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CHAPTER 8

The Political Ecology of Ethnic Frontiers and Relations Among the Piaroa of the Middle Orinoco

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Introduction

Until very recently, South American rainforest Indians were portrayed either as timeless, bounded and atomistic societies adapted intimately to their natural surroundings or as historically altered, deculturated and marginalised groups corrupted by colonial or global agents. This dichotomous viewpoint has been overturned by a spate of new studies that have emphasised dynamic processes of ethnogenesis and identity construction, historically situated strategies of resistance and accommodation to shifting environmental forces, the complex interplay of political, economic and cultural factors operating at different scales, and the creative collective consciousness and representations of local groups in the process of their (re)formation (Hill 1996, 1998; Pérez 2000; Hill and Santos Granero 2002; Whitehead 2003; Heckenberger 2005). As Alexiades points out in the introduction to this volume, a key theoretical impact of

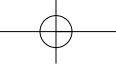
1. An earlier version of this chapter was presented at a conference on Environmental Dimensions of Cultural Conflict, held at Xerox Document University, Leesburg, Virginia, USA, 18–22 June 1995, and later submitted for a proposed volume of the conference proceedings, which, unfortunately, was never published. The author wishes to thank the participants of the conference, as well as Egleé Zent, María Elena González, Francisco Tiapa, Jeyni González and Miguel Alexiades, for their comments and criticisms but relieves them of any responsibility for the final product.

this work has been to leave behind essentialist and primordialist conceptions of ethnicity in favour of a more historical, processual, variable and situational perspective (see also Alexiades and Peluso, Athayde et al., Dudley and Micarelli, this volume).

A dynamic, interactive formulation of ethnicity was anticipated by Barth's (1969) seminal work, which puts the critical focus on the boundaries between ethnic groups in contact. If ethnic identity is defined only in relation to a complementary notion of alterity, then it is potentially responsive to any external or internal factor that causes inter-group relations to change. Thus ethnic boundaries may expand or contract, open or close, in response to the vicissitudes of surrounding environmental conditions and the agencies of the people who are affected. Cohen (1978) developed this point further by drawing attention to the utter variability, multiplicity, volatility and contextuality of such boundary placement.

The present study focuses precisely on the shifting ethnic frontiers and relations over time that have constituted and reconstituted the Piaroa group of the Middle Orinoco region in Venezuela. Whereas much of the new ethnicity literature has been more concerned with the subjective, symbolic and reflexive dimensions of identity politics, the approach that I take looks at broad diachronic trends of boundary movement in relation to changing demographic, economic, political and ecological factors. Two main theoretical frameworks or arguments structure my analysis of Piaroa ethnic processes. First, Vincent (1974) has advanced the highly ephemeral, essentially political quality of ethnic categorisation. Borrowing from Weber, she notes that ethnicity can be broadened or narrowed in boundary terms according to the specific needs of political mobilisation. Ethnic identities are articulated by interest-seeking individuals when it is appropriate and advantageous to do so and ignored when otherwise. Ethnic groups are thus conceived as arbitrarily created, temporarily sustained, situation-responsive, goal-oriented groups.

Secondly, Despres (1975) has proposed a resource competition model of ethnicity, in which ethnic differentiation is treated as a function of different groups competing for access to scarce resources, first by limiting their membership and secondly by monopolising or dominating as a group certain resource units. Inter-group relationships are thereby regarded as derivative of people's relationships to environmental resources. This model predicts that the boundaries surrounding ethnic groupings become more restrictive and rigidly drawn as the resources they control become ever more scarce and more valuable (see Trosper 1976; Salzman 1978), whereas ethnic barriers should be lowered and distinctions less salient as competition withers. From this I adopt the principle that ethnic delineation is (partially) influenced by group adaptation to a competitive resource environment but I do not intend that such delineation is totally determined by it. A third source of analytical direction is the historical



ecology research perspective (Balée 1998; Balée and Erickson 2006) which highlights the reciprocal influences and transformations over time of human sociocultural formations and natural landscapes. Piaroa anthropogenic landscapes are sociopolitical and biophysical entities, and human agency within them is expressed through biological processes (population growth and migration) as well as socio-symbolic ones (territorial zonation and meanings attached to places) (see Dudley, this volume).

Evolution of Piaroa Ethnicity

The Piaroa are one of the most numerous and longeval indigenous groups inhabiting the Middle Orinoco region. They have a population of ~15,000 living in Bolívar and the Amazonas States of Venezuela (INE 2002) and another ~800 in the Vichada department of Colombia (Arango and Sánchez 1998). Their language is classified in the Salivan family, whose geographical centre of origin is the Middle Orinoco (Krute 1989). Their name begins to appear in historical documents towards the end of the seventeenth century, soon after the first Europeans arrived in that area (Del Rey Fajardo 1977: 112). Both written and oral histories converge in placing the traditional or original Piaroa homeland within the hilly and heavily forested region rising between the Orinoco and Ventuari rivers, which the Piaroa call *hut^hokiju* (Figure 8.1). The following reconstruction of their socio-ethnic history was assembled using the literary works of archaeologists, historians and ethnographers and the oral traditions of contemporary Piaroa.

Pre-contact Period

Macroregional exchange networks, high ethnolinguistic diversity, inter-ethnic social interaction and inter-cultural hybridisation stand out as key themes in recent investigations of the pre-Columbian and early historical cultural landscape of the Orinoco basin (Tarble and Zucchi 1984; Biord Castillo 1985; Arvelo-Jiménez et al. 1989; Whitehead 1993, 1994, 1996; Arvelo-Jiménez and Biord 1994; Gassón 2000, 2002; Heinen and García-Castro 2000; Vidal 2002). According to this emerging viewpoint, the pre-colonial Orinoco was inhabited by many diverse ethnic groups that coexisted and interacted extensively and interdependently through a broad range of commercial, social, military, ideological and artistic exchanges.

The archaeological record displays a bewildering plurality and complexity of ceramic styles and their distributions, which suggests a

regional prehistory punctuated by considerable movement and mixing of peoples and material items (Tarble 1985; Zucchi 1985; Gassón 2002). The first chroniclers (<1750) registered the presence of a multiplicity of aboriginal groups whose territorial distributions were not neatly separated from one another, and of institutionalised patterns of social and economic interaction that cut across linguistic, cultural and ecological boundaries. A number of groups were reported as being materially dependent on their neighbours for prestige and utilitarian trade goods (Gumilla 1963; Gilij 1965; Caulín 1966; Morey 1975; Morey and Morey 1975; Zucchi and Gasson n.d.). In other cases, mutualistic food–food or food–labour exchanges took place between groups occupying different ecological niches and fulfilling complementary subsistence roles (Morey and Morey 1973; Morey 1975: 232; Henley 1983: 235).

In addition to the flow of material goods, people moved across local and ethnic boundaries as a result of intermarriage, adoption and slave capture. In some places, the Europeans encountered ethnically pluralistic villages (Henley 1975; Morey and Morey 1975; Zucchi et al. 1984: 170–72; Biord Castillo 1985: 93–95). Along with material and social contacts, it is likely that information and ideas were transmitted along so-called ‘routes of knowledge’ (see Butt Colson 1985), as evinced by similar religious motifs and cognate lexemes being shared by distant groups (Gilij 1965, III).²

Arvelo-Jiménez and colleagues (1989, 1994) interpret the multifaceted nature of contacts among distinct local groups – consisting of economic, political and religious structures of sociocultural integration – as evidence for the existence of a regional-scale, multi-ethnic, pluri-cultural social system, which they refer to as the ‘System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence’. The political organisation of the aboriginal macroregional social system is not well understood at this time and disagreements exist as to whether it was stratified or egalitarian, and whether it was driven by ecological differentiation or by political-economic competition (Gassón 2002).

Our data on the social situation of the Piaroa during the pre-contact period is consistent with this portrait of extensive inter-ethnic contact and commensality. Although the prehistory of the Piaroa is not well known, due to the dearth of archaeological research in their area, some authors (Marcano 1890: 116–17; Dickey 1932: 146; Metraux 1947; Cruxent and Kamen-Kaye 1950) detect stylistic similarities between their cave burial practices and artistic adornment of handicrafts and the ancient cave ossuaries and rock paintings found throughout the Middle Orinoco flood

2. Gilij (1965, III: 30) reports that the Maipure, Avane, Guaipuinave, Caberre and other Arawakan groups refer to the supreme being by the same name, Purrúnaminári. Cognate forms of this term also appear in the Salivan family languages of Sáliva (Puru) and Piaroa (Puruna).

plain, thus suggesting a cultural-historical connection. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Jesuit missionary Gilij (1965, II: 284) noted that they were highly reputed manufacturers and traders of curare hunting poison, *peraman* wax and *chica* dye.³ According to their oral history, relations with neighbouring cultural groups were complex and varied, in some cases peaceful and symbiotic, in other cases hostile and competitive, and in yet others trading alternated with raiding. Close and peaceful relations were maintained with the powerful flood plain groups, the Maipure (*mæipore*) and Atures (*æturi* or *mæbu*). The latter are described as having been key trading partners, providing fish in return for forest products and manioc flour (see also Mansutti 1990: 15). The Atures are also commonly recalled as the first source of Western trade goods for the Piaroa. Mansutti (1990: 16) recorded testimonies about an ancient exchange circuit along a biotopic gradient involving the Piaroa, Kiruva and Maipure, with Piaroa in the headwater forests, Kiruva at the savannah–forest ecotones and Maipure on the flood plains. Informant testimony diverges in regard to pre-Columbian marriage exchanges with these groups. Some informants claimed that Piaroa did not intermarry with these groups before the arrival of Europeans, whereas others reported that Piaroa women were taken as spouses by the flood-plain-dwelling Maipure and Atures.

The character of relationships with other surrounding and neighbouring ethnic groups are mostly described as unfriendly, marked by physical or magical warfare. Even groups that are closely associated with the Piaroa in the historical and ethnographic literature are perceived as having been aboriginally antagonistic: (1) the Mako (*wiru*) of the Lower Ventuari, whose shamans were potent purveyors of lethal black magic aimed at the Piaroa, (2) the Yabarana (*yæwææænæ*, *oratikano*) of the Middle Ventuari–Manapiare basins, also reputed as having an abundance of aggressive malevolent shamans, and (3) the Mapoyo (*babajæ*), ambiguously regarded as the givers of coveted trade goods but also of dangerous witchcraft. Physical hostilities were especially acute with the *wæñæpi*, former inhabitants of the Upper Suapure and Guaviarito regions, who fought with the Piaroa over the Guanay valley, the precious source of the best clay for making pottery in the region. Other physical combatants mentioned by informants were the *sereu*, a group of possible Carib affiliation and closely associated with the Mapoyo, whose territory was in the Upper Parguaza, and the Jotĩ (*waruwaru*), of the Upper Cuchivero watershed. The most feared group, however, were the *kæriminæ* or Caribs, who invaded Piaroa territory by land and water from the east in search of

3. *Peraman* is a common wax made and used by different indigenous groups of the Middle Orinoco. It is fabricated from the resin of *Symphonia globulifera*.

human captives, who, according to Piaroa oral tradition, were then cannibalised (Monod 1972; Zent 1992: 62–63).⁴

The pre-contact socio-ethnic composition and organisation of the ancestral Piaroa population were considerably more complex than they are today, characterised by numerous internal social divisions, which have been referred to in the literature as ‘clans’ (Velez Boza and Baumgartner 1962; Wilbert 1966; Boglar 1971: 332; Anduze 1974: 81–82, 131–32; Overing and Kaplan 1988: 402–4). While the clans are now clearly a non-functional relic (Zent 1992: 354–58), the Piaroa continue to recognise different clanship affiliations or ancestral lines, referred to by the terms *hænok^wæti* (pl.) or *t^hæmi* (‘grandfather groups’). Each *hænok^wa* (sing.) is associated with a specific place of origin (*t^hiænæwame*), invariably a mountain formation, and some make clear reference to totem objects, most of which are animals. According to Piaroa, the souls of the *hænok^wæti* reside inside the *t^hiænæwame* mountain abodes. A soul may leave its *t^hiænæwame* and occupy the body of a person born into the group, returning upon their death. Clan affiliation was inherited by patrilineal descent and a clan-exogamous marriage rule prevailed (but see Mansutti 1994, whose data apparently indicate a clan-endogamous pattern). Although nowadays people of different *hænok^wæti* marry and reside together, oral tradition holds that these groups were highly localised in the past and each is associated with a particular territory (*idepeju*).⁵ Many different clan names have been reported in the literature. Anduze (1974: 131–32) lists twenty-four different clan names and their approximate geographical localities. However, some of these designations obviously refer to formerly distinct ethnolinguistic groups who have assimilated to Piaroa through intermarriage (see below). In 1993, I conducted a survey of clan affiliation by interviewing a sample of seventy-seven adults from fifteen communities located in five different river basins (Cataniapo, Upper Cuao, Manapiare, Ventuari and Marieta) (Zent 1993a). Each person was asked to name their *hænok^wa*, its *t^hiænæwame* and territorial range, and to provide any other pertinent information. From these data, at least eight clans (some with more than one name) were identified as ‘original’ constituents by virtue of them having always spoken the Piaroa language and followed

4. It is not clear whether the Carib raids etched so deeply and tragically in the collective Piaroa memory actually took place before or after the date of European contact, or both. Ethnohistorical studies of the Caribs have determined that their slave-raiding activities pre-dated the Columbian period but intensified following and as a consequence of contact with the Europeans (Morales Méndez 1979; Whitehead 1988).
5. Overing (1993) characterises them as cosmological ‘mortuary clans’, but the oral histories I recorded suggest that these were remnants of ancient social statuses and groupings.

Table 8.1. Original Piraóa clan (*hænok^wætí*) names, mountain abodes, and territories

Group name (<i>hænok^wætí</i>)	Group seat (<i>t^hiænæwame</i>)	Group territory (<i>idepeju</i>)
<i>wíniku</i> (<i>yæwi, yubeku</i>)	<i>mæriwek'a</i>	Middle Cuao
<i>mæniaru</i> (<i>kua</i>)	<i>mæniaru</i>	Pargueña, Yumena, Upper Cataniapo
<i>ow^ho</i>	<i>kurei</i>	Middle Cuao, Autana
<i>hurækæti</i>	<i>purejou-edejou</i>	Yumena, Mariuaca, Upper Cuao
<i>k^wohurime</i> (<i>teækæti</i>)	<i>purejou-edejou</i>	Upper Cuao
<i>diyærua</i> (<i>ækuri</i>)	<i>kurei</i>	Yumena, Mariuaca, Upper Parguaza
<i>yoronoti</i> (<i>tak^wæhoætí</i>)	<i>purejou-edejou</i>	Upper Cuao
<i>inæk^wijæ</i> (<i>wōhi</i>)	<i>bause yuriwæ</i>	Middle Cuao, Upper Marieta

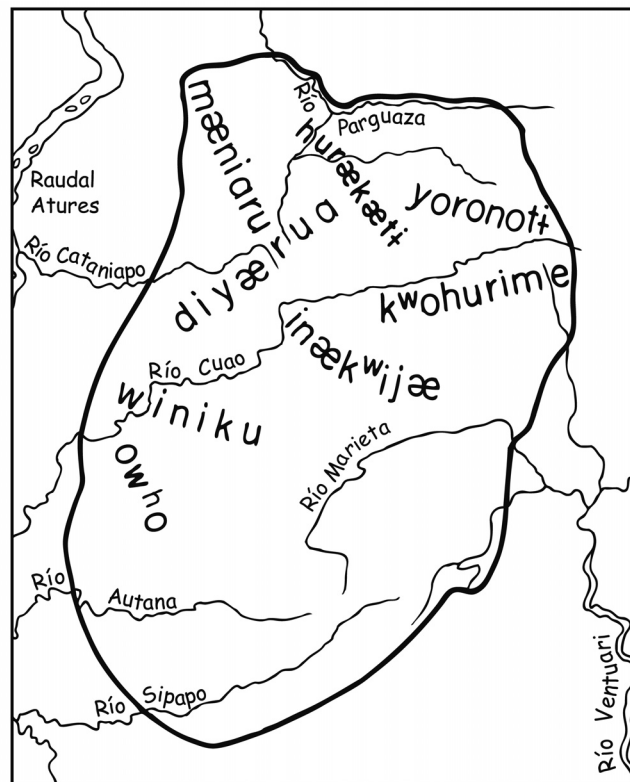


Figure 8.2. Territorial distributions of Piraóa aboriginal clans

Piaroa customs (Table 8.1; Figure 8.2). It is possible that more *hænok^wæti* could be identified by extending the survey of clan history to other communities and regions.

Although the original clan groups are considered to have shared the same general language and culture, it is interesting to note that they are often associated with differences in physical phenotype. Members of the *k^wohurime* were considered to be exceptionally swarthy, the *ow^ho* were big-boned and the *hurækæti* displayed short stature. Also significant is that they sometimes engaged in magical combat against each other, which appears to act as a form of territorial control in the sense of preventing people from travelling far from their home territory (Mansutti 1994: 17). Despite the tensions between these groups, intercommunity and inter-territorial trade is supposed to have been commonplace. Both exotic goods, like blowpipe cane, *quiripa* shells and *yopo* (a hallucinogen), and intra-tribal manufactures, such as pottery (*uriyu*), *chica* dye and curare, were traded along well-defined terrestrial routes (Mansutti 1986a).⁶

To sum up this phase of Piaroa ethnic relations, interactions with surrounding ethnic groups are prevalent and marked by either commerce or warfare, or sometimes both. At the level of the ethnic grouping, as defined by shared language and culture, we find internal social segmentation consisting of patrilocally organised socio-territorial units and frequent contact and communication between these localised groupings in the form of systematic marriage exchange and trade of indispensable artefacts. The relative social elaboration, the considerable supra-local interactions, at both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic levels, and the evidence of territorial tendencies, including open hostilities between some neighbouring groups, are all social characteristics consistent with a relatively dense and stable demographic environment.

Post-contact Period

The European conquest caused radical demographic and ethnic decline of the native population, leading to the collapse of many aspects of the multi-ethnic social system. Depopulation was by far the most severe among the flood plain groups, who were the most populous and powerful in the pre-contact setting. The primary causes of population loss were exogenous

6. In this region, the inner tube of the blowgun is made from the stem of the bamboo-like plant *Arthrostylidium schomburgkii*. This species grows in upper-montane habitats over 1,500 metres above sea level. It is absent from Piaroa territory and therefore must be obtained through trade with neighbouring ethnic groups

infectious disease (mainly smallpox, scarlet fever, influenza and whooping cough), slave trafficking and coercive missionisation. The rate and extent of native depopulation in the Orinoco are impossible to gauge due to lack of reliable information about the baseline population (Whitehead 1993: 291). However, Perera (1982: 114) conservatively estimates a 60 per cent reduction during the first century of contact. An indication of the drastic decimation of the native population may be inferred by the number of ethnic extinctions. Nearly all of the prominent riverine groups mentioned in the archives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries disappear from the written record by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Of thirty linguistically distinct groups recorded by Gilij (1965) as inhabiting the Middle Orinoco region in the mid-eighteenth century, only ten had survived by the time Codazzi censused the region in 1841 (Codazzi 1940). The principal survivors of this biocultural holocaust were the interfluvial dwellers, who benefited from greater distance between their communities and the intrusive European enclaves. Meanwhile some riverine groups fled the colonial frontier and moved upriver into the interfluvial forests. The social consequences of such migrations were to intensify inter-ethnic contacts, through cohabitations and assimilations, in the interior zones, while contacts between interfluvial and fluvial inhabitants were probably diminished. Thus the interior upland zone became in effect a refuge region, where remnant factions from the river zones retreated and subsequently merged with pre-existing and still intact hinterland groups (Zent 1992: 25; see Alexiades and Peluso, this volume).

The cultural and demographic upheavals wrought by European colonisation also disrupted the structure and function of the aboriginal trade system. The Orinoco river was a region of intense competition among the colonial powers of Spain, Portugal, Holland and England, as well as several missionary orders (Jesuit, Franciscan and Capuchin). Some native groups formed alliances with one or the other colonial power and became willing proxies in their commercial and political operations (Civrieux 1976; Dreyfus 1983–84; Whitehead 1988). Imported Western goods, mainly iron tools, clothing and glass beads, quickly became the most valuable trade items and were easily incorporated into indigenous exchange networks, while slave trafficking and the extraction of natural products (for example, tortoise oil) became the main export industries (Civrieux 1976; Zucchi and Gasson n.d.). Meanwhile, the exchange of native artefacts was attenuated, devalued and conserved mainly within the Indian-dominated interfluvial zones (Arvelo-Jiménez and Biord 1994; see also Coppens 1971; Thomas 1972; Butt Colson 1973; Morey 1975; Mansutti 1986). A possible exception to this trend was the circulation of *quiripa* shell beads, which came to be used as a generalised currency linking the colonial and aboriginal economic spheres (Gassón 2000). The changing face of the regional trade system, subverted and dominated by

Western trade goods, sparked strategic shifts in the political-economic interrelationships among different cultural groups, which in turn provoked ethnic realignment. Thus, for example, the rise of the Caribs (or Karinya) as an ethno-political entity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been attributed to their position as commercial middlemen between the Dutch in Essequibo and inland Indian groups (Whitehead 1993: 297–98; see Alexiades, this volume).

As the colonisation process matures throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, native individuals and groups were gradually assimilated into the encroaching criollo ('mestizo') population. In some cases, sustained contact was facilitated by the practices of forced labour and debt peonage (*avance*). Accordingly, the resident Indian population became differentiated from a Western point of view into two macro-groups based on their degree of social and economic contact with the criollo society: (1) *racionales* ('rational/civilised people'), the pacified and acculturated Indians; and (2) *indios* ('primitive Indians'), the autonomous and unacculturated groups (Zent 1992: 66; Arvelo-Jiménez and Biord 1994: 65). The former provided the bulk of the Indian labour force for commercial collecting operations (for example, rubber, chicle, balata and tonka bean), which became the leading industry of the region from 1880 to 1945, under criollo bosses and owners (Iribertegui 1987). The two Indian sectors were, however, linked by trade, as the independent interior groups became increasingly dependent on Western trade goods, especially steel tools, supplied to them by the more acculturated groups (Arvelo-Jiménez and Biord 1994: 65–66).

The Piaroa were at least initially spared the genocidal and ethnocidal impacts of the colonial and neocolonial periods (1700–1950) by virtue of their relative isolation from the active vanguards of colonisation. The rugged topography, rapids-strewn rivers and thick forest cover of *hut^hokiyu* provided them with a natural barrier against contact with outsiders. Historical records of Piaroa throughout this period indicate that they were extremely fearful of the diseases associated with the neo-Europeans and their general response to the epidemiological threat was to keep a safe distance between their settlements and the colonial enclaves or routes of transit. Thus at the same time that they gradually and cautiously expanded their commercial contacts with the intrusive Western society, for the most part they were reluctant to leave the relatively salubrious headwaters and backwater creeks (Humboldt 1876; Crevaux 1883; Chaffanjon 1986; Michelena y Rojas 1989). The Piaroa were even more terrified of the violent raids aimed at them by roving indigenous militias, ostensibly Caribs from the lower Orinoco or Arawakans from the Río Negro, who according to native belief were perceived as barbaric cannibals but who the historical literature suggests were slave traffickers (Zent 1992: 62–63). In defensive response to these threats, the Piaroa

reportedly intensified their settlement of inaccessible interfluvial zones, increased settlement dispersion and devised new strategies of residential mobility, such as maintaining multiple village-garden sites (Mansutti 1988; Zent 1998).

Many of the Piaroa's neighbours were not so fortunate. The Atures and Maipure disappeared from the written record by the later eighteenth century and several writers speculate that the shattered remnants of these once powerful flood plain groups retreated to the forested interfluves, where they intermarried and eventually merged with the Piaroa population (Tavera Acosta 1907: 226–27; Bueno 1933: 78; Aguirre Elorriaga 1941: 88). This scenario is generally supported by Piaroa oral history and by the results of the survey of clan affiliation mentioned above. Eleven out of seventy-seven (14 per cent) respondents expressed affiliation to either Atures (*mæbu*) or Maipure (*mæipore*) clans. The considerable antiquity of this history of assimilation is hinted at by the fact that informants disagreed or were uncertain about whether these two groups were original constituents of the ancestral ethnic line (that is, same language, same culture, same mythological origin) or previously separate.

The extinction or migration of neighbouring ethnic groups opened up large areas of unoccupied or underutilised land around the peripheries of the traditional Piaroa territory. Motivated by the opportunity to exploit underutilised natural resources, in particular the rich fishing grounds of the Sipapo and other sizeable rivers, and by the need to maintain or re-establish vital trade links, which afforded access to Western trade goods, the Piaroa slowly began to migrate out of their tribal core and into these peripheral areas. Mansutti (1990) reconstructs the history of their migration from their contact date to the present, showing that the timing and direction of this movement were varied and dictated by surrounding conditions. They retracted in the face of life-threatening outsiders and expanded when the danger subsided. The general trend, however, was a gradual centrifugal expansion of the Piaroa zone of occupation (Figure 8.1).

There is little doubt that geographical expansion was accompanied by partial or total assimilation of other ethnic groups into the Piaroa population, including their former enemies the Mako, Yabarana, Mapoyo, *wæñæpi* and *sereu*. In the survey of clan affiliation, 13 per cent of respondents (ten of seventy-seven) were found to be descendants of at least one of these groups. The historical and ethnographic literature provides other such references to intermarriage, cohabitation and amalgamation between these groups and Piaroa (Bueno 1933: 70; Codazzi 1940: 23–24; Grelier 1959: 106–10). These cases of assimilation are judged to be more recent than the others mentioned above because one can find more recent references to these groups in the historical literature and because some of them (for example, the Mako, Yabarana and Mapoyo)

still have viable communities. Furthermore, the universal opinion of my informants was that they are of distinct ethnic origin and have become Piaroa through intermarriage, co-residence, learning the language and adoption of Piaroa customs.

That assimilation of these groups has occurred within the context of Piaroa territorial expansion seems evident by comparing their former territorial ranges with the contemporary range of Piaroa. Their former territories fall wholly or partially within the contemporary boundaries of Piaroa settlement (Figure 8.3). The reasons for the territorial and population gain of the Piaroa ethnocultural group at the expense of these other groups are similar to those for the fate of the older assimilants: that is, the more recent assimilants occupied more vulnerable territories, which were closer to the active fronts of colonisation, and probably suffered some degree of depopulation, which helped pave the way to the geographical and cultural takeover by Piaroa. The Mapoyo lived near the Orinoco flood plain and along the lower reaches of the Parguaza river while the *sereu*, located in the Upper Parguaza and Upper Suapure areas, were an interdependent group whose cultural survival may have been deeply affected by their downriver partners. The Mako and Yabarana were situated on the Ventuari, another large navigable river. An ancient terrestrial route between the Orinoco and the Middle Ventuari, travelled by missionaries, Spanish conquistadors and Carib raiders alike, runs directly through the former homeland of the *wæñæpi* (Coppens 1998). Thus it appears that demographic performance was inversely related to accessibility (see also Alexiades and Peluso, this volume). In any case, the territorial expansion of Piaroa was accomplished by peaceful means, essentially through intermarriage and co-residence.

The fact that the Piaroa assimilated former friends and enemies alike and peacefully took over their territories in the process stimulates reflection regarding the social and ecological mechanisms at work here. Demographic, techno-economic and political conditions were radically altered from the pre-contact situation, thereby affecting ecological and social relationships, which in turn had an impact on inter-ethnic relationships. Regional depopulation lowered population densities and opened up a land frontier into which the Piaroa gradually expanded. Another development affecting man-land relationships was the arrival of iron tools, which became widely available from the mid eighteenth century on (Gilij 1965, II: 275), obtained through native trading circuits (Zent 1992: 63–64; see also Grelier 1959; Mansutti 1986a). The iron technology enabled more efficient pursuit of slash-and-burn agriculture, which in turn meant greater resource production per unit of land and labour utilised. Although the new technology was clearly desirable, the wholesale movement of population to the fluvial regions, where the local outlet of these goods was found, was effectively

mitigated by the high epidemiological and military risks associated with the frontiers of colonisation.⁷

The main ecological impact of this constellation of factors was the lessening of pressure on environmental resources. This in turn led to several adaptive adjustments in the social organisation: (1) increase in settlement dispersion; (2) diminished need for territorial defence mechanisms; (3) loss of social complexity (that is, clans) and corresponding structures of integration; (4) the fading of hostilities among neighbouring groups, and (5) the lowering and loosening of ethnic boundaries. A key to understanding this path of social evolution, or devolution as it were, is the emergence of labour as the most strategic or limiting resource. High demand for labour facilitated the lowering of social and ethnic boundaries since land was no longer scarce and instead people themselves were the most highly valued resource to be maximised. Political status in this environment was based largely on the capacity to produce a food surplus in order to sponsor ceremonial feasts and thus depended on the attraction of labour power. But the proximity of open land along with a naturally dispersed wild resource base undermined settlement nucleation and prevented any great concentration of political control over human resources, which helps to explain the decline of socio-political complexity.

More general anthropological analyses have determined that the relative lack of social boundaries, signalled by bilateral or non-linear forms of social organisation, is frequently associated with environmental situations where premium value is placed on labour, while land or capital resources are relatively devalued (Murphy 1979; Price 1984). Thus it may be observed that the former rigid social divisions represented by the clan groupings and the structured marriage exchange between them broke down and was replaced by a more simple and flexible cognatic kinship system specifically designed to effect the inclusion rather than exclusion of new personnel. Inter-ethnic mixing is a logical extension of this principle of social openness and inclusion. Furthermore, the typical marriage pattern found here, settlement endogamy being preferred but inter-settlement unions also permitted and regulated by a rule of uxorilocal residence, constitutes an efficient mechanism for quickly erasing or hiding social differences due to heritage. Endogamous cross-cousin marriage has the effect of replicating marriage exchanges realised in previous generations, thus building up multiple consanguineal and affinal ties among co-resident individuals. Over time, the serial replication of

7. The scenario of counteracting forces affecting the Piaroa population movement described here is consistent with the push-pull migration dynamic articulated by Alexiades in the opening chapter of this volume.

marriage exchanges has the effect of blurring the distinction between kin (insider) and affine (outsider) and lays the basis for local group unity and continuity (Overing 1983–84; Schwerin 1983–84).

Modern Period

The second half of the twentieth century opens a new chapter in Middle Orinoco inter-ethnic relations, marked by significant transformations in the political, economic and sociocultural integration of the remaining Indian population. Stimulated by missionaries, markets, medicines and national development programmes, many of the former independent groups inhabiting the relatively inaccessible upland forests migrated during this period towards the inter-ethnic contact zones located along the major rivers or near criollo towns. In the process, they have undergone drastic changes in population size and distribution, settlement pattern, economic orientation, socio-political organisation and ethnic affiliation and consciousness.

The relative socio-spatial separation and aloofness of the Piaroa from criollo society began to undergo a drastic change around 1960 with the penetration of foreign missionaries into their upriver sanctuaries. Personnel of the New Tribes Mission (NTM) visited Piaroa communities of the Parguaza and Manapiare rivers in the early 1960s, and began to learn the Piaroa language, preach the Christian gospel and persuade the Piaroa to go to the NTM mission centre at Tamatama for bible study or to move downriver and establish large evangelical communities (Earle 1972; Findley 1973; Yount 1973). The process of religious conversion was extended when native converts later returned to their home communities to proselytise other family members and neighbours. Concurrently, Catholic Salesians set up multi-ethnic boarding schools at Isla Ratón, San Juan de Manapiare and elsewhere, and recruited Piaroa children to attend them. At these schools, they were taught Spanish and a basic national educational curriculum.

The Venezuelan government has also been a direct agent of social change since at least the 1950s, when it began to provide free Western medicines, vaccinations, health clinics, paramedics and other modern medical services (Baumgartner 1954; Velez Boza and Baumgartner 1962). The Piaroa themselves often mention their desire to be closer to the life-saving medical technology as a primary reason for their downriver migration towards the contact zones (Boglar and Caballero 1979: 66; Zent 1993b). Greater access to Western medicine is responsible for significantly lower mortality rates (Zent 1993b). As a result, the Piaroa population has more than doubled in a twenty-year span, from *c.* 7,000 in 1982 to *c.* 15,000 in 2001 (OCEI 1985, 1993; INE 2002).

The downriver migration grew from a trickle to a flood during the 1970s coinciding with a drastic expansion in the number and scope of government-sponsored social and economic welfare programmes, beginning with the ambitious 'Conquest of the South' (CODESUR) development plan. The plan explicitly sought to achieve the social, political and economic integration of the region's indigenous population through a variety of social and material enticements: community infrastructural construction (housing, transportation, electrification), social services (community-based schools and medical dispensaries) and agricultural development projects (credits for cash crop or livestock raising and mechanised equipment). Similarly conceived public welfare programmes have continued to unfold and even expand until the present day, even though financial support fluctuates in conjunction with the boom-bust cycles of the petroleum-dominated national economy and changes in government administrations. However, most of these are discriminatingly concentrated within the larger communities of the frontier zones, thus providing a sustained stimulus for downriver migration, settlement nucleation and subsequent culture change (Zent 2005).

Thus, by 1982, when the first comprehensive Indian census was made in Venezuela, the vast majority of Piaroa communities were found to be located along navigable rivers or roadways and almost two-thirds of the population was living in communities of greater than fifty individuals (OCEI 1985), well above the traditional average of twenty-five to thirty. Mansutti (1994) observes that the vast majority of these communities were still in place during the 1992 census, indicating that Piaroa settlement had become somewhat stabilised. Although factions of close relatives split off and form new settlements with certain regularity, they often do so in nearby locations (Freire 2003). Meanwhile the headwater forests have been mostly evacuated, with less than 5 per cent of Piaroa still residing there.

The impact of these developments can be analysed as causing a strategic shift in the balance of demographic, economic, political and social power away from the indigenous occupied hinterland towards the frontiers of contact with the national society. But the strong internal migration towards urban and commercial centres, settlement nucleation and sedentarisation, and population growth owing to improved biomedical conditions have also led to population crowding and land stresses in the contact zones. This in turn is associated with local wild resource depletion, agricultural intensification and habitat degradation in some places (Zent and Zent 2007; see Athayde et al., this volume, for a similar outcome in the Brazilian Amazon). Given these population trends and their environmental impacts, it is not surprising that a number of Piaroa communities have experienced sharp land conflicts in the past few decades (Zent 1993c). This problem has been exacerbated by the arrival of other Indian and criollo settler groups in the same colonisation zones,

drawn by many of the same incentives (Vicariato 1984; Arvelo-Jiménez et al. 1986; Clarac 1986).⁸

Significant economic, political, and cultural changes have accompanied the demogeographical transition from the hinterland to the frontier. Interaction with regional and national markets is now direct, extensive and commonplace, and the local economy has become partially capitalised. The Piaroa are prolific producers of cash crops (manioc products, bananas, pineapples, etc.), forest products for sale (flowers and fruits, smoked meat, vine stems used to make furniture) and mineral ore (mainly gold), and regular consumers of tools, cooking utensils, factory-made garments, industrial foods and even electrical appliances. Some enterprising communities have organised cooperative businesses for the purpose of obtaining credits and marketing commercial crops.⁹ The biggest money earners (and spenders), however, are the burgeoning corps of government-salaried indigenous civil servants – teachers, paramedics, sheriffs, electric and water plant operators (Mansutti 1995: 78); collectively they represent the most significant source of capital for the Piaroa economy. In this sense, the contemporary Piaroa economy and the contingent social and settlement pattern are heavily dependent on the government dole.

In the political sphere, the influence of the traditional village shaman-headman (*isode rua*) has given way to a younger and more Westernised secular leadership composed of the civil servants, businessmen and politically connected operators – that is, those people who occupy a strategic position between their home community and the surrounding national society. The new leadership is much more conscious and concerned about the place of their communities within the larger social macrocosm, and hence their principal efforts have been directed at negotiating power relations and socio-economic concessions with the nation state through ethnopolitical mobilisation strategies. Such strategies include grass-roots attempts to organise collective action groups at different scales of inclusiveness.

The drive to tribal integration began with pan-tribal congresses held in the mid-1980s (see Mansutti 1986b). In 1994, a short-lived attempt was

8. According to the 1992 Venezuelan Indian Census report, eighty-three of 236 (35 per cent) Indian communities in the northernmost Atures department of Amazonas state, where demographic and economic growth is concentrated, registered land conflicts (OCEI 1993: 131).
9. The most well-known examples include: APIPROCA (Asociación de Piaroas Productores de Cacao), EPIAMIEL (Empresa Piaroa de Producción de Miel), PUORIBU (Productores de Aceite de Seje), HUARIME (inter-community cooperative dedicated to commercialising native artwork and processed food products) and Cooperativa Ārūme'chā (pineapple products).

made to establish a formal political body that would represent and govern the entire Piaroa nation, called the *Parlamento Piaroa* (Piaroa 1994). But these attempts to achieve tribal unity foundered, partly due to stronger local allegiances and rivalries among sectorial leaders. Thus the parliament was effectively eclipsed by regional-based federations such as OIPUS and HUAICUNI, inter-community organisations of the Sipapo and Cataniapo sectors respectively, reflecting the divergence of problems and interests between regions. The integrative force of these is in turn weakened by the emergence of community-based organisations such as those established at Churuata Don Ramón and Caño Grullo (Oldham 1995).

Another factor affecting Piaroa tribal (dis)unity has been the rise of macro-scale indigenous federations, such as the national group CONIVE and the statewide organisation ORPIA. These groups have actively defended certain ethnic groups and communities when problems have arisen but their main focus is on promoting the collective rights and interests of all Indians and they have sought to instil a common pan-Indian identity as a means of building a larger and more cohesive constituency. In sum, political integration appears to be taking shape at multiple, overlapping and sometimes counteracting levels: village, sector (neighbourhood of villages occupying a common river basin), ethnic group, macro-region (state or province) and nation (see Micarelli, this volume, for a similar case in the Colombian Amazon).

The political situation of the Piaroa has become considerably more complicated since the mid-1990s with the political-territorial decentralisation of Amazonas state. The new structure created an elective state government as well as seven municipalities and corresponding governmental structures to administrate them. This resulted in a significant surge in the creation of new jobs, services, infrastructure and development and aid programmes at the state and municipal levels, paid for by the central government, as well as greater control over these resources. It also spurred much greater participation of the indigenous population in the democratic political process as a way to gain access to these new sources of wealth and power. This has opened spaces for involvement with national- and regional-based political parties. In 1998, the first indigenous-led political party (PUAMA) was formed and their candidate won the governorship two years later. Piaroa politicians were elected *alcalde* (that is, mayor) of the Autana and Manapiare municipalities in 2000 and then again in 2004. The high stakes, in terms of jobs and assistance, attached to this enormous but temporary concentration of power has served to magnify competition among leaders over the political support of the voting masses, such that the *campaña* (political campaign) has become a regular and seemingly never-ending event on the social calendar. The campaign process, as well as the voting pattern itself, follows mostly ethnic and micro-regional (for example, river

basin) lines but I also have first-hand accounts of intra-ethnic splits and strategic inter-ethnic alliances.

The recent ethno-political evolution of Piaroa signifies their final passage from colonial 'ethnic formation', based on loose and layered ties of shared culture and language, to post-colonial 'tribe', an acephalous and yet structurally integrated and bounded unit (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992: 15). Considering that tribe is a political formation which arises in response to contact and intervention by a nearby state (Fried 1975; Whitehead 1992), we can therefore regard the tribalisation of Piaroa as a fairly predictable outcome of the last forty years of encroaching state control over their population and territory. Similarly, the expanding presence of the state and the corresponding response to that encroachment is in large part responsible for transformations in the meaning and articulation of ethnic identification (see Alexiades and Peluso, Dudley and Micarelli, this volume). At the first Piaroa congress held in 1984, the membership adopted the name *Uhuottöja*, 'people with knowledge', as the official tribal auto-designation while rejecting the previously common term *DeaRua*, 'owners of the forest', as if to formally announce their departure from the backwoods and entrance into the mainstream national society (Piaroa 1984). The modern leaders frequently frame their political discourse in terms of ethnic and cultural difference and the need to recuperate self-determination through the preservation of their traditional culture. However, their representations of it sometimes deviate from the way people actually do or did live out their lives, a process Jackson (1994) would refer to as the 'folklorisation of Piaroa culture'. For example, the *wærimé*, the paramount religious ceremony among Piaroa, has practically disappeared nowadays but, on those rare occasions when it is performed, it is staged more as a political rally designed to mobilise votes or support for collective projects or as a cultural theatre attended by photojournalists or paying tourists.

In the last few years, the impetus for ethnic integration and consciousness raising has received a significant boost from the 2001 Indian land demarcation law, which calls for the demarcation and eventual titling of Indian lands. This new opportunity moved several groups, including the Piaroa, to undertake the task of demarcating and mapping their land and documenting their socio-anthropological history in support of their claims. Two separate and non-cooperating groups, one based in the Sipapo and backed by ORPIA and the other associated with communities close to Puerto Ayacucho and supported by officials from the Ministry of Environment, formed teams to carry out the work and seek popular support (a requirement for official approval) for their respective projects. While the demarcation process has reinforced ethnic consciousness by bringing together members of diverse communities for periodic meetings, producing tangible symbols of shared heritage and interests as embodied

in the maps, and tying ethnic membership directly to a scarce resource in an increasingly congested and contested landscape, it has also exposed the inter-sectorial divisions alluded to above. An alternative approach to the demarcation issue being advocated by some politically active leaders, including a number of prominent Piaroa, is to have the entire state of Amazonas declared a multi-ethnic indigenous territory with special rights and authorities granted to Indian residents.

The preceding discussion suggests that the recent ethno-political mobilisation of the Piaroa is rising at multiple levels and creating multiple social identities (community, sector, ethnolinguistic group, pan-Indian, political party and national citizen) that are articulated selectively by different actors in different contexts. Clearly one of the prime movers of ethnic politicisation among the Piaroa, as well as for other indigenous groups in Venezuela and elsewhere in South America (see Whitten 1975), is the competition over political power and economic resources. The principal material resources of political striving identified here are land and the welfare benefits (services, aid, jobs) dispensed by the state. Such competition has intensified in the last few years due to the proliferation of service- and aid-providing programmes and institutions and consequent stretching of government funding among them, the strong population growth (much of it through immigration) and the general climate of political instability that has prevailed nationally and regionally in the last few decades. To the extent that this nascent political mobilisation, as expressions of the struggle for access to political power and associated resources in a changing environment, is occurring along ethnic and sub-ethnic lines suggests that social boundaries are being raised and that ethnocultural identity is being used once again to carve out privileged territories of action in the emerging political order. At the same time, however, the growth and extension of multiple exchanges and affiliations to supra-local groups and organisations implies the re-formation of distant and cross-cutting social-economic-political networks in some ways similar to the macro-regional systems that prevailed in the pre-colonial context.

Conclusions

The dynamic and shifting nature of Piaroa ethnic boundaries and relations was highlighted here through political, ecological and historical analysis. During the past 500 years, the articulation of ethnocultural differences among the Piaroa and their neighbours has passed through three distinct socio-historical phases (pre-contact, post-contact and modern). In the pre-contact phase, inter-ethnic relationships were characterised as either hostile and territorially segregated, or peaceful, ecologically complementary and economically integrated. The elaboration of ethnic differentiation and

structured patterns of inter-ethnic interaction were conditioned by a demographically dense, relatively stable and competitive resource environment. The post-contact phase was marked by peaceful territorial conquest and cultural assimilation of neighbours, following drastic regional population decline and yet increased techno-economic capacitation through ownership of iron tools. Human labour became the strategic resource and, as the focus of competition shifted to people themselves, social and ethnic boundaries faded accordingly. The modern phase can be summed up as increasing intra- and inter-ethnic tensions tied to land and political struggles. Downriver migration, settlement nucleation, population growth and competition over resources provided or sanctioned by the expanding nation state have led to a resurgence of inclusive/exclusive social boundary distinctions at multiple levels.

This case study demonstrates that fluctuations in resource relationships – that is, the competitive balance among population, resources, land, labour, power and socio-economic ties – are closely tied to the ebb and flow of ethnic categorisation. Although the effective local or regional environment and its impact on ethnicity are often deeply transformed by socio-political forces whose origin may be elsewhere, it can also be seen that local responses to such changes also shape the outcome. In this light, the contemporary ethno-political mobilisation of the Piaroa and their articulation of difference from the national society might well be understood as the unintended consequence of the state's effort to remake their Indian peoples to look and act more like the dominant criollo population.

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