

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization

Peter Riviere

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Peoples and approaches

This work has three aims, all of which reflect the present state of ethnographic research in Lowland South America. Although late as an area to receive intensive ethnographic attention, this lateness has not lacked its advantages. Untrammelled by the deadweight of earlier works cast in outmoded anthropological fashions, the ethnography of the area has been characterized in the past decade by an enormous vitality, not only in the quantity of its production but also in the quality of its ideas. It is time to take stock of what we have got and where we stand before pushing on. In a small way, and with reference to only part of the area, this book is intended to be a contribution to that stocktaking.

These remarks are as true for the Northeast region of Lowland South America as they are for the area as a whole, and it is on this region, referred to as “Guiana” and more closely defined below, that attention is focused. Although early accounts by missionaries, travelers, and scientists are often valuable and informative documents, and indeed are the sources for Roth’s masterly and comprehensive surveys (1915, 1924, 1929), intensive anthropological fieldwork in the region dates only from the 1930s with Gillin’s study (1936) of the Barama River Caribs. After that there was a slight hiatus until Butt, Fock, and Yde started work in the 1950s. Their publications heralded a spate of works that has continued until the present. There is evidence to suggest that we are about to enter a lull in this activity, and, even if this is not so, the time seems ripe to attempt an overview of the rich information now available.

The value of such an exercise must be judged by the aims of this work. In the first place, it is designed to provide an introduction to the region, and I have attempted at this level to fulfill the needs of an undergraduate or postgraduate course on South American Indian ethnography. The second aim, slightly more ambitious, is to identify the essential elements and relationships in Guiana social organization. At this level I am basically addressing my colleagues who work in Guiana and on whose information this study is entirely dependent. Third, and most ambitious of all, I seek to make some suggestions that are relevant to the wider study of Lowland South American society. Work in other regions of the Lowlands has progressed to the point where it is time for similar studies to that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization

Peter Riviere

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Individual and society in Guiana*

undertaken here. At this level, the study is, so to speak, an attempt to provide the Guiana piece in the jigsaw (or mosaic) that forms Lowland South American society. To some extent these three aims are dependent on one another. It is obvious that a competent introduction to the region requires the successful delineation of the essential ingredients. At the same time, failure to portray an accurate picture will undermine the value of the work as a contribution to the wider comparative study.

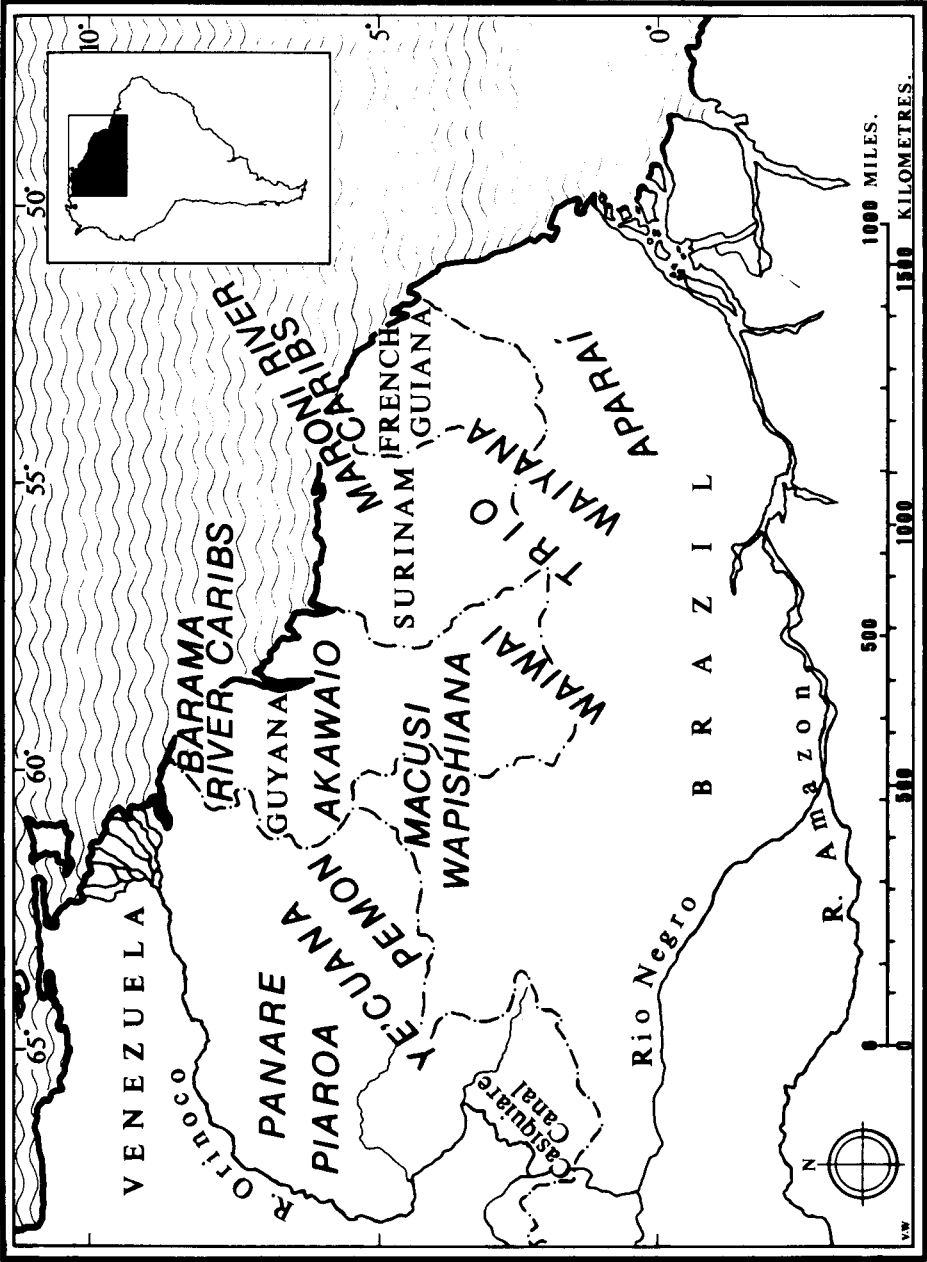
I

The region, referred to as Guiana, that is the focus of this book, is the “island” of northeastern South America (see map). It is that area of land surrounded by water: the Amazon River, the Rio Negro, the Casiquiare Canal, the Orinoco River, and the Atlantic Ocean. Its greatest east–west extension is approximately 1,200 miles, and north–south 800 miles. Politically it is divided between Brazil, Venezuela, Guyana, Surinam, and French Guiana. The Amerindians with whom I am concerned live mainly along the watershed that divides the rivers that flow into the Amazon from those that flow into the Orinoco or directly into the Atlantic. The ethnographies from which this study is compiled relate mainly to the Aparai, the Waiyana, the Trio, the Waiwai, the Wapishiana, the Macusi, the Pemon, the Akawaio, the Ye’cuana, the Piaroa, the Panare, and the Barama River Caribs. There are, however, exceptions to this. For example, the study includes reference to the Maroni River Caribs who live near the coast, but excludes from consideration two of the most populous groups who dwell within the region. These are the Warao and the Yanoama.

The reasons for excluding these two groups are not the same in both cases, although the principle is. It is that they differ in certain quite specific ways from the other groups in the region, although at the same time they share many features. The Warao social organization is characterized by an idol-temple cult reminiscent of the Circum-Caribbean region, an Hawaiian relationship terminology, and a subsistence economy based on the moriche palm pith. The Yanoama group is composed of a number of subgroups, among whom considerable variation exists. Some of these subgroups exhibit a social organization very similar to the other peoples of Guiana, whereas others contain features not found elsewhere. Furthermore, the size as well as the variation makes the Yanoama a highly appropriate subject for a separate study.

To some extent these exclusions are arbitrary but they are not less so than the inclusions, and the selection of Guiana as forming some sort of entity, a subculture of the wider Lowland South America culture area, requires some justification. Before providing this, it must be stressed that there is no assumption that the forms of social organization that characterize the region are not found elsewhere, because they are. Nor is it assumed that the region forms some sort of watertight

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization
 Peter Riviere
 Excerpt
[More information](#)



Map of Guiana showing the location of the main Amerindian groups.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization

Peter Riviere

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Individual and society in Guiana*

cultural compartment with rigid boundaries. It is clear that here as elsewhere in Amazonia boundaries are fuzzy and change unevenly from one region to another.

This is by no means the first time that the Guiana region has been identified as forming a subculture [see, for example, "Handbook of South American Indians," (Steward 1946–50)], and there is no difficulty in indicating the features shared by the people who inhabit the region. In the first place, these similarities are best recognized by what these societies do not have in comparison with those elsewhere in Lowland South America. They lack any formal social groupings such as lineages, clans, moieties, age-sets, etc., membership in which is defined by unilineal descent, name transmission, age, sex, and so on. The social and political organization of these societies is so unformalized that it has often been difficult to understand how they work at all. Over and over again writers have drawn attention to the atomistic nature of these societies and the rampant individualism of their members. Gillin (1936) stresses the individualistic nature of Barama River Carib society and the looseness of its social organization. Butt (1954:33, 44–6) states that the Akawaio have no idea of authority and are characterized by a "great independence of nature." Arvelo-Jimenez (1971:112) refers to the "individualistic tendencies of each Ye'cuana," and Koehn (1975:100) calls the Aparaf "very individualistic." Lapointe (1970) takes the phenomena of the looseness of Waiyana social organization and of their emphasis on individual roles as central to his main concern to explicate the nature of their settlement pattern. Most recently, Thomas (1982:1) has referred to Pemon society as "amorphous."

These societies are rightly described in such terms, but it would be wrong to take a negative view of such a characterization. Pierre Clastres (1977) correctly pointed out that drawing attention to what is absent is a result of our own expectation. If we cannot identify a political organization we must not assume that it is lacking; rather we must accept that we are looking in the wrong place or for the wrong thing and look elsewhere. Thus the looseness of the social organization is not to be seen as the disadvantageous lack of formal institutions but as a positive attribute. If the peoples of Guiana have not developed complex social structures, it is because they have no need for them. It is not because they have not evolved, nor because they are latter-day Noble Savages free of all social constraints. The social organization as it exists provides a fine balance between the requirements of society and the autonomy of the individual. It is the uniformity of ways in which this is achieved that justifies, more than anything else, the selection of the Guiana region as a separable unit of study.

Although each of them will receive detailed attention in later chapters, a brief list of the features of social organization common to the area may be helpful at this point. They include cognatic descent, two-line prescriptive relationship terminology, preferred settlement endogamy and/or uxorilocal residence, the emphasis on co-residence in ordering relationships, and small and impermanent settlements.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization

Peter Riviere

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Peoples and approaches*

The choice of the particular groups to be studied has been largely dictated by the availability of adequate ethnography. The amount and quality of ethnography vary greatly from one group to the next, and although whatever material available has been used it is inevitable that the emphasis has fallen on those people for whom the ethnography is best. Thus the Macusi and Wapishiana receive relatively little attention despite the fact that they are two of the largest groups in the region because we do not know a great deal about them.¹ Sources from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries have been used, but I have depended most heavily on material from the last two decades. The reasons for this are simply that most of the earlier writers do not provide the sort of information necessary for a study such as this.

Although many of the recent ethnographers have concentrated on very similar topics, in particular social and political organization, and their works are almost invariably admirably detailed, certain problems still remain in conducting a comparative study. The ethnographers come from different countries, have been brought up in different schools of anthropological thought, and have conducted their research with different aims and expectations. This has led them to express themselves in various ways on what I have had to take to be the same point. To achieve some degree of coherence in my presentation, I have had to translate their ways of putting things in order to achieve a comparison. However, any translation carries the threat of distortion, and where I consider this may be serious I have included an author's own words.

The extent to which the original should be quoted represents another presentational problem in a work of this sort. There is a difficult balance to reach between quoting too much, making the work not only excessively long but little more than a tedious string of quotations, and not citing enough, leaving the less well informed reader at a loss. I hope that a suitable compromise has been reached, and where direct quotation has not been made I have taken care to provide references so that my version can be checked against the original.

Finally, on the matter of the region and its ethnography, I should note that I have not provided a reasoned critique of the sources. Nor have I tried to assess the relative merits of one source against another. This is because the sources mainly refer to different peoples and I have assumed that the differences are a reflection of this fact. Even where we have sources providing rather differing accounts about the same people from a similar period, I have looked for factors that might account for the discrepancies rather than make judgments about their relative correctness. The reason for this is that I am not trying to distill out a single type of Guiana social organization, but rather to reveal the distinctive features of it, both what is variable as well as invariable. At this point, it is important to say a few words about the method involved.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization

Peter Riviere

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Individual and society in Guiana*

II

The problem of comparison has been and is of perennial concern to anthropologists. In a general way, comparison is implicit in all their work since any attempt to understand a different way of life or to translate it for one's own kind requires reference to what is familiar. Initially one's own representations act as a model against which to assess another's, although with growing familiarity with the other one can increasingly dispense with one's own world as a point of reference. In this implicit sense, comparison only becomes problematic when the observer's prejudices intrude too far; when they become more than just a preliminary set of instructions by which to orient oneself in an alien world.

Although this represents a threat in any ethnographic endeavor, it is the more explicit forms of comparison, the so-called comparative method, that has proved more problematic. The comparative method has been used in many ways, and it is not my intention to review them here. In general, however, the comparative method has proved a failure either because the goal, such as the establishment of some general sociological law, has been too grandiose and the conclusion too easily undermined, or it has proved difficult to ensure comparability, that like is being compared with like. The remedy for these failings lies in restricting the comparison to a bounded territorial and cultural area, to peoples who exhibit, at least in their gross features, some homogeneity. This approach, usually known as controlled comparison, is more modest in its purpose and seeks, not universal laws, but a better understanding of the localized societies under investigation. However, even the method of controlled comparison is not without its problems, since there is more than one level at which comparison can be conducted.

Thus comparison is possible in terms completely alien to the societies under study. Some external measurement, such as protein supply, is used to compare one group with another in order to explain other variables such as levels of violence and rates of infanticide. Beyond the actual practical difficulties of obtaining reliable measurements of such variables,² there are serious epistemological shortcomings in such an approach. There is the difficulty of demonstrating a causal relationship between factors rather than a simple association. The statistical probability of association still leaves unanswered the problem of the negative cases. Then there is no way of incorporating into such explanations human actions and intentions, and such an approach is forced to accept human behavior as guided by external forces.

An alternative way is to conduct the controlled comparison in terms of native categories. In other words, a social category or set of social categories is examined to see how its meaning and content vary among the peoples within a given region and how this variation is related to other differences. This is the approach adopted in the present study, although the comparison has not been confined solely to social groups that bear a linguistic label. For example, although of fundamental importance and readily identifiable in behavioral terms,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization

Peter Riviere

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Peoples and approaches

nowhere in Guiana is there a term for the nuclear family. Likewise it is rare that there is a term for a territorial grouping larger than the single settlement, but it can easily be demonstrated that such groupings exist and have important social, economic, political, and ritual functions. To ignore such unnamed groups would seriously detract from the value of the study for it is possible to show that the failure to recognize the wider social context in which a settlement is contained is consistent with native notions about the nature of the individual settlement.

Although the aim of a controlled comparison, focusing on native categories and behaviors, is to obtain a better understanding of the principles and values ordering the societies concerned, it contains the assumption that this is better done by the comparison of a number of cases rather than the detailed investigation of one. As well as the obvious point that the use of a number of cases acts as a control, there is also the argument that each society reveals to varying degrees and with varying explicitness its organizing principles and values. Like a mosaic, the pattern becomes clearer as each piece is fitted in.

However, the mosaic analogy needs to be used with caution since a priori it is not possible to know whether the societies chosen do form a pattern until some preliminary work has been conducted. This point has been dealt with already. Second, how do we know that the mosaic is bounded? The answer to this is that we do not, nor do we expect it to be. The Guiana region has much in common with other regions of Lowland South America, and the patterns found in Guiana reemerge transformed elsewhere. Thus the Guiana mosaic is simply a piece in a larger mosaic. The third problem is how to know that we have incorporated all the pieces. The answer to this is that we can never be certain that we have taken into account all the variations, but if we have enough variations so that we can identify the principles involved then it is possible to work out all the logical possibilities in order to trace forms that are missing.

There is another important feature that must also be recognized. The pieces are at the same time similar and different. They are similar through being part of the same mosaic; they are different insofar as each is a unique entity, set off from others by particular cultural and social forms. These two properties – which define the relationship of the mosaic to its component pieces – assure simultaneously commonality and separateness. They represent respectively the invariant and variant features.

The aims of this study are relatively modest insofar as it restricts itself mainly to invariant features. This was not the original aim but was the result of concentrating on social structure and social organization. It was assumed that significant variation occurred at these levels; in fact this was found not to be the case. Some variation in social phenomena does occur in the region, and this is documented in the following chapters, but it does not effectively mark off one group from another. The uniqueness of each group is not signaled at the social level, for this, to return to the mosaic analogy, provides the overall pattern. The distinctiveness of each piece, of each group, is expressed through cultural

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization

Peter Riviere

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Individual and society in Guiana*

elements. It is through variation in language, body adornments, technical equipment, methods of processing food, funerary rites, and the consumption of hallucinogens that the peoples of Guiana mark themselves off from one another.

There is a problem here of a far greater order than that examined in this book. In principle, I would agree with Lévi-Strauss that

the simplest techniques of any primitive society have hidden in them the character of a system, analysable in terms of a more general system. The manner in which some elements of this system have been retained and others excluded permits us to conceive of the local system as a totality of significant choices, compatible or incompatible with other choices, which each society, or each period within its development, has been led to make. (1967:19)

Although in a study of blowguns and hairtubes (Rivière 1969b), I made an attempt in this direction, in practice a study of cultural variation in these terms is faced with tremendous difficulties. First it is uncertain that the ethnography is good enough for an exercise of this nature to be carried through, since it is often the minutiae of cultural detail that are significant. It is not enough to note that the Trio distinguish themselves both from the Waiyana to the east and the Waiwai to the west by their hairstyle (among other things). It is necessary to know how the choice of a hairstyle, in relationship to other choices, forms a cultural identity.

The second problem is that it appears to be just these cultural elements that are most prone to change, abandonment, and substitution. The readiness to dispense with cultural phenomena does suggest that the boundaries between groups are fluid because their distinctiveness is as transient as the cultural elements that mark it. Certainly the history of the region records a myriad of names that appear and disappear as the groups to which they refer amalgamate and separate, creating a continual flow of new groups. This is in marked contrast with the ability of these groups to retain their social structures through the most adverse conditions.³ This supports the view that what is fundamental and invariant is the social structure. Further, this invariance can even be seen as a means by which the transience of groups is facilitated; it provides a common basis for the interaction between social groups and a base on which the cultural elements have freedom to vary. Just as the Guiana region does not represent a watertight cultural department, so are these groups not independent tribal units. They are populations whose boundaries are fuzzy as a result of constant interaction through marriage, trade, and migration. We will see that the relationship between settlements, the smallest constituent units of these populations, can be characterized in the same way.

The resolution of the problems concerning the study of cultural variation can be left to the future, although it is a matter that deserves proper attention. For the moment the subject of social invariance is enough, and there is one more aspect that needs to be discussed before moving on. A decision had to be reached on whether the comparative study should be pursued group by group or theme by theme. In the event, it was decided to approach the study theme by theme. There

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization

Peter Riviere

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Peoples and approaches*

were several reasons for this decision. First, it was decided that by the thematic approach it would be possible both to provide the reader with a more coherent picture and at the same time to develop a more powerful argument. Second, if the groups were treated one by one it would still be necessary to bring the findings together in a series of chapters. Thus the work would be longer without necessarily being any better. Third, because the ethnographies are inevitably uneven in the sense that they do not treat identical topics in the same degree of detail, then the studies of each group would reflect similar tendencies. The approach adopted has been to examine themes or aspects of society in turn. For each aspect those ethnographies that deal with it in the fullest way receive the most attention, and from them a proper picture of the aspect is built up. Then sources that do not devote so much attention to the particular aspect are examined in the light of what is known from the fuller accounts. Because the emphasis on topics differs from one ethnography to another, so the main ethnography used varies from one aspect to another. It is not important for the present purpose whether this variation is the result of the differing interests of the ethnographers themselves or of the emphasis that a given population puts on different aspects. In practice, it is likely to be some of both, although the latter may deserve more weight, because the particular features of the society being studied tend to influence the interests of the ethnographer. What is important is that a more reliable picture can be built up as the study of the same aspect is pursued from one group to the next.

At this point we will leave this rather abstract discussion of method, which is anyway easier to follow in practice, and turn to an introduction to Guiana and its native inhabitants.

III

It cannot be assumed that all the readers of this volume will be familiar with Guiana and its native inhabitants, and because the main body of the study presupposes this knowledge some attempt to remedy any such deficiency is made here. The description that follows is both broad and general. Some of the topics touched upon are dealt with in far greater detail in later chapters, whereas others receive no further attention although acquaintance with them will help in understanding the argument. Those already familiar with the region can afford to miss this section.

The native peoples with whom we are concerned live on the pre-Cambrian Guiana Highlands, a peneplain that is the predominant geological feature of the region. The rivers that originate in these Highlands are, with the exception of the Orinoco River, small by the standards of Lowland South America. Broken by series of rapids at the point where they leave the peneplain, these rivers do not offer good lines of communication and easy access into the interior. Furthermore, because of the nature of the seasonal cycle, there are times of the year when the waterways are little more than fordable streams and other times when they are

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-26997-1 - Individual and Society in Guiana: A Comparative Study of Amerindian Social Organization

Peter Riviere

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Individual and society in Guiana

rushing torrents that flood out over the surrounding terrain to head height. The flatness of the watershed in some areas results in extensive flooding during the wet season.

Although there is some variation across the region, the year is basically marked by two seasons, wet and dry. The dry season lasts approximately from September to March and the wet season from April to August. In some parts the wet season extends almost to December, whereas in others a brief wet season occurs around December-January so that four seasons, two wet and two dry, divide the year. The dry season is rarely completely dry, nor the wet season devoid of dry days. The amount of rainfall fluctuates greatly from one year to the next, but on average everywhere gets 2,000 mm or more a year. The mean annual temperature is around 26 degrees centigrade, with the dry season the hottest time of the year. The diurnal range of temperature is much greater than the annual range.

Although tropical forest is the predominant type of vegetation, stretches of savanna occur, and to the north and west of the region these are extensive. However, even when Amerindians are found dwelling on these grasslands, they always do so in proximity to forest, which occurs as galleries along watercourses or as cover on the low hills.

A list of the groups with which this study is primarily concerned has been provided already. With the exception of the Arawakan Wapishiana and the Sáliban Piaroa, all these peoples are Carib speaking. Basso (1977) has isolated eight traits that she regards as typically Carib; although not all these traits are dealt with in this work, they occur in most of the societies considered. Indeed, here as elsewhere in Lowland South America, linguistic differences do not necessarily coincide with social and cultural differences, although it is not unusual for the Indians themselves to use variations in dialect to make social distinctions.

All the peoples of the area are slash-and-burn cultivators. The main cultigen and dietary staple is bitter cassava. This crop is supplemented by a wide range of other produce, including sweet cassava, sweet potatoes, yams, eddoes, peanuts, maize, bananas, sugarcane, pineapples, and peppers. Nonedible cultivated plants include tobacco, cotton, silk grass, gourds, arrowcane, and urucu. Compared with forms of slash-and-burn cultivation found elsewhere the technique is fairly crude. Tree stumps and large unburnt trunks are left where they are, and secondary clearing is often reduced to a minimum, as are weeding and other cultivation practices. The main crop, cassava, is usually planted twice, the second planting taking place as the first crop is harvested. Fields go on producing for about four years, but after they have been abandoned they are often still visited in order to pick cotton and bananas. The usual practice is to start a new field each year so that a family normally has two fields, at different stages in their life cycles, producing simultaneously. The reasons for abandoning a field are