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Regionalism and Cultural Identity in Western Amazonia

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INTRODUCTION

The several Arawakan groups living in the western Amazonian region about which I write here are perhaps outliers of the waves of early Arawakan expansion, minorities in an area now dominated by Panoan Indians. The equally intrusive Aruan speakers that I know best are a minority in the regional context of older Arawakan groups, such as the Campa, Apurinã and Guana, who appear to have entered surrounding regions some time earlier. In this article I explore, rather tentatively, the experience of those indigenous groups in an ethnically complex cultural region. As an initial wedge into the issue I consider some of the ways in which notions of identity and its representation—for example, through the ethnohistory of language in marking ethnic distinctiveness in this area—are intertwined with notions of place: “territoriality” as cultural space. The processes through which representational strategies lose some of their capacity to mark ethnic difference, and in which “regionality” comes to dominate the representation of cultural identity and difference, entail both the wide sharing of cultural features, from economic strategies to dress, and the increased intensity of interaction among indigenous groups that accompanied the intrusion of Brazilians, Peruvians, and Bolivians into the region in the nineteenth century, primarily to exploit rubber.

The area in which I have conducted my research is dominated by the state of Acre, the western-most state of Brazil, which was incorporated into Brazil as a territory in 1903 following a series of conflicts and agreements with Bolivia. The larger region includes the neighboring portions of Rondônia and Amazonas states, as well as the eastern, lowland portion of Peru, particularly the region east of the Ucayali. I focus here on the experience of indigenous groups in Acre, largely because the national experiences of Brazil and Peru have affected indigenous groups differently, and because the organizational efforts of Acre’s Indians are both more Amazonian oriented and more familiar to me.

Relatively little is known of the history of the area prior to the nineteenth century, and little archaeological work has been done in this region. Moreover, my own work among Kulina Indians in Acre did not focus on the ethnohistory of the group or the area, except tangentially, and thus my comments here will necessarily have a speculative quality and historical shallowness by contrast to work that is being done in regions richer in documentation, research, or archaeology. Rather, my interest is in pursuing the radical changes that have taken place in the region since the middle of the nineteenth century, and which are still in progress today.

My fieldwork has been conducted among Kulina living along the Upper Purús River in Acre. At the time of my first fieldwork I worked with a large community that lived in a village called Maronaua. The bulk of this community subsequently moved downriver to an abandoned rubber tapping camp, or *seringal*, called the Seringal Sobral, where they continue to live today. There are seven communities of Kulina along the Upper Purús, ranging in size from roughly ten individuals in an isolated single household to nearly 200 at the Sobral. The Kulina population of the Upper Purús was approximately 540 in June 1990, and rose to perhaps as high as 600 by the year 2000. The Kulina are Aruan language speakers, whose name appears in the reports of explorers at least since the middle nineteenth century (Gonçalves 1991). They are sometimes confused with a possibly extinct Panoan group called the Culina or Culino, who were found along the Solimões, living east of the Mayoruna.

TWO HISTORIES

It appears that the western-most half of Acre, the area between the Purús and the Javari Rivers, was dominated for centuries by speakers of the Aruan languages, including the Kulina, Manitenerí, Kujigenerí, and Katiana. To the west, the region up to the Ucayali was dominated by Arawakan speakers, including the Campa, Piro, and Machigenga. By the end of the sixteenth century, however, Spanish from Peru moved east of the Ucayali, driving a number of these Arawakans and several Panoan groups before them, including the Kaxinaua, Yaminaua, and Amahuaca who now dominate the area, having pushed other groups south and east. A glance at, for example, Nimuendaju's "Mapa Ethnohistórico" shows the cluster of intrusive Panoans in the northeast section of Acre, as well as the string of Arawakan and Aruan groups that stretches northeast along the Purús and Jurua Rivers up to the Solimões.

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The region is, consequently, ethnically complex. Since 1709 some forty-nine indigenous groups have been identified along the Juruá River alone (Mendonça 1989:188), though some of these, especially the extinct groups, may be subdivisions of others. All such early descriptions are highly problematic because characterizations of Indians in this region, even as late as the eighteenth century, were in some ways reminiscent of Sir John Mandeville's thirteenth-century reports from Asia, with excessive credence paid to rumors of radical physical differences that marked or stood for cultural distance. In 1768, for example, José Monteiro de Noronha reported that Ugina (or Coatátapuya) Indians on the Juruá had tails, the result of marriage with monkeys. The belief was repeated as late as 1847 by a traveler who reported seeing a large monkey in an Indian house. When he asked to buy the unusually large animal, his Indian host declared the monkey his wife, whom he could never sell.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century Brazilians and Bolivians entered the area in search of sarsaparilla, copaiba, and other products—the “drogas da floresta.” There are few reports from these early contacts with the area's indigenous groups, but travelers and explorers saw the impact of such contact by the mid-nineteenth century. In 1858, for example, João da Cunha Corrêa, the “director dos índios do Juruá,” identified nine “malocas” or longhouses, with 426 “pacified” Indians along the river. By the 1860s some indigenous groups in the most remote regions of the upper Juruá and Purús Rivers were said to wear western style clothing whenever possible, and were conversant with the relative qualities of Brazilian versus American steel in axes, knives, and other tools.

In 1860 Manoel Urbano da Encarnação ascended the Purús River in Brazil for some 1600 miles, searching for a water route to the Madeira from which forest products such as turtle egg oil and copaiba could be transported more easily to Manaus, and on to Belém. Manoel, said to be “a mulatto man of slight education but great natural intelligence” (Chandless 1866:86), was more concerned with navigation than ethnography, but his observations, no less than the very purpose of his trip, indicate that the region was economically important, even in this period before the rubber boom. His observations of local indigenous groups were few, but he described the Paumarí and Apurinã along the middle Purús.

Between 1864 and 1867 the English explorer William Chandless ascended the Purús and Juruá Rivers, the first European to penetrate so far into the area that now comprises the Brazilian state of Acre and eastern Peru (Chandless 1866, 1867). His characterizations of Indians in the region are shaped primarily by the extent to which they would hinder or assist its

economic exploitation, and hardly stand in for ethnography, but are worth noting nonetheless. He says of the “Pammarys”—subdivisions of the Arawakan Puru-puru Indians along the lower Purús—that they “are a merry, good-humoured set, fond of and famed for singing,” who “work happily for local traders” (1866:93). Of the “Catauixis” he says they “are said to be given to hospitality—a virtue very rare among Indians” (1866:95).

At the Ituxi River (then called the Aquiry) Chandless found the Apurinã Indians, an Arawakan group said to be “the most numerous, warlike, and formidable on the Purús” (1866:96). The Apurinã, he said, “seem to delight in war, and to be constantly engaged in it [chiefly on those of their own tribe]” (1866:96). At the confluence of the Purús and the Iaco Rivers, at the point along the Purús where he entered what is now the state of Acre, Chandless reached the upper limit of the region of the Apurinã Indians, where the Kanamarí and Manitenerí had fled upriver to avoid contact with the hostile Apurinã. Chandless noted that the Manitenerí, despite their remoteness, “wear clothes, and plant cotton and spin and weave it ... for trade,” meeting strangers with “the greatest joy ... offers of children for sale, and with other offers such as travelers report to be made by the Polynesians” (1866:101).

Chandless reported an interesting thread in the webs of culture linking communities in this region. One of his Manitenerí informants spoke of the point on the Upper Purús at which Indians drag their canoes for two days to another river, which they take downstream for ten days to the Ucayali. This informant recited portions of the Catholic mass and spoke knowledgeably of an Italian missionary on the Ucayali (1866:105). This Padre Antonio was said to have brought a large number of Indians from the Ucayali to the Purús, and though Chandless thought it unlikely that the entire community of Manitenerí had migrated so late to the Purús, what remains notable is the fact that indigenous groups in this area were familiar with communities that stretched from the Peruvian Ucayali to the Brazilian Amazon and beyond.

During his account of an 1867 ascent of the Juruá, Chandless mentioned nine indigenous groups along the river: Marauhas; Catauaxis; Arauás; Culinás; Conibos; Pirá-tapuya; Catuquinas; Murucurumas; and Nauas. Of these, the Pirá-tapuya may have been a subgroup of the Arauá, and the Murucurumas were closely related to the Catuquina.

Chandless did not encounter Kulina Indians on the Purús, but heard of them during his ascent of the Juruá. He described the “Culinós” as “a numerous tribe of the interior, who are said not to have canoes ... they are considered treacherous and hostile ... They are met with also on the River Tarauacá, and probably extend a considerable distance s.w.” (1869:300).

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Again, Chandless's interest was in navigation, and especially a route to the Madeira. Consequently, a route between the Juruá and the Purús was attractive, but impossible due to the hostile Indians in the region between the two rivers: "I should be very bold were I to say that Indians may not have passed from the one river to the other here. The Indians, however, now existing here are of tribes warlike, numerous and intractable: the Hypurinás [Apurinás] near the Purús, the Culinos near the Juruá, and the Jamamadys in the centre" (1869:304). The upper reaches of the Juruá, which Chandless did not reach, were said to be dangerous because they were the home of the "dreaded Nauas"—no doubt several Panoan groups.

By the 1880s the rubber boom brought numerous Brazilians up the Juruá and Purús, into the territory of Acre, in which the richest and most productive *hevea* trees were found. The history of the region over the past 120 years is inseparable from the history of rubber. Brazilians, and especially Acreanos, divide the history of the area into three periods: the time before the rubber boom, when indigenous groups dominated the region and few products were extracted; the period of the rubber boom, from roughly the 1880s to about 1912, during which the major rivers, including the Purús, the Envira, the Juruá and the Javari, were occupied by Brazilian *seringueiros* (rubber tappers), and when indigenous groups were either useful as sources of labor or food, or were hostile and exterminated; and after the rubber boom, when the remaining *seringueiros* and Indians forged an awkward *pas de deux*, sometimes joining forces under the banner of "povos da floresta" (people of the forest), at other times aggressively defending rights to territory (see Pollock 1994).

A second history of indigenous groups in the region is being developed, an account partly shaped by Indians themselves, though it is sometimes unclear who exactly has created the context for that history or selected its outlines. It is multivocal and multipositional, but it is woven around several threads that I will try to identify here. It is not simply an ethnohistory, though it also is that. It emerges in the encounter with global environmentalism, the Catholic Church and its conflicts with the Brazilian government, and international indigenous rights organizations. One of the most striking contrasts presented by these two histories is, on the one hand, the image of the "dreaded Nauas" of the upper Juruá River in the second half of the nineteenth century, who the Arawakan Indians as well as Brazilian travelers avoided, and on the other hand, the website created one hundred and forty years later by descendants of these same indigenous groups, where the several Panoan communities that comprise the Organization of the Indigenous People of Tarauacá and Jordão portray an

ethnohistory and a unified image of themselves that merges multiple symbols of identity through the global technology of the Internet.¹

WHEN DOES HISTORY BEGIN?

The above mentioned website is a good place to open an ethnohistory of Acre's Indians. The history it presents is one that is being promulgated throughout the region, and is presented in broad enough terms—calculated, one suspects—that it is being embraced by other indigenous groups as well. According to the English version of the website text:

In former times our Indian leaderships governed our community with a vision of our culture in its entirety. They were trained to be leaders in the areas of economy, health and education and started practicing the traditional creeds and habits with their own parents when they were three years old. With seven they finished the first stage of the medicine man training. At the age of 20 they concluded their education in the areas of economy, health, education and nature study. There was no need for theoretical study in school. We celebrated our creeds and traditional habits, there was fish and game animal in abundance and our people were healthy and lived happily in their native land.

The nearly mythical nature of such a history is palpable, of course, and it goes without saying that it sets up an idyllic past of healthy and happy people, one that contrasts starkly with the image of murderous, warlike Nauas popularized by travelers in the nineteenth century. The framework of indigenous education is surely curious. Much of this potted history, quoted in full above, focuses on training, particularly of indigenous leaders. One may wonder if it is a counter narrative to the dominant forms of enculturation used by both missionary and government organizations in Brazil, that is, formal education. It seems to assert that traditional forms of education were superior in several of the areas that contemporary Brazilians valorize: "economy, health, education and nature study" are hardly salient categories in the traditional cultures of indigenous groups in Acre.

The demarcation of history and myth in lowland South America has been pursued by Jonathan Hill and his colleagues in their important volume on the subject (Hill 1988), where it is suggested that the moment of contact with Europeans was often a defining point in the emergence of a sense of history for indigenous communities. Arguably, however, history begins for the groups comprising the OPITARJ, not through their first contacts with Brazilians or the Spanish coming across from Peru as early as the

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sixteenth century, but in 1975, with their first contact with Terri Vale de Aquino, an anthropologist who became the focus of much of the Panoan indigenous rights movement in western Amazonia. Certainly these indigenous groups recount tales of the time “Before Aquino,” if I may put it that way. But descriptions of the period before and during the rubber boom, that was so critical to the shaping of current indigenous lives today, also have a distinctly mythic quality, telescoped into a few stereotyped and highly structured vignettes. For example: *seringeiros* were violent intruders who, as the OPITARJ website puts it, “hindered the practice of our creeds and traditional habits.” Within this mythic narrative, epidemic disease reduced the indigenous population, and Indians were forced to work for rubber tappers.

By contrast, history, as a particular way of representing and thinking about events, begins with Terri Aquino. The OPITARJ website describes life since 1975 by using the kind of details that have the contestable quality that comprises the representational praxis of history: “The lands belonged to the proprietors Mr. Altevir Leal and Raimundo Ramo ... Mr. Carlos Farias was their manager ... The Indian rubber tappers had to pay 70 kg per month [in rent] for each pair of rubber paths ... In 1979 ... we organized an indigenous cooperative ... On November 15, 1993 ... On March 12, 1994 ... ”

The politics are clear, and the accumulation of details is just as clearly intended to build the political case. Terri Vale de Aquino may be legendary in the region,² but his arrival precipitates a distinctive sense of history among local indigenous groups.

I want to draw attention to the terms of difference, to the language of identity, and to the signs of entitlement that permeate these and other representations of indigenous life in the past and at the current time. They derive in large part from the political contexts that shape a new sense of the history of the indigenous groups in the region, but also require that communities once feuding find common identities, or common grounds for identity.

IDENTITY AND ITS PLACE

Language was a primary marker of identity for the nineteenth-century European travelers who first penetrated the region. As Chandless ascended the Purús and Jurua Rivers between 1865 and 1867, a copy of the *Glossaria Linguarum Brasiliensum* was just as important for determining the cultural location of the Indians he met as his mechanical measuring instruments

were for determining his geographical location. He comments, for example, that the Indians he had encountered on the Purús, who called themselves the “Manetenerys,” were really “Conibos,” a judgment he makes solely on the similarity of their languages. Indeed, he suggests that the Brazilian explorer Serafim Salgado was wrong to call them “Cucamas,” since they had “not a word in common with” the Conibo, whom he ironically failed to recognize as Panoan rather than Tupian (Chandless 1869:300-301).

If Chandless’ linguistics seems to us somewhat naive, his association of language and cultural identity retains much of its compelling force, and continues to be an aspect of Western ethnolinguistic theory (Graham 2002:189). One issue that prompts this article is the simple point that language and “culture” are to an extent separable. This separability has been exploited by numerous indigenous groups in the region in question to reconceptualize their identity. As Greg Urban has pointed out in his discussion of *linguas francas* in several South American countries, the point was made nearly a century ago by Franz Boas in a more theoretically and politically significant argument about race, language, and culture (1992:307). Indeed, and as Urban noted, the standard anthropological categorizations of South American indigenous peoples depend upon a barely tacit assumption that those who speak similar languages have more in common with each other than they do with speakers of other indigenous languages. My interest here is less conceptual. I am concerned, rather, with the use of language and a variety of other representational strategies to mark difference in identity across groups, and the processes through which new representational strategies now mark similarity of identity across groups. In short, the semiotics of identity in this region are inverting the iconic and indexical features that once marked difference, and new valences of these signs are replacing them (see Pollock 1995).

Linguistic chauvinism was attributed to the indigenous groups that explorers such as Chandless encountered, and while it is impossible to determine on what evidence this attribution was based, such chauvinism is certainly plausible. Along his nearly two thousand-mile trip up the Purús River, Chandless noted that the most hostile relations obtained between groups speaking radically different languages, especially the Arawakans and the Panoans. Indeed, Chandless took pains to suggest that the Apurinã, the most hostile, warlike Arawakan group he actually encountered, spoke a language that was similar to that of other local Arawakan groups, but not so much so that they were mutually intelligible.

The ethnohistorical recollections of my Kulina informants suggest that they made similar assumptions of language difference. My oldest informants in 1980 recalled childhoods from the 1930s, a mere seventy years after

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Chandless's journey through the region, when even Kulina dialect differences were strongly associated with a division into various localized groups, called this- or that-*madiba* (e.g., the *kurubu madiba* [the kurubu fish people], the *pitsi madiba* [the pitsi monkey people], or the *dzumabe madiba* [the jaguar people]), divisions that mapped social lines of tension, competition and hostility. Chandless was unaware of the existence of these subgroups, but he did observe that Indians along the Juruá River were reluctant to accompany him above the Chirua River, fearing the Kulina who lived there. Kulina still mark distinctions among subgroups largely by dialect differences, though these are no longer associated with feuding and raiding. My informants on the Purús can point to numerous phonological differences, for example, that mark the distinction between themselves—the *kurubu madiba*—and *madiba* groups on the Envira or Juruá.

It might be worth noting that the existence of dialect differences, and the salience and significance of such dialect differences, continue to have implications for Kulina, particularly as their language has acquired a written form through the efforts of missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) working with them in Peru. The dialect of the Kulina with whom the SIL has worked has become a kind of official dialect for the written language—despite numerous phonological differences between it and other Kulina dialects—due largely to the availability of educational materials in Kulina produced by the SIL.³ Indeed, the most extensive grammatical description of the Kulina language to have been published so far, and an accompanying dictionary, have used the SIL's Spanish-derived orthography, despite the fact that the Kulina group that formed the source of the grammar and dictionary lives in Brazil and speaks the dialect of the “Igarapé do Anjô” on the Envira River in Acre (Monserrat and Silva 1986; Kanaú and Monserrat 1984). For this group, and for the great majority of Kulina, a Portuguese-derived orthography would represent the values of sounds more consistently between their own indigenous language and Portuguese, which is increasingly their second language.

Indigenous use of language to mark radical ethnic difference is suggested in nineteenth-century accounts from the area. It is notable, for example, that Chandless' Indian informants, Arawakan language speakers, homogenized the Juruá River's Panoans as “Nauas,” and one suspects that these Panoans had some equally collective epithet for the region's Arawakan speakers. Indigenous use of language to mark identity within communities is well-known, and is widespread in Amazonia (Graham 2002). Phenomena such as “plaza speech” and comparable forms of ritualized language performance are common among Acre's indigenous groups, and no doubt have a deep history (cf. Urban 1986). In earlier work I have commented

on the irony that Catholic missionaries working among Kulina in Acre tried to teach literacy on the explicit assumption that written language would have only informational content—it would be purely referential, so to speak (Pollock 1995). This assumption ignored or overlooked the fact that linguistic performance often indexes social position and competence, such that senior adult men have full linguistic skill and creativity, while adolescent boys and women—despite possessing complete fluency—are thought to have lesser linguistic skill. Graham has recently noted that this second-order indexicality is especially productive in contexts in which aspects of identity are signaled by language (Graham 2002:190).

The semiotics of linguistic performance also affect the area's indigenous groups in the novel social settings in which new indigenous rights movements sometimes place them. Kulina, for example, have a distinct sense of being at the bottom of the social hierarchy in western Amazonia, and of having diminished capacity in social contexts in which they appear or interact with representatives of the national society or international organizations. The founder of the Seringal Sobral community of Kulina, for example, was a man of passionate, fiery rhetorical skill, a consummate orator and performer of the “big speech” or plaza speech that compels people to action, and for which he was widely admired among local Kulina groups. On the first occasion on which I saw him called upon to speak in the regional forum of a meeting of Acre's rubber tappers, designed in part to forge an alliance among various kinds of forest peoples, this headman was tongue-tied and awkward, as if he thought that his social position was comparable to the adolescent boys who shuffle, hem and haw when called upon to speak in village meetings in the presence of senior men. His language performance indexed his inferior position in this social hierarchy, a striking contrast to his usual verbal sophistication in settings in which he was a social leader.

The retention of indigenous language has acquired important political dimensions for Brazilian Indians as a whole, of course, especially in view of Brazilian constitutional efforts to link the loss of *índio* identity to speaking Portuguese. At the same time, there is an interesting tension in the popular representation of indigenous issues that emerges with the process of ethnogenesis. That is, differences among indigenous groups are often represented as linguistic differences, while the more general category of “Indian” is homogenized. A popular history of Brazilian Indians produced to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World describes “cultural differences” in almost exclusively linguistic terms:

In schools one learns that the Indian house is OCA, the village is TABA, that the Indians speak only one language: TUPI-GUARANI, that they

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venerate one God called TUPÁ and eat people ... On the contrary, see for example what houses are called in three different indigenous cultures ... (ANAÍ-BA 1992).

Language continues to denote a certain sense of ethnic difference in western Amazonia, but it has been undercut by a more recent and marked emphasis on place, what I might call “ethnoregionality.” There are at least two dimensions to this sense of place—the effects of propinquity and the effects of encroachment—that function to overlay language difference with regional similarity.

Kulina in the middle of the nineteenth century were forest dwellers who rarely appeared on the banks of the major rivers. Indeed, during his ascent of the Juruá Chandless was told that no Kulina had been seen along the river for two or three years (Chandless 1869:300). Kulina were not easily drawn out by the enticements of the rubber trade, unlike any number of other groups. By the 1860s, for example, the “Manetenery” Indians on the upper Purús wore western-style clothing and could discuss the fine points of manufactured goods. Even before the “boom” in rubber brought a flood of *seringueiros* into the region, other products were drawing Brazilians far enough up the Amazon’s affluents that Indians at the most distant trickle of the Upper Purús River were apparently knowledgeable about western manufactured goods.

Kulina resistance to the technological seductions of European presence appears to have ended by the 1930s and 1940s. I have no good evidence that Kulina maintained regular contact with *seringueiros* during the rubber boom, though it is quite possible that many Kulina had left the deeper forests and moved to the river banks by then. Two Brazilian anthropologists, Harald Schultz and Vilma Chiara, traveling up the Purús River in the early 1950s, encountered a community of Kulina that was working for a local *seringal*, hunting, clearing gardens, and performing menial labor (1955). Schultz and Chiara reported that this community appeared to be largely monolingual in Portuguese, and that the children especially were losing their ability to speak Kulina. They identified this group as the “fish” *madiba*. I believe that it may have been the same group I worked with in 1981, further up river—the *kurubu madiba*, named after the *kurubu* fish. This is also suggested by the fact that a measles epidemic had recently struck the community that Schultz and Chiara visited. The older residents of the Maronaua village that I worked in during 1981 recalled an epidemic that killed most of the community’s children, and the age pyramid of the village in 1981 included only two people who would have been under age five at the time of the epidemic thirty years earlier.

Older Kulina in 1981 remembered childhoods spent in forest *aldeias* (villages), without metal pots and pans, but with knives and axes. Kulina are somewhat notorious in Acre for their relatively recent emergence from the forest, and for their continued standoffish isolation from regional and national society. A recent popular article about indigenous groups along Acre's Envira River, for example, says that "The Kulina belong to the group with the greatest cultural resistance (the only one that remains of the groups that occupied the Envira in 1979), which, on the one hand, preserves their tribal language and rituals, but on the other hand they show total disinterest in defending their territory ..." (Junges 1992:49). The author goes on to comment that the Kulina on the Envira River still spent the dry season trekking in the forest, and their social isolation contributes to contemporary versions of the kind of radical "othering" that characterized early accounts of indigenous people: "They also have the practice of having sexual relations with any kind of game they slaughter and, finally, they even have sex with dogs" (Junges 1992:49; my translation).⁴

Kulina on the Purús report that "wild" groups of Kulina still live in the forests between the Purús and the Envira, and in the interriverine areas up to the Juruá. While these rumors may simply index the socialized self-image of the Kulina who now live along the rivers, it is clear that a number of uncontacted groups are indeed living in the forests between the rivers, one of which, the "Korobo," has been sighted only recently, and has been subject to the early stages of attraction.

Language has a new valence among indigenous groups in this region, and in other areas of Brazil as well (Ramos 1998). While indigenous groups struggle to maintain their own languages, they are acutely aware that these language differences inhibit their ability to communicate with each other in pursuit of common political goals. As Ramos suggests for Brazil as a whole, contemporary indigenous rights movements are largely the product of non-Indian organizations and agencies, including NGOs and the Conselho Indigenista Missionário (CIMI)—the Catholic missionary arm—that often have brought diverse groups into collective action using Portuguese, without adequate communication among indigenous groups themselves. In Acre, the experience of Kulina and Kaxinaua Indians in the Área Indígena Alto Purús is typical, and suggests as well how the semiotics of language difference have become inverted, and how regionality has emerged to replace, or at least to supplement it.

A large village of Panoan Kaxinaua Indians is located in the midst of the large *área indígena* (an officially demarcated indigenous area) in which Kulina live along the Upper Purús River. These Kaxinaua migrated downriver from Peru, where their kin continue to live in several villages

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along an affluent of the Purús. Traditionally enemies, the Kulina and the Kaxinaua on the Purús have managed to maintain cooperative relations for several decades, despite difficulties in communicating. I know of no Kulina in the area who speaks Kaxinaua, and no Kaxinaua who speaks Kulina. Nevertheless, the two groups interact, though infrequently, through fairly rudimentary Portuguese.

Political differences of a new sort continually threaten to undermine the stability of this interethnic relationship. The Kaxinaua have for some time been served by the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), which maintained a post in their village. FUNAI provides a variety of services, from health care to economic assistance, as well as the promise of virtually unlimited development. Both Kulina and Kaxinaua spoke of electrification of the Kaxinaua village, of regular airplane transport between the Kaxinaua village and Rio Branco, the state capital, and of other economic plans for things such as cattle. FUNAI, and by extension the Brazilian government, were expected ultimately to provide these nearly fantastical benefits to the Kaxinaua who had tied their fates to the agency.

The Kulina, on the other hand, had entered into an alliance with CIMI, the Catholic missionary organization. CIMI made similar promises of benefits to Kulina who allied themselves with the Conselho, perhaps moderated somewhat by the relative poverty of the church's missionary arm. Indeed, CIMI maintained a small supply of largely donated medications in Maronaua, built a school house in the village, and assigned a missionary couple to the community, who visited from time to time to promote CIMI's indigenous rights agenda in the village. A second CIMI missionary was located at the Kulina village of Santo Amaro, on the Purús River at the mouth of the Chandless River. Near the end of my first period of fieldwork in Maronaua, these missionaries brought a cow and a bull up river to the village, itself a heroic task of many days' travel on a small boat with two large animals that were described as being in a constant state of panic during the trip.⁵

One of the more remarkable aspects of the overtly cordial relations between the Kulina and the Kaxinaua along the Purús is that each had allied itself to rather bitter enemies—in the realm of indigenous issues, FUNAI and CIMI are the primary representatives of the state and the church, which have long been antagonistic. The relationship between CIMI and FUNAI in the state of Acre is more complex. The director of the local FUNAI office in Rio Branco adopted an attitude of tolerance for CIMI missionaries, noting that even though they were in these indigenous areas without proper authorization, FUNAI raised no objection to their presence so long as CIMI provided the basic health care services and economic

support that FUNAI was unable to provide, due largely to its own financial problems. CIMI, for its part, has been less tolerant of FUNAI's presence in this region, accusing FUNAI of undermining indigenous rights, especially in its chronic inability to demarcate indigenous lands in a timely manner. Indeed, the Kulina and Kaxinaua made history in Brazil in 1984 as the first Indian communities to undertake an "autodemarcation," tracking out the vast circumference of the huge 265,000 hectare area themselves.

The ideological conflict between CIMI and FUNAI has microcosmic features as well. In Maronaua, in 1980, the major village headman became disenchanted with CIMI, and was more or less seduced by FUNAI during a government-sponsored trip to Brasília. This headman tried to stir up general sentiment against the CIMI missionaries in the village, and was successful enough to convince roughly a third of the population to accompany him downriver to the Seringal Sobral, where they established a separate village and declared it off-limits to missionaries. This headman made frequent visits back upriver to Maronaua, where his younger brother had assumed the day-to-day role of headman, though without his older brother's great leadership skill. The older brother, an effective orator, would sometimes harangue the village on these visits, encouraging residents to expel the missionaries, harangues that were unintelligible to the missionaries even when they were present in the village to hear. After several years, and the departure of this Brazilian missionary couple, the bulk of the Maronaua population did migrate to the Seringal Sobral, though CIMI maintains its major presence within the *área indígena* as a whole, alongside of FUNAI.

It is tempting to read the relations between CIMI and FUNAI as a kind of metaphor for the relations between the Kulina and the Kaxinaua in the Área Indígena Alto Purús. These two groups, radically different in many significant ways, nonetheless find common ground on which to establish generally cooperative relations. The reality is that the two indigenous groups are probably politically closer and more socially cordial than the national level organizations, despite the larger cultural and linguistic gulf between them, or perhaps because of it.

The Kulina and the Kaxinaua along the Purús find common ground, if I may use the term in this context, in the pursuit of territory: of land, and its defense. It is a commonplace, of course, that rights to land are the primary focus of indigenous rights organizations in Brazil, and the failure to secure and ensure land rights is the primary failing of FUNAI. But, in this region it has never been clear that land is a primary value or goal for Indians themselves, as opposed to their outside supporters. I want to take a moment to consider the ways in which the promotion of land rights in Acre by Indian rights groups may be contributing to new forms of the

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representation of identity in the area and to the interethnic alliances that make allies of their traditional Panoan enemies.

Alcida Ramos has analyzed the notion of “nation” that saturates the rhetoric of indigenous rights (1998:168). One of the earliest national level indigenous rights organizations to emerge in the late 1970s was the União de Nações Indígenas (UNI), and the specific use of the concept of “nations” in its name was viewed as subversive by the military government of Brazil at that time. FUNAI documents from 1980 reveal that its functionaries were instructed to have no interaction with UNI. Ramos notes that the concept of “nation” is powerfully overdetermined, a kind of vast repository for complex affect, even when it has ambiguous referents. Within the complicated web of significations that the notion of nation conveys, the possibility of territoriality is distinctly present—this is, indeed, one of the major issues of so-called nationhood for Native Americans in the United States.

In Acre, the pursuit of land, as a feature of nationhood, is less powerfully present than it may be in other areas of Brazil, but it has been maintained at the forefront of indigenous rights rhetoric in the state, and over twenty years has come to be a central part of Acre Indians’ conception of their basic entitlements and requirements for survival. If it has been a harder notion to sell to Acre’s Indians, it is partly because the withdrawal of thousands of rubber tappers following the two waves of rubber extraction—the nineteenth-century boom, and the World War II miniboom—has left open and unoccupied large areas along the major rivers, and an impression that land is not scarce. There are few large *seringais* on the Purús anymore, and the few rubber tappers left along the river tend to be rather poor, small extended families eking out a miserable living, hardly representing a threat to local Indians. Acre’s larger concentrations of rubber tappers are found in the southeast corner of the state, in the region of Xapuri, and in an extractive reserve along the Juruá.⁶

This is not to suggest that intrusive Brazilians pose no threat to the territorial claims of Indians in Acre. Since the late 1980s, incursions of loggers have been frequent, and in many ways are more troublesome than the relatively small number of rubber tappers. Loggers are reminiscent of the early nineteenth-century *caucheiros*, who destroyed trees in the process of extraction. Loggers illegally enter indigenous areas and, in the process of cutting down selected valuable trees, they destroy larger sections of forest to enter and remove logs. Reports over the past decade suggest that, though a shaky coexistence with rubber tappers has been tolerated, NGOs, indigenous groups, and the CIMI have been most concerned with the threat logging presents to indigenous territories.

The pursuit of a kind of nationhood through territoriality has subtly altered some of the ways in which indigenous groups in Acre conceive of—or talk about—their identity. As I suggested at the outset of this article, new forms of the representation of ethnicity or identity focus on regionality rather than language or culture. The OPITARJ, for example, which I mentioned earlier, is a regional organization of indigenous communities, not a Panoan or Arawakan organization. Throughout Acre two levels of indigenous action and organization emerge in this process: the national and the regional. At the national level, territorialism is pursued and reinforced as a conceptual field through the belief that indigenous communities require land to survive, and this intersects conveniently with wider Brazilian self-conceptions that regard land as a major public policy issue. After all, thousands of landless people from the northeast region of Brazil were encouraged by the Brazilian government to migrate to Amazonian regions—including the states of Rondônia and Acre. This was the “march to the west” in the phrase of Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas in his 1940 speech, where “people without land” could find a “land without people,” in the expression made famous by President Emilio Medici. The more recent version of this phenomenon is the landless people movement, a national level, almost revolutionary movement opposing the entrenched structures of government-supported wealth and exploitation that keep the poor landless.

Whether or not indigenous communities require land to survive, or to survive in what social form, is not the issue. The point is that an intersection of discourses on “land” imbues the concept in Brazil with special cultural salience at all levels of society. Moreover, indigenous groups are all the more threatening because they demand precisely what Brazilian public policy regards as a resource in short supply among the huge non-Indian population.

Indigenous interethnic political alliances in Acre localize the national movement in part through regionalism. This process is aided, perhaps ironically, through the system of “indigenous areas,” many of which, such as the Área Indígena Alto Purús, include two or more ethnic groups. Such alliances contribute to the notion that regional, localized, territorial politics is centralized, even pitting indigenous areas against each other in competition for resources. The Kulina living in the Área Indígena Alto Purús, for example, not only cite the superior access to resources that Kulina have in other areas of Acre, they now speak of these areal divisions in the terms they once used to speak of *madiba* group distinctions.

Certainly there is a rather homogenized, single image of what an “Indian” is in Acre and in surrounding areas, one cultivated by indigenous

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communities themselves (cf. Jackson 1991). Housing styles, personal adornment and decoration, and the sharing of large rituals, lend a sense of similarity among the Indian communities in the area. Language differences, which once signaled cultural differences that demarcated territories, are being undercut by the use of Portuguese as a *lingua franca*.

In Acre the unified local “culture” of indigenism is nonetheless undercut by the attribution of difference based on regionality. At the time of my first research in Maronaua, before the formalization of an *Área Indígena* and the emergence of a distinctive sense of place for the groups along the Purús River, the two large communities of Kulina (and indeed the third, which had broken off from Maronaua and lived at the former Seringal Sobral) were rivals. Witchcraft accusations were common between the two communities, and the residents of Maronaua considered the residents of Santo Amaro to be members of a separate *madiba* group.

With the demarcation of the *Área Indígena* Alto Purús, and in particular with the promotion of a sense of territorial entitlement that was embodied in the *Área Indígena*, the communities on the Alto Purús have come to regard themselves in many ways as members of a single conceptual community— an “imagined community,” in Benedict Anderson’s terms (Anderson 1991). Kulina have even divided up the residential task of occupying the full stretch of the *Área Indígena*’s extension along the river. The location of the seven Kulina villages in the area is partly the result of explicit decisions to place communities at strategic points along the way, not merely to provide gate-keeping villages at the upper and lower ends of the *Área Indígena*, but to create a sense of full occupation along the whole stretch of the river.

At another level, the interethnic alliance between Kulina and Kaxinaua, and between the entire region’s Aruan, Arawakan and Panoan Indians, may be due in part to the different conception of social justice that indigenous communities bring to interethnic interactions. National level organizations in Brazil, especially those working on behalf of indigenous rights, are trapped between two awkward models of social justice that present sometimes incompatible and usually unachievable goals.

The classical distributive model informs the struggle of landless people. In this view, the problem is the unequal distribution of benefits, including land, and the solution is the redistribution of benefits. To the extent that indigenous rights groups in Amazonia define native circumstances in a discourse of distribution, as is often the case with the rhetoric of the landless people movement, they risk being caught in the dilemmas of this framework, including the impossibility of expanding limited amounts of wealth, or land, or health care, to accommodate both the demands of the disadvantaged

and the counterclaims of the advantaged. The dilemma of distributive justice is the extraordinary difficulty of converting social policy into action in countries that lack adequate resources.

The alternative discourse through which indigenous rights are pursued is the newer but by now familiar discourse of identity politics, or as some political philosophers call it, “recognition” (Taylor 1992). The demand for recognition is a common strategy among indigenous groups around the world, one that entails the assumption that the promotion of a unified identity is a first step toward legitimization of claims for redress of perceived inequities in the distribution of social benefits. It is often a precursor to claims for distributive justice, but carries the risk, as debates among feminists in the United States illustrate (e.g., Young 1990), that the reification of identity opens the possibility for discrimination. To the extent that an individual puts on the collective identity, he or she also acquires any collective stigma, and enters into the social structures of inequality. One need hardly look further among Brazil’s Indians than national level political leaders such as Mario Juruna or Paiakan to understand the ways in which participation in identity politics can undermine individual authority (cf. Conklin 1997; Rabben 1998). It is, in effect, the darker political side of ethnogenesis.

The Kulina among whom I have worked have to some extent sidestepped this dilemma. I have commented before (Pollock 1993) that they refer to themselves rather innocently as *caboclos* in Portuguese, even using the term with self-approving pleasure, as though finding any place in the social matrix of the national society is a boon. The use of the term is revealing. Rather than considering it a slightly incorrect usage, I believe that the Kulina are using it in the precise sense in which it is applied to any Amazonian community at the bottom of the social ladder. While the peasants in this area are the more classic *caboclos* of Brazilian backwoods fame, these stereotypical *caboclos* see at least one more rung below them—local Indians—and they apply the term to this most disadvantaged group.

This hierarchical discourse is typical of the Brazilian social imaginary. Yet, it is one that Acre’s indigenous groups find rather puzzling, and it is one that is rarely used among themselves. Rather, indigenous groups use a kind of status model, again to use a concept from political philosophy, that places all Indians on an equal level. Kulina headmen meet Kaxinaua headmen as peers, but they meet the lowliest CIMI missionary or FUNAI functionary as symbolic children. It was galling for Kulina men, for example, to interact with the local FUNAI *chefe do posto* on the Alto Purús, a very young, unmarried man, socially still an adolescent boy for Kulina, who nonetheless expected them to show him deference. The *chefe do posto* told

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me that he wanted the local indigenous communities to regard him as their *patrão*, or patron. For the Kulina, and I suspect with the Kaxinaua as well, alliance is easier with those whom they regard as social equals.

Interethnic alliance in the region has thus been facilitated by a complex set of social processes. Interestingly enough, language differences remain that serve to maintain a communicative gulf, and so it is not merely the possibility of interethnic communication that has led to alliance and new strategies in the representation of identity. Nor do I believe that the mere presence of external threat—encroachments by rubber tappers, loggers, cattle ranchers, missionaries, or anthropologists—has catalyzed this possibility, since it is a phenomenon that is relatively new and has emerged even where there is little consciousness of such threats. My interest here has been to try to identify some of the features of interethnic alliance in this region, and to articulate some of the more complicated contexts for its emergence. The next step is perhaps not to explain it in mechanistic terms, but to understand how it is practiced, that is, to try to understand how its significance is maintained as a salient realm of meaning for indigenous identity.

NOTES

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1. The website is www.amazonlink.org/OPITARJ and was active as of September 2003.

2. See, for example, journalist Alex Shankland’s article on the Ashaninca of Acre, where he notes that “Terri Vale de Aquino, a pioneering anthropologist, [has] a legendary reputation among the Indians of Acre” (1991:3).

3. Most of these dialect differences are minor and regular phonological variations, for example an alternation of /o/ and /u/. More significant, however, is the use of a Spanish alphabet for writing Kulina, though at least 90% of Kulina live in Brazil. This entails that in the “official” writing system, the morpheme /wi/ is written ‘hui’, just as the phoneme /h/ is written ‘j’. Kulina are not yet sensitive to the political implications of such simple orthographic choices.

4. “Eles têm também o costume de manter relações sexuais con qualquer tipo de caça que abatam e, ultimamente, mantêm relações sexuais até com cachorros.”

5. Lacking any experience of animal husbandry, neither the Kulina nor the missionaries knew how to manage two such animals successfully. Initially the cow and bull wandered freely around the village and in the nearby gardens. People were afraid of the bull, which was aggressive, and were concerned for horticultural produce. The bull died fairly soon, and the cow was nearly dead a short time later, when I left the village. Ten years later people scarcely recalled the incident.

6. I want to make it clear here that I refer to the perceptions of Indians in the area. Not all indigenous communities seem as isolated from the threat of encroachment as do the Kulina. Moreover, the Kulina are threatened in ways they may not recognize. For example, a new road—the Transacreano—is planned between Rio Branco, the capital of Acre, and Boqueirão de Esperança at the northwest corner of the state, which will transect the Área Indígena Alto Purús.

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