

The Sisyphus Syndrome, or the struggle for conviviality in Native Amazonia

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Ever since the pioneering works of such people as Nimuendajú (1939), Fejos (1943) and Oberg (1949) were published, Amazonianist anthropologists have produced an impressive body of ethnography that has contributed significantly to general anthropological theory. Along with this process, and as discussed in the Introduction to this volume, they have shaped – more or less consciously – an ethnographic imaginary based on two radically opposing conceptions of Native Amazonians. The first image depicts them as ‘fierce’ peoples who exalt the value of war, entertain a ‘macho’ ideal of virility and are engaged in permanent intra- and intertribal fighting. The second image portrays them as ‘gentle’ peoples who value peacefulness, have an ‘intellectual’ ideal of manhood and attempt to maintain harmonious relations at both the intra- and intertribal levels by practising reciprocal generosity.¹ This bipolar imaginary is based in part on empirical observation. In effect, there are Native Amazonian societies that are more violent, or more peaceful – depending on where we put the emphasis – than others. But it is also based on emic models, conscious Native perceptions and ideals about how social organisation and interaction work which in some cases have seeped into the ethnographers’ interpretations, and in others have been deliberately adopted as the basis of their analyses.

No Amazonianist anthropologist would support the notion that Amerindians are quintessentially violent or quintessentially pacific. In recent years, however, there has been a tendency to raise to the level of anthropological theory the emic perceptions upon which these stereotypes have been constructed. Presented as antithetical ways of apprehending Native Amazonian sociality, these two approaches have been labelled as ‘the moral economy of intimacy’ and as ‘the symbolic economy of alterity’ (Viveiros de Castro 1996: 190). According to this view the first approach focuses on the local level and the domestic domain, placing emphasis on consanguinity, endogamy and the solidarity induced by moral sentiments, whereas the latter focuses on the interlocal level and the political domain, highlighting the importance of affinity, exchange and ontological predation (cf. Introduction (pp. 6, 24 n. 9), Gonçalves and Rivière, this volume).²

One of the main criticisms made of the morality approach – whose followers I have elsewhere labelled as ‘doves’ (Santos-Granero 1999) – is that it over-emphasises consanguinity, as well as the consubstantiality that results from commensality or the continuous sharing of food and beverages, as the basis of Amazonian sociality. Followers of the predation approach – whom I have labelled ‘hawks’ – assert that implicit in this view is the (erroneous) conception that consanguinity is ‘natural’ whereas affinity is a cultural construct. They contend instead that sociality and identity is about exchange rather than consubstantiality, and that ‘potential or symbolic affinity is the key category of sociability in the lowlands’ (Viveiros de Castro 1995: 14, my translation). ‘Hawks’ further assert that even though it is true that at the local level affinity is encompassed (in Dumont’s sense) by consanguinity, at the interlocal level affinity encompasses consanguinity, becoming a socio-cosmological operator that allows reference to all kinds of relations between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Viveiros de Castro 1993: 181; 1996: 190; Descola 1993). At this higher level, the notion of affinity finds expression in the metaphor of cannibalistic predation, which, ‘hawks’ contend, is shared universally by Native Amazonian peoples. In this view affinity is the natural relation, whereas consanguinity is a cultural artefact in need of explanation (Anne-Christine Taylor, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, personal communications).

A second important criticism levelled at followers of the morality approach is that by downplaying or ignoring conflict they present an idealised view of Amerindian communal life (Taylor 1996: 206). Being one of the multiple forms of social exchange, conflict is a basic factor in shaping Amazonian sociality. According to ‘hawks’, the notion of harmonious conviviality – in one way or another present throughout Native Amazonia, as the chapters in this volume attest – is nothing else but ‘wishful thinking’, an ideal, an aspiration rarely corresponding to the on-the-ground reality of constant, ongoing strife.

In this chapter I shall contest this ‘*tout noir*’ version of Amazonian sociality, without, I hope, falling into the other extreme and advocating the ‘rosy’ kind of version ‘hawks’ accuse us ‘doves’ of favouring. The only way to escape from this Manichaean trap, I contend, is by incorporating a temporal dimension into the analysis. Instead of examining sociality at junctures of peace and harmony, or at junctures of conflict and feuding, we should look at the social processes by which conviviality is constructed – and also destroyed. I will attempt this task by examining ethnographic data from the Yanesha of eastern Peru and comparing it with cycles of sociality in other Amazonian indigenous peoples.

The pillars of Yanesha conviviality

Yanesha notions of sociality are summarised in the myth of Sanrronesha’, the murdered ones. As in Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), in this myth the Yanesha

exalt the positive aspects of daily social interaction by opposing the present era to a brutal pre-social age characterised by the presence of territorially bound, endogamous and incestuous descent groups engaged in constant war with each other (Santos-Granero 1991: 36–48). Marked by isolationism, individualism, greediness, war, feuding and murder, the pre-social era is endowed by myth tellers with all the features that the Yanéssha regard as antithetical to the ‘good social life’. In contrast to other Native Amazonian peoples that glorify warfare as an honourable endeavour (Chagnon 1968; Maybury-Lewis 1974; Viveiros de Castro 1992; Basso 1995; Descola 1996), the Yanéssha view war and killing with abhorrence.

Such aversion is expressed in this myth through the gruesome description of Sanrronesho – the land located in the uppermost level of the Yanéssha cosmos – where the souls of the murdered ones (*sanerr*) live. A woman decides to travel with her children to Sanrronesho after enemies kill her husband. There, she sees her husband – his body wounded and covered with dry blood, his head crawling with maggots – singing and dancing with other murdered men and women to the sound of *coshamñats* music. Members of the group invite each other to drink a concoction made of fermented heart, liver and kidney. At dawn, after celebrating all night long, the murdered ones turn into vultures and other despised carrion birds, and ascend to the heavens of Sanrronesho. Clearly, for the Yanéssha being killed in war does not constitute a noble death (see Alès, this volume). On the contrary, it leads to an after-life of defilement and cannibalism. After death, however, the murdered ones seemed to have learnt something they did not know while alive: namely, how to interact harmoniously.

The priceless knowledge the woman obtains from her journey to the land of the murdered ones is precisely that social interaction need not be predatory: that the divisions, rivalries and hatreds that pit human beings against each other can be overcome. Realising that the key to a good social life lay in the *coshamñats* celebration, the woman and her children learn how to make the panpipes and drums, as well as how to brew manioc beer. They also learn the songs and dances of the murdered ones. After returning to the land of the living the woman organises a huge celebration, inviting all her neighbours, including those who killed her husband. She asks them to stop warring and tells them that they should establish friendly relations and become like a big family, for she has seen the ghastly fate that befalls those who are murdered. Thus it was that the Yanéssha learnt what Overing (1996: 5) calls the ‘skills for social living’. From then onwards, according to myth, they stopped killing each other, taking turns to organise *coshamñats* celebrations and to invite everybody to eat, drink, sing and dance in praise of the divinities.

The *coshamñats* celebration embodies the virtues the Yanéssha consider to be the basis of conviviality and a good social life: namely, love (*morrenteñets*), friendliness (*amo'tsteñets*), trust (*yemteñets*) and generosity (*yomateñets*). *Morrenteñets* refers to the bilateral, symmetrical love existing between two

individuals or parties related either vertically or horizontally. It contrasts with *muereñets*, the unilateral, asymmetrical love that those who occupy the superordinate position in a hierarchical relationship (divinities, leaders, or parents) feel toward those who occupy subordinate positions (humans, followers, or children). The Yanesha claim that whereas *muereñets* is the primordial, timeless love/compassion that moved the divinities to create the cosmos and its inhabitants, *morrenteñets* is a historical type of love that appeared when the Yanesha obtained the knowledge of the *coshamñats* celebration. It is this latter type of love that moved the mythical woman to invite the murderers of her husband to the first *coshamñats* celebration ever held in this mortal earth. And it is this type of love that is expected to guide social interaction whether among consanguines, affines or friends.

Friendliness is a personal disposition, indispensable to the establishment of harmonious social relationships with unrelated persons, or with someone with whom one has quarrelled and is not on speaking terms (*amo'tsteñets*). The verb root *am'ots*, indicating a harmonious or friendly relation between any two persons, is also present in the term *namo'tsesha'*, or 'the group of people with whom I have friendly relations'. This is an ego-centred term having varying degrees of inclusiveness according to context (cf. Gow, this volume). These range from one's nuclear family, to one's bilateral kindred, and even to one's distant collateral relatives and friends. It can even be extended to include all Yanesha, as if they were one 'big family'.

Like the term *amo'tsteñets*, the term *yemteñets* refers to 'friendly relationships'. However, in the latter, the emphasis is on the dimension of trust. The Yanesha consider trust and friendliness as basic ingredients of a harmonious social life. Trust is conducive to friendship; friendliness promotes trust. However, neither trust nor friendship could be sustained without *yomateñets*, that is, without generosity. This is especially true within local settlements, where everybody is expected to display generosity by sharing garden products, game, cooked food and beverages (Santos-Granero 1986: 122). And where all are expected to cooperate with their neighbours in burdensome or long-lasting tasks such as clearing gardens, building houses, or constructing community facilities (schools, health posts, airstrips, etc.). The Yanesha are expected to be generous not only towards their kin, affines, friends and acquaintances, but also towards strangers. So much so that I have never visited a Yanesha household without having its owners invite me to eat or drink, no matter how strange or suspicious I might have looked to them.

Love, friendliness, trust and generosity are the pillars of Yanesha conviviality. However, rather than ideal values that can or cannot be adhered to, these feelings and dispositions are regarded as social virtues that need to be constantly reinforced for them to turn into effective social practices. They are taught to everybody from early childhood (cf. Alès, Belaunde, Kidd, Lagrou, Londoño-Sulkin, this volume). Children are never punished physically. Instead they are encouraged through praise to be generous, loving,

friendly and trusting, and discouraged through scorn from antisocial behaviours. Acts of greed are similarly dealt with. Outbursts of wrath or anger are repressed by making fun of the culprit. Quarrelsome children are ignored and excluded from collective games.

Mockery, scorn and indifference are powerful mechanisms to instil social virtues and encourage harmonious relations among children. In the case of adults, these mechanisms may turn into gossip, contempt and, in extreme cases, ostracism. The greedy, irascible or unfriendly are never openly confronted. Instead, people express their disapproval by treating them with indifference, ignoring them in public, not taking them seriously in community forums, and excluding them from day-to-day networks of commensality. They force the culprits either to behave as expected or to abandon the collective.³

An even more powerful deterrent to antisocial behaviour is the fear of being accused of witchcraft (cf. Rivière, this volume). Selfishness (*mopateñets*), wrath (*atsrre'mueñets*), hatred (*e'moñe'teñets*) and belligerence (*chetannateñets*) express a dangerous lack of self-control – dangerous because they trigger the bewitching powers that every human being contains within him- or herself (cf. Belaunde, Overing, this volume). Those individuals lacking social virtues expose themselves to sorcery accusations, which in time can result in counter-sorcery, or even in their being assassinated.

To prevent conflicts and, more specifically, to discourage the escalation of existing conflicts, the Yanesha have a second informal mechanism: namely controlled sociability. People enjoy visiting each other, getting together in informal celebrations, sharing food and beverages, and cooperating in collective tasks. But they are also jealous of their privacy. It is not that they prefer to live behind walls. There are few walls, if any, in Yanesha houses and everybody can see what is going on within them. However, people get tired of so much exposure, and of the sociability that this openness imposes on them: too many visitors, constant demands on their generosity, increasing requests for cooperation and so forth. In the old days, sociability was not as burdensome, for households were dispersed. Distances between them may not have been big – in some cases as little as one or two hundred metres – but they were out of sight of each other. Nowadays, the government requires that people live in nucleated settlements if they want to be recognised as *comunidades nativas*, or Native communities, and to be granted land titles.

To lessen the burden that conviviality places on their lives under the new circumstances, the Yanesha have developed a two-house strategy. Most Yanesha have a house in the community's centre, which is generally located along both sides of a landing strip or on a square or rectangular plaza that doubles as a football field. In addition, they also have a second house near their gardens, located fifteen minutes' to one hour's walking distance from the village; these dwellings are generally smaller and less carefully built than their village houses. Some individuals live permanently in the village and

move to their peripheral houses only when they have had enough of socialising, or when they want to escape from mounting tensions with a neighbour. Others live in their peripheral houses from Monday to Friday, away from the intense conviviality of the village centre, and move to the village only on weekends, to attend church services, play football, and socialise. Having two houses allows people to adjust the intensity of conviviality to their personal needs and provides an escape from social interaction in situations of friction or discord with other settlement members.

These informal mechanisms help keep in check antisocial attitudes and defuse social tensions, but they are insufficient to avert internal conflicts altogether. In such conflict situations, the opposing parties turn to the settlement leader, one of whose main functions is that of pacifier.⁴ Yanesha leaders are quite effective in appeasing contenders, and in suggesting just solutions acceptable to those involved. A problem arises when the leader, or one of his close relatives, is one of the parties in conflict. The conviviality and harmony laboriously achieved by settlement members begin to crumble when informal social pressure has proven insufficient to maintain social harmony, or when withdrawal to peripheral houses has not lessened tensions, and the formal conflict-solving mediation of leaders is unavailable. In the case of the settlements of Huacsho and Camantarmas this is precisely what happened, as the following pages testify.

The case of Huacsho

Huacsho was founded along the Cacazu River in 1963 by a small group of families native to the area. The Cacazu valley was still quite isolated then, being at least one day's walking distance from the nearest road, but several colonist families had already settled in the area. Huacsho's founding families – four married sisters and their children, some of them married – were quite aware that colonist pressure was likely to increase in the future. To counter encroachment by colonists they built up a nucleated settlement and requested land titles from the government. To avoid further colonist exploitation they also asked the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) to establish a bilingual school in the community. It was around this school that the founding families settled in 1963 (Smith 1977: 54). Under the leadership of Muenaresa, the active son of one of the founding sisters, the population of the settlement grew rapidly from then onwards. Ten years later, Huacsho's population had increased to twenty-one nuclear families (*ibid.*, p. 55).

In 1973 the settlement was made up of two extended kindreds, each represented by four living generations (*ibid.*). The core of the dominant kindred consisted of the founding sisters and their offspring, ten biological and classificatory siblings. The second kindred had at its core an old man representing the senior generation, plus five of his children and six classificatory siblings. These two kindreds were linked through nine marriage alliances

(*ibid.*, p. 56). Members of the first kindred were considered to be founders and ‘insiders’ – they played a dominant role in settlement politics and affairs. In contrast, members of the second kindred, though more numerous, were considered to be newcomers and ‘outsiders’ – they had lesser powers of decision. Surprisingly, however, the two extended kindreds did not behave as rival political factions.

Thanks to the concerted efforts of its inhabitants, and to the skilful leadership of Muenaresa, Huacsho became a successful and prosperous community. Muenaresa had all the good characteristics of traditional settlement leaders. He belonged to the *cornaneshamray*, the group made up of descendants of the Yanesha priestly leaders of old and, until 1965, when he became an active member of the Evangelical church, he had two wives. Despite being illiterate, a trait shared by most traditional leaders of the time, Muenaresa was extremely competent in his dealings with state authorities. To secure titles for his community he even travelled to Lima, becoming the first person from the area to visit the capital. He was able to undertake this, as well as other trips, thanks to generous support from members of the community, who gave him the little cash they could save from wage labour. In 1971 Muenaresa’s efforts bore fruit, and Huacsho was officially recognised as a Native reserve with legal title over 175 hectares of land (SINAMOS 1975: 67), becoming one of the first Yanesha settlements to enjoy these rights. Muenaresa’s already great prestige was enhanced further.

Despite its isolation, by 1975 Huacsho benefited from all the services associated with modernity. It had a bilingual school run by a teacher trained by the SIL but paid by the government. It also had a small dispensary run by a member of the community. Finally, it had a small Evangelical church where a Native minister held services every Sunday. The school, the dispensary and the church were built through the cooperative work of all the members of the community. The same was true of the settlement’s airstrip, which was finished in early 1976; even the school children participated in its construction. Finally, members of the community requested, and obtained, credit to establish a communal cattle-raising project and a communal store.

In brief, members of the Huacsho community had acted in a concerted fashion since the beginning, pooling their labour and resources on behalf of collective goals. Settlement leaders and church dignitaries directed collective work in the various communal projects. Work in large construction projects was alternated with the sharing of food and beverages, in some cases elaborated from the produce of communal gardens made with that purpose in mind. Commensality and cooperation enhanced the sense of conviviality, reinforcing communal solidarity.

Conviviality was so important in those years that on the basis of the observations he made in Huacsho between 1973–5, Smith (*op. cit.*, pp. 64–9) waxed enthusiastically on the central role that reciprocal generosity

(*yomateñets*) played in Yanasha lives, forming the basis for a harmonious social life. Reciprocity involved food, whether garden produce, game meat, fish or gathered wild products, but the notion that people should be generous extended even to their money (*ibid.*, p. 66). Every household was expected to display, and actually did display, generous offerings of cooked food for visitors, whether consanguines, affines or strangers.

Unfortunately, things began to change in 1976, mostly as a result of political conflicts (Santos-Granero 1991: 184–7). Muenaresa had played an important part in the creation of the Amuesha Congress in 1969 (Estatutos 1980: 19).⁵ Thanks both to his prestigious ancestry and personal charisma he was elected as *cornesha*' or chief representative of the Amuesha Congress in 1972.⁶ Indeed, he was so popular that he continued in office in 1976, although he should have been replaced in 1974. During those years Muenaresa shared power with Shollac, the President of the Amuesha Congress, who was the teacher in charge of Huacsho's bilingual school. An outsider to the community, Shollac belonged to neither of the settlement's two main kindreds. He was elected in 1973 and re-elected in 1975 (Estatutos, *op. cit.*, p. 19). By 1976, the relationship between Muenaresa and Shollac had soured as a result of an ambiguity. The Congress's statutes did not establish clearly whether the *cornesha*' had predominance over the president, or the other way around. Meanwhile, Shollac persuaded Ma'yarr, the community's representative to the Congress, and Chom, the elected settlement leader, to side with him.

Ma'yarr was a much younger classificatory brother of Muenaresa – the son of one of Muenaresa's mother's younger sisters. He was literate and had worked for a while for a government agency. As a government official, Ma'yarr had played an important part in some of Huacsho's collective ventures, mainly the cattle-raising project and the communal store. Chom, who was Muenaresa's classificatory son – the stepson of a classificatory brother – was not only *amcha'tareĩ*, or settlement leader, but also minister of the local Evangelical church. He and Shollac were also involved in the administration of the communal projects. Shollac, Ma'yarr and Chom accused Muenaresa of political incompetence, of using Congress funds for personal purposes and of attempting to perpetuate himself in power. Muenaresa accused them of abusing their power, selling communal cattle for their own benefit and embezzling the profits of the communal store.

What began as a struggle between Muenaresa and Shollac turned into a major conflict between brothers – a common theme in Yanasha political history and mythology (Santos-Granero 1991: 183). With the support of Shollac, Ma'yarr convoked a Congress meeting in which he demanded Muenaresa's resignation and proclaimed his candidacy to the office of *cornesha*'. Muenaresa countered by convoking another meeting in which he denounced Ma'yarr's political intrigues. Their struggle had bitter results.

In traditional terms, the brothers possessed equal prestige, for both were descended from Huacsho's founding families and belonged to the prestigious *cornaneshamray* group.⁷ Moreover, they were married to a pair of sisters, who also were descended from a priestly leader. However, they differed profoundly in their political styles. Muenaresa's was more traditional, being based on charisma, diplomatic skills and the power of kin and affinal connections. Ma'yarr had a more modern style, based on literacy, knowledge of the outside world and the power of votes.⁸

During my first stint of fieldwork among the Yanesha in 1977, the conflict between the two brothers had not only split the Yanesha communities into two blocs – with the upriver settlements supporting Ma'yarr and the downriver settlements supporting Muenaresa – but had also divided Huacsho into two political factions that cut across the settlement's main kindreds. Rather than being confined to consanguines and affines, the confrontation between Muenaresa and Ma'yarr pitted consanguines against each other. Members of each faction exchanged accusations and counter-accusations on every public occasion. People stopped visiting each other; they would not exchange greetings when encountering one another by chance along a trail or at the riverside. The mothers of the two disputing leaders, who had always been very close, were forced by the circumstances to stop communicating. All collective activities were interrupted, and no family organised an *orreñtsopo* or drinking party. As the normal channels of communication, exchange and conviviality were interrupted, life within the community became unbearable. Between October 1976 and April 1977 four families abandoned Huacsho, among them that of Muenaresa's eldest son. Many families began moving away from the settlement's centre, to its periphery, so as to avoid meeting their opponents.

When the Amuesha Congress held its annual meeting in August 1977, both brothers had great expectations. Muenaresa hoped to be re-elected; Ma'yarr hoped to become the new *cornesha*'. Expressing their disapproval of antisocial sentiments, lack of self-control and open confrontation, the Yanesha supported neither. Instead, they elected a third candidate who was little known in most communities. All those involved got the message: the public condemned the conduct of the conflicting brothers. Disappointed with the results of the meeting, the main protagonists in the conflict – Muenaresa, Ma'yarr and Chom – abandoned Huacsho. A few years later, Shollac went back to his community of origin. By the end of 1977 nine out of the twenty-one families extant in 1973 had abandoned the community. Those who stayed moved to its periphery. In 1973, ten families lived permanently in the village centre (Smith, op. cit., p. 56); by 1983, when I did my second stint of fieldwork, only three families resided there. As an informant told me, 'the community was silent', by which he meant that it was dead.

Participants and spectators alike asserted to me that beneath the apparent reasons for the conflict (political competition, economic gain and personal

dislikes) there was a more important cause, namely, envy. In fact, people did not blame either brother. Rather, they contended that someone who was envious of the community's prosperity, and of the brothers' prestige – and thus hated them – must have laid a curse upon them and the community; for no one in his right mind would fight with his own brother. The protagonists themselves agree with this explanation. Years after these events had taken place Ma'yarr said to me: 'I don't know what happened to me at the time. It was as if I was not myself. Someone must have wished me evil.' Briefly stated, envy, hatred, temporary madness and sorcery are the emotions, actions and states of mind the Yanasha associate with the emergence of social conflict and the end of conviviality.

The case of Camantarmas

Camantarmas, a settlement located in the middle stretches of the Palcazu River, was founded in 1948 by Poyaren, a Yanasha Adventist pastor, together with his Ashaninka brother-in-law (Santos-Granero 1991: 177–82). Their goal was to disseminate the Adventist faith, creating a safe haven in an isolated region for Yanasha and Ashaninka Adventists who wanted to escape from the pressures of colonisation upriver. In the ensuing years the settlement experienced several reversals as a result of various epidemics. By 1957, once its founders had died, Camantarmas was almost abandoned. Only three families remained: the widows of the founders, with their respective children, and Orrno, an old Yanasha man, and his wife and seven children. Linked by several marriage bonds, the three families formed the nucleus out of which a new community emerged, with Matar, one of Orrno's younger sons, as the new settlement and church leader.

Despite its isolation – the settlement was five days' walking distance from the nearest road – Camantarmas entered into a period of rapid demographic growth after 1957. Doubtless, the establishment of a private Adventist school, which acted as a magnet both for local people and for Adventists escaping from colonist encroachment upriver, was an important catalyst. Matar's firm leadership was also crucial. By 1964, the population of the settlement had increased to around sixty nuclear families, and school participation had grown to approximately 150 students.

Matar was an enterprising and charismatic figure. His prestige stemmed not only from the fact that he belonged to the *cornaneshamray* descent group, but was also fluent in Spanish, knew the 'ways of the Peruvians', had considerable oratorical abilities and was very pious. Under his religious guidance, the inhabitants of Camantarmas complied strictly with the norms of Seventh Day Adventism. Consumption of coca leaves, manioc beer, tobacco, alcohol and hallucinogens came to an end. Performing, singing and dancing sacred *coshamñats* music was forbidden; the same was true of shamanic activities and polygyny. Fish, game or domestic animals that were tabooed were avoided.

Despite the prohibition on holding drinking parties and *coshamñats* festivities, settlement members carried on an intensive social life centred on church activities and the Sabbath celebrations. Adventist morality coincided to a large extent with traditional Yanesha morality; they both emphasised generosity and solidarity. The principle of *yomateñets*, or reciprocal generosity, continued to regulate social interactions, ensuring that the redistribution of foodstuffs within the community always took place. Church celebrations replaced *orreñtsopo*, or drinking parties normally held on the occasion of the full moon; psalms replaced the singing of *coshamñats* sacred songs. Internal solidarity was enhanced by collective projects and activities, one good example being the construction of a 300-metre-long airstrip that mainly served the aeroplanes of an Adventist agency.

No Adventist missionary lived in Camantarmas; the community depended for church matters on the neighbouring mission post of Nevati, located on the Pichis River. Missionaries from Nevati administered the school at Camantarmas, collecting the fees that paid for its privately hired teacher. The fees imposed a heavy burden on parents whose only means of income in this isolated region was working for wages in cattle ranches. When parents could not pay in cash they had to pay in agricultural produce. Members of the community readily acknowledged the importance of sending their children to school, but many parents began to complain that the fees were prohibitive.

Most of the protesting parents belonged to the founding families. Matar, the settlement and church leader, was particularly outspoken. In 1968 he asked the Summer Institute of Linguistics to establish a state bilingual school in Camantarmas. The most devout Adventist families opposed this move, fearing the Evangelicals would have an overriding influence over their children. Contor, the leader of this faction, was a young Adventist pastor who doubled as health attendant. He belonged to a large kindred whose members came from Yorenačo. Married to the daughter of one of Matar's sisters, Contor was thus treated by Matar as a classificatory son.

Ostensibly, the replacement of an Adventist private monolingual school by a state bilingual school was the issue triggering the dispute between the two factions. The real confrontation, however, pitted the 'old' against the 'new ways'. Contor referred to members of his classificatory father's faction as the 'old ones': elderly folks who were the earliest settlers in the community and remained attached to the old ways, such as chewing coca leaves, drinking manioc beer and singing the traditional sacred songs in praise of the old divinities. In short, Contor accused Matar and his supporters of being 'little civilised'. By contrast, Contor argued that he and his followers adhered to the new ways; they complied with Adventist norms and 'had greater knowledge and more ideas'. In my opinion, there was a grain of truth in his argument.

Until then a devoted Adventist pastor, by the late 1960s Matar had become disillusioned with the missionaries. He thus began a process of *rapprochement* with traditional beliefs and customs. Whereas neither he nor his followers ever renounced their Adventist faith, they were definitely less fervent than members of Contor's faction. To avoid deepening the division, and wanting to hold the community together, Matar insisted that the issue was not religious but economic. He argued that the Adventist school was too expensive; that it made little sense to pay high school fees when they could have a school-teacher for free. In private, however, Matar remarked that most ongoing settlement conflicts resulted from the overzealous attitudes of young militant ministers, whether Adventist or Evangelical, who had no respect for Yanেশa traditions.

When the missionaries of Nevati appointed Contor as the new pastor of the church of Camantarmas the conflict deepened. Matar and some of his followers stopped attending church services altogether. From then onwards, and for almost a year, the settlement had two leaders, neither claiming the full support of its inhabitants. The conflict climaxed in 1969 when the government approved the establishment of a bilingual school in the community. Contor's faction opposed transforming the old mission school into a state school. Being in the minority, and not having enough political support to impede this, Contor persuaded his followers to split from Camantarmas and found a new village across the river, on the left bank of the Palcazu. Some fifteen families moved with him to the new settlement, which was named Shetomaso. The division followed along the lines of the settlement's two largest kindreds, with Matar's and Contor's respective extended kindreds forming the core of each faction. Once again, however, the struggle was between consanguines rather than affines.

Not surprisingly, and in consonance with the Yanেশa's disapproval of extreme measures, a third group of about ten families not closely related to the core members of the opposing factions followed neither of the contending leaders. Instead, they founded a third, smaller, settlement further upriver. Thus what had once been one of the largest and most prosperous communities along the Palcazu River ended up being divided into three small settlements.

Cycles of sociality

The fates of Huacsho and Camantarmas are by no means unique. Community fission has been widely reported from Native Amazonia. Except for Rivière's (1984) perceptive analysis of the Guiana region, however, few attempts have been made to determine whether these various processes respond to a common theme. Yet even a quick glance at the literature reveals that they do, despite the very different regions and social settings from which they have been reported. Most authors attribute settlement fissioning to a variety of causal factors. In order to compare their information, I distinguish

between the following analytical levels: (1) the general conditions that favour conflict and fission; (2) the specific causes that trigger settlement disputes, which can eventually lead to fractures; and (3) the causes that make settlement fissioning inevitable. In addition, I examine the social lines along which fissioning takes place.

All authors seem to agree – whether explicitly (Chagnon 1976: 14; Whitten 1976: 125; Dumont 1978: 32; Bamberger 1979: 142; Rivière 1984: 27; Brown 1984: 103; Kensinger 1995: 269), or implicitly (Maybury-Lewis 1974: 171; Overing Kaplan 1975: 50) – that settlement size is one of the general conditions favouring processes of fissioning. But they differ as to how this happens, and as to how large a village can grow before being affected by such processes. One group of scholars argues that the larger the settlement the greater the pressure and competition over key natural resources – be they game or good garden sites. In time these lead to social conflicts (Whitten, *op. cit.*, p. 125; Dumont, *op. cit.*, p. 75; Kensinger, *op. cit.*, p. 269).

A second group maintains that the larger the settlement the more complex its social composition – a correlation proposed much earlier by Carneiro (1967) – and the more likely that sociopolitical conflicts will emerge. Advocates of this latter argument differ slightly as to why greater social complexity promotes discord. Some say it does so by diminishing the ‘general amount of relatedness’ (Chagnon, *op. cit.*, p. 18). Others claim it does so by increasing the proportion of ‘intrinsically fragile’ affinal relations (Overing Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 118; Rivière, *op. cit.*, pp. 28, 74), or by multiplying the number of social groupings – patrilineages or men’s societies – that have the potential to become political factions (Maybury-Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 169–70; Bamberger, *op. cit.*, p. 138).

Finally, a third group of scholars argues that large settlement size induces both: competition over resources and an increase in sociopolitical conflicts (Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 103; Hames 1983: 423). On the issue of how large a village can grow before fissioning processes begin, opinions vary from 50–70 persons (Overing Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 49; Arvelo-Jiménez 1977: 109; Dumont *op. cit.*, p. 75; Rivière, *op. cit.*, p. 73), to 70–100 persons (Whitten *op. cit.*: 125), and even to 100–200 persons (Maybury-Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 172; Chagnon, *op. cit.*, p. 18).

Authors generally agree as to the specific causes that trigger internal community discord. Foremost amongst them is competition over women, whether arising from rivalry over prospective spouses (Chagnon, *op. cit.*, p. 17; Arvelo-Jiménez, *op. cit.*, p. 109; Hames, *op. cit.*, p. 423; Alès 1990: 91), or from adulterous affairs (Maybury-Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 186; Dumont, *op. cit.*, p. 32; Bamberger, *op. cit.*, p. 133; Rivière, *op. cit.*, p. 27; Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 104; Kensinger, *op. cit.*, p. 178). Other factors causing serious settlement disputes are sorcery accusations (Maybury-Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 185; Rivière, *op. cit.*, p. 27; Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 103), theft (Maybury-Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 27; Alès, *op. cit.*, p. 91), competition for power between incumbent leaders and

younger pretenders (Overing Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 119; Kensinger, *op. cit.*, p. 177) and disagreements over strategic political decisions (Bamberger, *op. cit.*, p. 132; Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 104–5).

There is also general accord over the main cause of fissioning: communities split when disputes escalate and cannot be resolved in a peaceful way. Most authors agree that this incapacity stems from limitations inherent to Native Amazonian political systems. Some attribute this inability to the ‘diffuse system of political authority’, which frequently results in the coexistence of several competing settlement leaders (Bamberger, *op. cit.*, p. 133). Others contend that it is a by-product of the ‘tenuous’ or ‘weak’ political authority characterising Amerindian leaders. Together with the impossibility of kinship ethics holding together large groups (Chagnon, *op. cit.*, p. 17), and with the absence of formal mechanisms to settle disputes (Rivière, *op. cit.*, pp. 27, 74; Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 103), such weaknesses result in settlement splits. For other analysts, the inability to resolve conflicts peacefully results from the contradictory qualities demanded of settlement leaders: they must prove to be forceful and aggressive in order to become leaders, yet they must demonstrate patience, self-control and diplomatic skills once they are in office (Maybury-Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 204).

Briefly then, most authors concur on the fact that settlement fissioning results from a sequence of events, beginning with population growth, followed by greater competition, increased conflict and finally, unresolved disputes.⁹ However, the fault line along which settlements divide varies substantially throughout Amazonia. In most cases it follows affinal fissures. But whereas among the Akwê-Shavante it separates patrilineages belonging to different exogamic clans and related through marriage ties (Maybury-Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 167–9), among the Piaroa it tends to divide sets of brothers-in-law (Overing Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 112), and among the Panare it usually disjoins fathers-in-law from sons-in-law (Dumont, *op. cit.*, p. 76). In other cases, fissioning takes place along consanguineal fractures. Thus, among the Ye’cuana it affects extended families belonging to the same kindred (Arvelo-Jiménez *op. cit.*, p. 109); among the Wanano it divides patrilineal sibs (Chernela 1993: 50); whereas among the Cashinahua it affects extended families belonging to the same patrimoiety (Kensinger, *op. cit.*, p. 177). In yet other cases, such as those of the Canelos Quichua and the Yanomamö, settlement schisms may separate both consanguines – whether belonging to a stem kindred segment or a group of patrilineally related men – and affines (Whitten, *op. cit.*, pp. 125–6; Chagnon *op. cit.*, pp. 17–18; Alès, *op. cit.*, p. 91). Finally, among the Kayapó fissioning affects neither affines nor consanguines, but non-kin-based men’s societies (Bamberger, *op. cit.*, p. 134). In brief, although settlement fissioning seems to be a pan-Amazonian phenomenon, there is no universal pattern determining how they divide (cf. Gonçalves, Rivière, Rosengren, this volume).

The end of conviviality

Yanesha settlement fissioning basically follows the same sequence. Both Huacsho and Camantarmas were large communities when they split. The former had more than 100 inhabitants, whereas the latter had an unusually high population of more than 300 persons. Size increased considerably the complexity of their social fabric. Huacsho grew from one set of married sisters to two large intermarrying bilateral kindreds; Camantarmas grew from two sets of siblings linked through multiple marriage ties to at least four large intermarrying bilateral kindreds. In one of these cases increased social complexity became expressed in escalating friction between ‘insiders’ – the founding families – and ‘outsiders’ – families that settled later on. However, in both settlements internal disputes took the form of a competition between ‘traditional’ settlement leaders and more ‘modern’ younger men eager to replace them.

Following Yanesha models of power building – based as they are on the retention of both married daughters and sons, but highly dependent on consanguineal rather than on affinal relations – this competition involved a pair of classificatory brothers (Huacsho) and a classificatory father and son (Camantarmas). In both instances, settlement leaders attempted to damp down conflicts as much as possible. However, in the absence of formal mechanisms to resolve disputes, and being themselves one of the parties in conflict, leaders were powerless to prevent confrontations from escalating. In time, what began as a competition over political power between two men ended up in a dramatic fissioning involving the entire community.

With reference to the Panare, Henley (1982: 127) has labelled these processes of growth and fission as the ‘developmental cycle of settlements’, arguing that they typically involve three ideal stages.¹⁰ Other authors provide similar two- or three-stage models (Overing Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 118; Arvelo-Jiménez 1992: 54) that, although referring to settlement composition, also help us to understand the development cycle of Amerindian conviviality. In effect, when a new settlement is created, its founders constitute not only a tightly knit unit – irrespective of whether at its core one finds consanguines or affines – but also a group of people bound by common interests. Founding groups may be searching for more bountiful hunting grounds. They may also be looking for a safe haven, to escape war with other groups or to avoid colonisation pressures. Alternatively, they may be pursuing a religious ideal or even engaged in a prophetic quest for a sacred land. Thus, the underlying solidarity that marks founding groups does not result only from commensality, mutuality and the ethics of kinship; it rests on a firm foundation of shared ideals and goals.

Commonly held Amerindian ideals usually articulate notions about the ‘perfect community’ (cf. Rivière, this volume), including the value of living in large settlements. Thus, for the Kayapó, a ‘beautiful village’ is a large

village that can sustain an intense ceremonial life (Bamberger, *op. cit.*, p. 142). For the Cashinahua, a 'real village' (*mae kuin*) is also one large enough to 'contain persons with the requisite knowledge for leading rituals, for curing illnesses and for dealing with the supernaturals' (Kensinger, *op. cit.*, p. 132). The same is true of the Piro notion of 'beautiful' villages (Gow 1991: 70). Even among the Yanomamö, who would be happy living in tiny family groups, the ideal village is one large enough to have enough warriors to maintain enemies at bay (Chagnon *op. cit.*, p. 17). In other Amerindian societies, leaders strive to form large local groups because size reflects favourably on their political power (Rivière, *op. cit.*).

Native Amazonian ideals about conviviality are not unattainable utopias. They find their fullest expression when settlements are growing, social relations are still close and intimate and commonly held ideals still very much alive. But the ideals about the beautiful village and the perfect conviviality carry the seeds of their own destruction. As we have seen, larger settlements often promote internal conflicts, with unresolved disputes eventually leading to village schisms. What authors often fail to explain satisfactorily, however, is why this should be so. In our own society we can quarrel with a neighbour or a colleague, even to the point of not being on speaking terms with her or him. But this does not usually prompt us to move out of our building, change our friends, look for another job or seek a new neighbourhood. We might simply stop interacting with those persons, or reduce contact to the necessary minimum. Another option is just to ignore them.

In a Native Amazonian community these options are not open to its members precisely because conviviality prior to the emergence of conflicts was extremely intense. We rarely have such close, intimate relations with our neighbours or our colleagues. A break in our relations simply adds a bit more distance to that already in existence. Among Amerindians such distancing is not possible (cf. Rosengren, this volume). In the initial stages of the developmental cycle of their settlements community members create even closer ties – using such mechanisms as commensality, cooperation and shared ideals – with persons with whom they already share close consanguineal and affinal ties. In the Yanéscha case, as we have seen, conviviality also entails strong feelings of love, friendliness, trust and generosity. A rupture in such close relations generates intense emotions of anger, hatred, shame and guilt (cf. Alès, Gonçalves, Kidd, Rivière, this volume). These feelings impede people from continuing to live in close proximity.

Among the Kayapó, unresolved disputes end in formal duels between members of different men's societies. The vanquished abandon the settlement because, as Bamberger (*op. cit.*, p. 139) asserts, 'they have too much shame to remain in the same village with those people with whom they have fought, and to whom they have lost'. The same is true among the Aguaruna and the Cashinahua: individuals or groups that lose face in a given confrontation or are chastised by the collective leave the community in anger or shame

(Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 104; Kensinger, *op. cit.*, p. 189). Among the Yanéscha, settlement conflicts generate intense anger and hatred. They also invoke feelings of shame and guilt, for they fly in the face of the close ties that should bind consanguines together. The closer the pre-existing relationship, the more intense the shame and guiltiness. This explains to a large extent why, as a result of Huacsho's division, both rival classificatory brothers abandoned the community in shame.

I suggest that these strong disrupting emotions account for what Rivière (*op. cit.*, pp. 74, 81) calls the 'lack of tolerance for disharmony' and 'low degree of tolerance for conflict' that distinguish Native Amazonian societies. Because Amerindian conviviality is so intense, its rupture generates equally intense but opposite emotions – negative feelings that prevent people from continuing to live together. Like Sisyphus, the Corinthian king condemned for eternity by Zeus to roll a stone to the top of a steep hill, only to see it always roll down again, Native Amazonians are engaged in constant pursuit of the ideal of perfect conviviality. It is a doomed struggle from the beginning, for conviviality begins to wear out as soon as it is achieved.¹¹

Notes

- 1 I have adopted the terms 'gentle' and 'fierce' from the titles of two books: *The Gentle People* by Colin Henfrey (1964), and *Yanomamö. The Fierce People* by Napoleon Chagnon (1968). I suspect that the title of Chagnon's famous ethnography is a play upon words of Henfrey's lesser-known travelogue.
- 2 I have discussed in more detail elsewhere the main points of disagreement between advocates of these two approaches (Santos-Granero 1999).
- 3 Here I follow Overing's (1996: 7) distinction between 'collectivity' – a group 'expressed through social structural imperatives (roles, statuses and juridical rules)' – and 'the collective' – a group expressed through a 'specific cultural and social way of being'. Native Amazonian social groups use informal means of enforcing expected social behaviour, yet they lack the coercive mechanisms more characteristic of collectivities in the Western sense.
- 4 In the past, a settlement leader was generally the founder of the community and the head of the settlement's largest bilateral kindred. Nowadays, settlement leadership is shared between the formal leader (*am̃cha'tareĩ*) elected by the communal assembly for a period of two years, and the informal leader, generally the man who founded the community – or one of his descendants – who is recognised by most members as the 'real' leader. In some cases, both types of leadership rest in the hands of one and the same man (see Rosengren 1987 for a similar situation among the Matsigenka).
- 5 The Amuesha Congress was created in 1969 in a meeting sponsored by Richard Chase Smith, then a Peace Corps volunteer, and the linguist-missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. It brought together the representatives of twenty Yanéscha communities. The organisational structure of the Congress resembled that of 'federations', or organisations grouping trade unions belonging to the same branch of production. It had a president, a vice-president, a treasurer and several secretaries in charge of the different areas of activity (health, education, land titling, etc.).

- 6 The term *cornesha*' originally referred to the Yanেশa traditional politico-religious leaders, the last of whom died in 1956. In its new usage it came to refer to an elected official of the Amuesha Congress who had the task of representing the Yanেশa as a whole. Since the creation of this office at the 1972 annual Congress meeting, there have been tensions between the *Cornesha*' and the president of the Congress, for it was never clearly established who had precedence over whom.
- 7 The importance of priestly ancestry in Yanেশa 'modern' politics is illustrated by the fact that four of the first five modern *Cornesha*' belonged to the *corneshamray* group. And the one who did not, claimed he did.
- 8 This in no way means that Muenaresa was ignorant of the 'ways of the Whites'; or that Ma'yarr was dismissive of 'traditional ways'. On the contrary, Muenaresa celebrated every year the anniversary of his first trip to Lima, to emphasise his knowledge of the national society, while Ma'yarr did not lose any opportunity of dressing up in traditional garb to underscore his adherence to Yanেশa mores.
- 9 However, this is not the only process through which settlements split. As several authors have pointed out, settlements also dissolve or fission when their leaders die, or when key persons holding together different individuals or groups of people die (Overing Kaplan 1975: 119; Arvelo-Jiménez 1977: 112; Dumont 1978: 75, 82; Alès 1990: 91).
- 10 In the first stage, the group consists of a man, his wife or wives and his children. In the second stage it is composed of a senior man, his wife or wives, his married daughters and his unmarried children. Finally, in the last stage the group consists of a core of married brothers and sisters, or, seen from another point of view, of a core of men related to each other as brothers-in-law.
- 11 This was not always so, however. We know that in several areas of tropical South America during pre-Columbian times ranked chiefdoms gave rise to large settlements with populations of several thousand inhabitants. These polities may not have had fixed boundaries, and were certainly fluid in composition, but they nonetheless enjoyed a remarkable continuity over time (Arvelo-Jiménez and Biord 1994; Whitehead 1994). The mechanisms guaranteeing conviviality in such large settlements and preventing the processes of 'endless mitosis' (Bamberger 1979: 141), more characteristic of egalitarian native Amazonian societies, remain to be established.

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