative, was one of the oldest men of Yapima village in 1979. He directed his account to listeners belonging to two *koroo*—the Nyahuri Pona (Children of Nyahuri), of which he was a member, and the Wekbea Pona (Children of Wekbea). Both groups lived in Yapima and considered themselves descendants of the Nihtin Dusuria hunters.

Mr. Cordeiro opened his account with the utterance “*Wa?manore, Wa?manore*,” placing the events of the narration at a time when the world and the beings in it were in a state of becoming. The narrative’s central figures, the ancestral Nihtin Dusuria, were not yet human. They were a sylvan band of Proto-Kotiria foragers who lived in the forests of the Querari River, about a day’s canoe travel upriver from Yapima. Today the Querari is site of Cubeo settlements.

While traveling in the forest the tree-dwelling Nihtin Dusuria came upon a clearing where women were planting. The women, we learn, are members of the Cubeo *koroo* known as Nahu Poa, who live in a large longhouse with their brothers.

Attraction and desire are the animating forces in this critical moment of mutual discovery. To appear before the women, the Nihtin Dusuria transformed themselves into handsome young men festooned in red body paint.⁷ Seeing the Nihtin Dusurias’ red, glistening bodies, the women wanted the red substance. They called out, “Where did you get that red stuff? Come and give us an exchange dance!” The Nihtin Dusuria agreed and asked for beer in return. The origin of the Kotiria, then, begins with attraction to, and exchange across, difference.

Exchange: The First Po?oa

The exchange ceremony of the myth, known in Kotiria as *po?oa* (a term meaning “giving”; cf., Tuk., *po?osê*), is the center of Vaupés sociality. It been written about extensively for the Northwest Amazon by Irving Goldman, Jonathan Hill, Robin Wright, Aloisio Calbazar, among others. It corresponds to the *pudali* of Hill (2013) and Wright (2013) and to what Hugh-Jones calls the “Foodgiving House” (1993). It is the foremost ritual expression of relations between intermarrying *koroo*, where host and guest are each wife-giver and wife-receiver to the other. At the center of the ceremony is the large prestation of food or crafts offered by the visiting donor *koro*, who may have transported it for days in loaded canoes. The hosts, in turn, provide ample rounds of manioc beer to the visitors. The *po?oa* is composed of a series of exchanges of several kinds, including greeting and oratory, food or craft exchange, ritual joking, dancing, and mock battle. The alternating formality and ribaldry of the opening ceremonies soon gives way to vociferous accusation as visitors and hosts take up ragtag sticks and wield them in mock spear throwing (*bueyoaka*). The expression of antagonism is a reminder of past hostilities between in-laws and the conditionality of the alliance.

In this reenactment, we understand the *po?oa* ceremony as a reiteration and reification of the transition from enemy to affine, as negative reciprocities are rendered past and replaced by reciprocities of a positive kind: matrimonial, economic, and political. Each *po?oa* is part of an ongoing intercommunity relationship, as the receiving group must reciprocate at a later date. Thus, donors and recipients, articulated by ceremonial reciprocity, alternate roles ad infinitum, so long as the relationship obtains (Chernela 1993, 2001).

In the *po?oa* of the narrative, we find numerous tropes referencing the forces of life and death. Upon the first encounter, the women in the fields desire the red body paint and invite the masculine Proto-Kotiria to a ceremonial exchange. The latter agree and ask for manioc beer, the cultivated product of the women. The term *dima* refers to any red substance, including blood. If the red substance stands for the blood of menstruation and the white beer stands for semen, a reasonable claim, the mythic exchange may be understood as the commencement of conjugality and child creation, referencing both the fertility of the women and of the gardens they cultivate. By assigning the meanings of menstrual blood to the red gift and semen to the white gift, we understand that the exchange brings about a fundamental transformation: through exchange of life-giving substances, male and female reproductive capacities are animated.

The themes of conjugality and affinity are made explicit when, mentioned for the first time after the *po?oa* ceremony, the women's brothers are referred to as "brothers-in-law" (*buhibero mehsare*) of the Nihtin Dusuria. Insofar as it references conjugality and marriage, the *po?oa* exchange of goods stands for the more elemental exchange—the exchange of persons in marriage. Enacted in the interchange of material objects, the *po?oa* is a metacommentary on the relationships of the two participating *koroa*, defining and redefining each group's relatedness to the other.

The encounter may be seen as a powerful moment of Recognition, in Hegel's sense, as the isolated and unfinished Nihtin Dusuria become aware of the presence of Others and, simultaneously, their need of them. But the *po?oa* ceremony in the myth not only stands for the attraction and desire between potential spouses; it also represents the competition and animosity between brothers-in-law.

Killing-and-eating

The dancing was interrupted by bolts of lightning penetrating the darkness. In the pulsating light the women's brothers, now called "brothers-in-law," caught sight of their sisters being eaten by the jaguar tooth necklaces of the Nihtin Dusuria, turning them into piles of bones. Bone is a frequent motif in Tukanoan narrative, suggesting the durable residue of the body after death, and the spinelike structure of the agnatic ancestral line (C. Hugh-Jones 1979:253; S. Hugh-Jones 1993). The association may be fitting here, as it is suggestive of bride capture—a negative theft. And, since, in marrying the Kotiria the Cubeo women would customarily leave their own villages to live among their husbands' agnatic relatives,⁸ from the perspectives of their brothers, they disappear.

The encounter exemplifies Lévi-Strauss's 1966 equivalence between conjugality and predatory consumption. In a different context, Kaj Århem wrote of the Tukanoan Makuna, "A man is expected to behave toward his female affines as a predator to his prey. The purest expression of this stereotyped role behavior is the ideal of bride capture The bride capture is a symbolic hunt If hunting is 'killing for food,' so, in a symbolic sense, is marrying And if women symbolically are 'food' to their male affines, then copulating becomes analogous to eating" (1981:201, 203).

By dancing (i.e., copulating) with the women, then cannibalizing and consuming them, a transformation occurs, one that complicates the separation between the Kotiria Nihtin Dusuria and the Cubeo women. By treating the women as game and eating them the way a jaguar eats its prey, the woman-wife-prey is transformed. So, too, is the predator. As a hunter stalks, kills, and consumes his prey, so too may we say that a man symbolically preys upon and consumes his wife-lover; so that, much like ingested game, she is taken in as wife and mother to produce Kotiria offspring. In that cannibal act, the Cubeo men are transformed from enemy-others to *buhibuo*, brothers-in-law, affines.

Fire

The Cubeo brothers-in-law chase the Nihtin Dusuria to their tree house, where they hear the sounds of dance flutes and the laughter of their sisters. Taking revenge, the brothers-in-law set fire to the trees. Rising with the flames, the Nihtin Dusuria transform and descend as raindrops to the ground, where they become the first "real" Kotiria people.

Fire is the transformative agent that converts standing forests to gardens, cooks prey, and forms the hearth around which the family gathers and food is prepared. As it turns forests into gardens, so too does fire domesticate the tree-dwelling Nihtin Dusuria. Rather than destroying life, it transforms and (re)produces it. Fire is the agent that transforms the presocial, sterile Nihtin Dusuria into fully human Kotiria.

A principal set of equivalences that is the analogy men:forests::women:gardens runs through the narrative. The Nihtin Dusuria, who are "of the forest," are undomesticated in multiple ways: they lack houses, women, fire, and crops. Like predatory beasts, they collect and kill their food, while women are the producers of food and the keepers of the hearth. The latter is a position of unrivaled importance, since fire is both the central element of domesticity and a principal instrument in the transformative processes of gardening and cooking.

The myth also presents fire as an instrument of the in-laws, a power that the Nihtin Dusuria lack. With fire as their weapon, the brothers-in-law burn down the Nihtin Dusuria

tree houses. Through multiple transformations and being “cooked by fire,” the predatory Nihtin Dusoria and their Cubeo female prey rise with the flames and descend as rain to produce the first Kotiria people. The fusion unites those who rely on hunting, an activity that brings about death (see Lévi-Strauss 1963:217–24), and those who rely on planting, an activity that produces life. The fusion does nothing less than bring about the beginning of the Kotiria peoples and the possibility of future generations. This, as the narrator explains, is “our beginning.”

Births of Two Kinds

The origin account presented here would appear to countermand the narratives, shared by all Eastern Tukanoans, in which the primordial anaconda, Phamori B̄sok̄a (also Pahlmelin Gahsiu), a Vessel of Transformation, distributes the ancestors of Vaupés language groups to their respective “houses” (w̄āt̄ā) along the river (Panlon and Kenhíri 1980; Calbazar 2000; Goldman 2004:31–38; Maia and Maia 2004; Wright 2009; Andrello 2016; Barbieri 2018). The Kotiria, however, subscribe to both origin accounts. Rather than finding contradictions between them, my Kotiria interlocutors consider the two to be complementary and of equal validity.⁹

The two accounts have little overlap. Whereas the Phamori B̄sok̄a account is of the river, the account of the Nihtin Dusoria and the Cubeo women is of fire and the forest. The riverine myth is wholly masculine account that acts as a charter for the proper “seating” (*dubinia*), or placement, of each sib along the river (Chernela 1988). It is concerned with sociotemporal placement—that is, both the physical location and the hierarchical ordering of agnatic *koroa*. In contrast, the Nihtin Dusoria account concerns the exchange of goods and persons between affinal, exogamous *koroa*. In it, women, marriage, and exchange are foregrounded—matters the riverine account omits altogether.

Each myth is an account of elementary connectivities. The riverine account of Phamori B̄sok̄a concerns vertical connectivities that proceed from wholeness to fragmentation, whereas the fiery account of the Nihtin Dusoria concerns lateral connectivities that proceed from autonomy to interdependence. In the riverine account, filiation is inscribed onto a common body. Differences between the *koroa* are incremental, as they are derived from a single, shared substance. Each portion of the graduated body (the *korō*, that is) is a repetition of the whole, yet it differs from the others in grade or rank so that the furthest extremes are maximally unlike one another.¹⁰

The fiery account, in contrast, recounts the turbulent transformations of diverse entities. The autonomous Nihtin Dusoria and Cubeo are drawn into a force field of attraction and desire fraught with conflict. The violent fusion serves as a passage from insufficiency and incompleteness to consummation and fruition. Yet this merger is not a thorough integration, but rather an aggregation, a coupling or coming together to produce a resultant product. The issue of this union is a derivative, the hybrid progeny of separate, independent corporalities. It is a synthesis not from nature, as in the riverine account, but from poesis; not from trust, but from theft; not from consensual amity, but from violence.

Stephen Hugh-Jones discusses a similar complementarity when he compares two different Tukanoan conceptualizations of social relations as recounted by the Barasana. One is “intrinsically male and hierarchical,” and associated with an anaconda origin, the sib, and male initiation, whereas the other is “more feminine,” nurturing, and egalitarian (S. Hugh-Jones 1993:112). The latter is associated with the “Foodgiving House” intergroup exchange feast.

Several researchers recognize a potential dilemma inherent in moving from the distribution of agnatically related sibs to the development of affinity where sibs will exchange sisters and be brothers-in-law to each other (Andrello et al. 2015:706). If, as suggested, anthropological interpretations err in recognizing only the masculine, descent-oriented conceptualization (Hugh-Jones 1993:114), then consideration of the myth described here should help remedy that oversight.

It should now be clear that each of the two foundational narratives suppresses a different memory. The riverine account of sib brotherhoods suppresses the role played by sexual desire and conjugality in favor of a wholly masculine, self-replicating model of brotherhood. That which must be repressed is the role played by the Other, the enemy-lover, wife, and mother. In the ideology of the *koroa*, the father’s place is revered, but the mother’s elided.

Hybridity is concealed; homogeneity is avowed. The myth-memory of predatory conjugality is obscured so that filiation prevails as the preeminent collective memory. The acknowledgment of conjugality in the contrasting fiery account is a subversion of the hegemony of filiation, which in itself is a testimony to its significance. The contrast between the two myths, furthermore, mirrors the debate over the primacy of filiation or affinity in the creation of people. This will be the subject of the next section.

Discussion

Female Desire, Incest, and Exogamy

The mythic account of the Nihtin Dusuria points to several complexities in the relationships between opposite-sex siblings. According to the myth, both the sisters' sexuality and their agency are the targets of the brothers' enmity. The latter's concern is that the sisters might, in marrying out, disappear and leave behind nothing but bones, an allusion to their loss to the sib.

Brothers are the very kinsmen who stand to lose if their sisters find spouses without securing a balanced exchange (i.e., wives for themselves). They can, in theory, attempt to control their sisters' reproductive capacities in at least two ways. The first is indirect: by investing in a sister as a trade between brothers-in-law, a brother may obtain a wife for himself and offspring, as well as future spouses in the next generation. Herein lie the seeds of conflict and a potential source of tension between sisters and brothers.

The second form of control is direct: in theory, and in myth, a brother may monopolize his sister's reproductive capacities and the identity of her offspring by fathering them himself, a phenomenon often found in myth that Roy Wagner referred to as an "outcest taboo" (2011:168, 2017:108–110). At several points in the account, the women's brothers reproach their sisters, blaming them for desiring the strangers and thereby bringing on the attack. One brother rebukes his sisters, saying, "All of this happened because you wanted it!" The brothers' reproach of their sisters for having exercised their own agency in desiring the strangers may be seen as an expression of regret and fear for the loss of their own privilege as sexual partners and their hegemony over their sisters' offspring. In the sisters' choice of strangers, and the brothers' rancor against the Nihtin Dusuria brothers-in-law, we find the tension between the norms of incest and outcest as well as the complementary capacities of each as both negative and positive prohibitions.

In contrast to the androcentric riverine origin, the fiery myth recognizes the generative role of women and the power of female desire. That myth presents a condition of otherwise in which the mythical sisters, driven by desire, defy their brothers' wishes and select, instead, the Other. It is the women's desire for the strangers that leads to the cataclysmic events and to the transformations leading to the genesis of the Kotiria people. In this narrative, women display power and agency: they exercise their own volition in initiating the *po?oa* and in ordering the men to give them the red substance. They dance with the Nihtin Duria; then, despite their brothers' protests, they follow their desires by running off with them.

The fiery account, then, allows us to consider a different interpretation of the genesis of incest in which the structural move from intrafamilial sexuality toward its prohibition (requiring extrafamilial sexuality) rests in the agency of sisters to direct their sexuality toward Others. From this perspective, (a) exogamy precedes and drives the prohibition against incest, not the other way round; and (b) the structural move from intrafamilial sexual license to its prohibition lies in the rebellion of sisters against their brothers.

In narrating the brothers' transition from license to prohibition, the myth establishes a primal delineation, a boundary that defines and separates insider from outsider. The brothers' loss is the brothers-in-laws' gain. This prescriptive structuring shifts the object of desire from sibling to outside Other, establishing a force field of repulsion and attraction among groups and persons. The prohibition, and its compulsion toward eversion, engenders the decentralized Tukanoan marriage system that brings people together across river basins and languages to produce one superordinate Vaupésian socius.

The expectation of reciprocity that underlies the marriage transaction requires that a daughter or sister given in marriage be compensated by returning a cross-cousin or cross-niece. In theory, failure to reciprocate is tantamount to capture. In Kotiria accounts, small-scale raiding for women typified Vaupés history (Chernela 1993, 2001, 2008, 2011). Marriage in which a woman is taken without return might give rise to a counterclaim and violent revenge. Indeed, twentieth-century ethnographers working in the Vaupés basin regarded all Eastern Tukanoan marriages as abductions (Goldman 1963:142–44; Arhem 1981; Jackson 1983:133; S. Hugh-Jones 1979, 2013).

Yet the same oral histories that report violent abductions also indicate that marriage was a means of ending enmity.¹¹ A violent situation could be reversed by bequeathing a woman. Such marriage exchanges had the capacity to transform hostile intergroup relationships into close intimacies. Alliances formed through marriage were used to avoid imminent as well as future violence. In what James Brooks calls a “fearsome paradox” (2008:288), forms of war “contain” peace (Chernela 2001, 2008, 2011; see also Albers 1993).

When in-law-hood is regarded as balanced and ongoing, it confers upon an outside *koro* a nonalien status. Such marriages, maintained over generations of wife-giving and -receiving, create alliances that are reified through ceremonial discourse, ritual gift-giving, and the coproduction of future generations. These in-laws are referred to by the collective term *phaña*, a preferred class of in-law that may be glossed as “real in-laws.” The Kotiria recognize the Desana (*Kasiri*), Cubeo (*Bu'isa*), and Baniwa (*Ba'chaa*) as *phaña*,¹¹ and are able to recall and recount how their ancestors first encountered these spouses and thereby established the history of affinal preferences and military alliances. Past and present are thus collapsed in the *po?oa* ceremony as the transformation from enmity to amity is rendered meaningful and immediate.

Tukano Exceptionality: Indigestibility

If, as many students of Native Amazonian society have suggested, the paradigm of assimilating affines into the consanguineal unit is a pan-Amazonian form of sociality, the Eastern Tukanoans must be regarded as exceptional. In the more numerous Cariban, Panoan, Tupian, and Yanomami language groups, known for their endogamous, cognatic social organizations, kinship systems suppress, rather than reify, kin-affine distinctions (Rivière 1969, 1984; Overing 1975, 1981, 1986). Eastern Tukanoan societies, in contrast, are organized around recursive agnatic principles and descent group exogamy. They embrace, without eradicating or neutralizing, difference.

In a Kotiria settlement, where males and unmarried females form the agnatic core, in-marrying wives are categorical outsiders. They are the daughters that left their own natal communities to live among the *koroa* of their husbands, where, like their own mothers, they are Other persons (*Paye Mahsa*). At the same time, this categorical distinction does not preclude strong, affective bonds. Relatives by marriage are fully enmeshed into daily life and accorded the same sentiments as other close relatives. But while they participate in the shared collectivity of daily village life, affines are not recognized as members of the *koro*, the collectivity thought to “belong” there.

For the Kotiria, Otherness is a quality that confounds the facile distinction between proximity and distance. Despite strong bonds of attachment, the distinction between relatives deemed “own” and “Other” remains intact. Rather than a process of blurring categorical differences, distinctions are preserved (cf. Hill 2013; Wright 2009:106ff). As a result, every household or village is a heterogeneous site, containing within it an irreducible alien element. Alterity, in the form of in-married wives and mothers, is an intrusion of difference in the heart of Kotiria social life (Chernela 2018). It constitutes a difference that is never fully assimilated, principally because it is *kept apart*, managed, and maintained through practices, including speech, that index identity and group belonging (Chernela 2018). If it is the role of desire, then, to obliterate Otherness (alterity), for the Kotiria it is the work of language and ideology to maintain it.

For these reasons, therefore, the permeable relationship between inside and outside, said to characterize Guianese cosmology (Rivière 1969, 1993; Overing 1975, 1993; Brightman 2011), does not apply to Eastern Tukanoans, where difference is reified. If, in the Guianas, “men represent the outside and women the inside” (Brightman 2011:212), in the Vaupés basin it is the reverse: men represent the inside and women the outside.

To return to the metaphor of consumption, then, we may say that the outsider in Tukanian society is never fully consumed; in this sense alterity may be said to be unassimilable. Affinity—a process of fusion or encompassment through symbolic killing and cannibalizing—closes a significant expanse of social distance and pacifies an enemy. It creates a bridging space of sentiment without identity or membership. The relationship constitutes a “conditional morality”; if a balance is upset, relations may return to violence.

Necessity, or the Instability of the Koro

As we have said, for Eastern Tukanians, sources of fertility and renewal must be found outside the *koro*. The incest prohibition that precludes persons from marrying within the *koro*—be it the small local descent group or the large language group—obliges persons to take spouses from alien groups. For the Eastern Tukanian *koroa*, then, marriage is construed as external (or xenotropic): permitted between, but not within, *koroa*.

Because one cannot marry within one’s own *koro*, no *koro* at any level of magnitude (including the language group) is capable of reproducing itself. The *koro* exists within a matrix of similarly incomplete socialities. For this reason, none of the named exogamous descent groups of the Northwest Amazon constitutes a society or an ethnicity in the strict sense of those terms. Instead, Eastern Tukanians conceive of the *koroa* as existing within a field of other similarly organized and incomplete, agnatic groupings whose members must find spouses among Others.

The incompleteness of the *koroa* is a problem at the center of the narrative analyzed here and, similarly, at the core of Kotiria social life. The transformation at issue here, then, is not one of an outside enemy becoming an inside kinsman. It is the discovery of the outsider as the sole means of reproducing the self (the *koro*) to create new kinspersons.

Operations of Desire

We may say that the myth’s moment of Other-consciousness is one of attraction and desire. If we turn again to Hegel, we find that for him Desire and Self-consciousness form a fundamental relation. It is the Desire for Recognition that drives Self-consciousness toward an Other Self-consciousness. The mutual acknowledgment entails a sense of privation, as each perceives in the Other that which he or she lacks. It thereby leads the subject to seek completion, or totality, in the Other (Hegel 1977:105).

Because the taboo prohibiting desire within the *koro* results in incompleteness, the *koro* operates as a persistent source of instability in a manner analogous to the electromagnetic charge in a subatomic particle. The tension is resolved only through attaching to an Other. Here Desire serves as a driving force or propulsion toward Recognition and completion.

For the Nihtin Dusuria and the farming women of the myth, each possessing the reproductive fluids and capacities of the other, the *po?oa* exchange ceremony would appear to be a solution to their mutual deprivations. By cannibalizing the Cubeo women, the incompleteness of the Nihtin Dusuria finds resolution, as through it they become fully human. For the Kotiria, marriage, a hybrid process that unites difference, is the sole means of producing wholeness.

Exteriority, Recognition, and Identity

The myth can be read as a series of ontological transitions that chart the origin of Kotiria society in and through difference. The first of these is the emergence of consciousness through exteriority, an awakening of a reflexive consciousness: a self “as it exists for the other.” We can consider the moment of *seeing the other*, that moment in which the Nihtin Dusuria and the Cubeo women at once behold and want one another, to be a moment of mutual *Recognition* in the sense of Hegel’s *Anerkennung*. Each experiences the other as an *Alter/Ander/Other*, a world of the otherwise, a route to completion. It is a pivotal moment of Other-consciousness, an awareness of the presence of other beings in the world. For the Kotiria, it may be said, it is only through Recognition—awareness of one’s self as an object for an other’s consciousness—that identity can be constructed.

For theorists concerned with advancing Hegel’s project of the Other, (e.g., Levinas 1995, 2003 [1972]; Buber 1970), to recognize an alternative consciousness is to become aware of an Other who is capable of giving meaning to the world and performing actions in it. It is thus an end of the hegemony of the self over the world and a loss of control over the

meanings assigned to it. Insofar as none of the exogamous language groups of the Northwest Amazon is autonomous, and therefore ever needful of Others, participation in the Eastern Tukanoan culture complex is an exercise in recognition and difference. In this complex, multilingual universe, the manifestations of alternative ways of giving meaning to the world are ever-present.

As the case of the Northwest Amazon illustrates, Otherness must be maintained through ideological and discursive resources. The danger, obscured by the work of ideology, is the awareness that, in fact, there is no Other. Unless, that is, we make it so. The social work entailed in constructing and maintaining Otherness/Alterity has only recently begun to be investigated.

Conclusions

One of the most contentious issues in the proposed symbolic economy of alterity model is the role of predatory cannibalism. Critics appear to disregard the cosmological role of violence—understanding it, instead, to be pragmatic. There has been a general search for “fit” to find and assign the societies that are or are not, violent. Yet, in the 1970s and 1980s, when Overing developed the influential argument that the Piaroa brothers-in-law, as political competitors, were potential cannibals, it was clear that the hostility found in Piaroa cosmology was not to be understood as a description of Piaroa peoples per se, but as a *transformational force* in Piaroa cosmology. (Overing 1975:169–70, 191–92; 1986:138–39). As the Kotiria myth illustrates, predation may act as a cosmological requisite in the production of society, which can be, otherwise, nothing other than convivial.

I suspect, as do others, that exclusive states of either violence or peace are neither empirical nor historic. As a powerful trope of cosmological devouring, mythic, rather than historic, cannibalism is the more critical to a *symbolic* economy of alterity. I am skeptical that its universality in Amazonia can be defended otherwise.

In the myth discussed here, an enactment of cannibalistic consumption transforms strangers into real affines. Predatory cannibalism is a negative transaction, the theft of a woman, the eating of the sisters. It is the negative exchange whose incompleteness sets off a revenge cycle of theft and countertheft. One solution, as the Eastern Tukanoans have found, is ongoing affinity, both real and potential.

Cannibalism therefore is not an end, but a means: through cosmological enmity and predatory consumption, matrices of solidary relationships are generated. The cannibal predators of the myth are the Kotiria themselves, who, with jaguar powers, hunt and consume their prey, including the sisters of the Cubeo brothers-in-law. As I believe the myth discussed here makes clear, the states of violence and peace are linked to one another by social mechanisms in which cosmological violence is a necessary, transformative, process.

If, according to this proposition, cannibalism is the *procedure* that takes in and transforms Otherness, Desire is the fundamental engine or operator that motivates and drives the operation. Desire transforms enmity to amity. It is the force that propels one to transcend the apparent boundaries between the safety and comfort of the known for the perils and discomforts of the unknown. *This* Desire is the other side, the positive side of the incest prohibition, prompting merger rather than violence between collectivities and reproduced ritually in the *po?oa* ceremony.

Affinization is the correction to our undue focus on the closed, named, collectivities in the Vaupés basin, where no identity-bearing collectivity can reproduce itself. The socius, if it is to be “found” anywhere, is in none of these alone. It is found not in the unit, but in the relationships between units. It is affinization and attraction that propels and shapes that sociality.

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Notes

¹Insofar as this paper speaks to a larger scholarly conversation, it shares a basic understanding of the concept of affinity in its reference to marriage or conjugality and its polar opposition to “self-consanguineal.” Where it makes sense to do so without altering meaning, I use the less rigorous term “in-law.” To the extent possible, I employ local categories and terms.

²The term Wanano and its variants, Guanano and Wanana, are spellings of the *Língua Geral* term used in the anthropological literature and in government documents. Recently, Kotiria schoolteachers formally voted to refer to themselves by their own term. My publications over four decades reflect these changes.

³The data in this paper were gathered in the Brazilian portion of the territory, where about 600–700 Kotiria live in an uninterrupted string of villages spaced intermittently along a span of about 40 kilometers.

⁴In the literature the *koroa* have been referred to by a number of terms: *descent group*, *sib*, *clan*, and *language group*.

⁵Anastasio Cordeiro, head of the Kotiria family that hosted me, sought me out to record this narrative in Kotiria for his descendants. The original was made in 1979 and conserved in archives at the University of Indiana and the University of Texas. The original can be accessed at www.ailla.utexas.org using the identifier GVC006R001. A transcription with translation in Portuguese and English was published in 2015 as *Kotiria Bhabuariro: A Origin do Kotiria / The Origin of the Kotiri*.

⁶Alternative versions of the myth have been published by Antonio Brandão de Amorim in 1926; by Pedro Rocha (2016) and in his very rich 2012 dissertation; the indigenous associations ASEKK/UNIARWA (2020); and by the Colombian Kotiria anthropologist Christiaan Moreno Villa (2018). In several versions there is a single Cubeo woman, rather than many, known as “Honey Woman.” Too, the Nihtin Dusuria appear as bats or as bumble bees whose legs and body are covered with sticky red pollen grains as their “body paint.” A version from Colombia (H. Villa et al. n.d.:12–15, 29–30) raises the possibility that it is the Thunders, transformations of the Yurupari, that attack the women.

⁷The red fruit, *Bixa Orellana*, known in Luzophone America as *urucu* and as *anchiote* in Hispanic America, is a dye used by native Amerindians.

⁸Unlike most Vaupés societies, the Cubeo do not subscribe to obligatory virilocality.

⁹In an extension of this Nihtin Dusuria account, the narrator tells us how the Kotiria ancestral shaman, Mukuti Yairo, ascended with the burning tree into the sky and then fell to the ground as rain. There he witnessed the arrival of the Transformation Canoe carrying Kenei, the seniormost founding ancestor of the Kotiria. A version from the Colombian Kotiria includes the same coda: just as the Kotiria were falling as rain and landing as human beings on Yoʔsoku mountain, the seniormost (“eldest”) brother, Kenei, disembarked from the transformative anaconda body (C. Villa 2018). In Rocha’s 2012 account, the narrator remarks, “We are people of appearance (*bahuari mahsa*), and not people of transformation (*Phamuri mahsa*)” (2012:90).

¹⁰Sibs that are lowest and highest in rank may form interdependent dyads of several kinds (see Goldman 2004; Chernela 1993; C. Hugh-Jones 1979, for a discussion of this phenomenon).

¹¹According to oral history accounts, warring between the Desana and Kotiria ceased when the Desana “gave a woman” to the Kotiria. The same accounts report that a fierce Baniwa sib refrained from attacking because they were “the brothers-in-law of our ancestors; for this reason they did not eat Kotiria flesh” (Chernela 1993, 2001).

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