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978-0-521-35889-7 - From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in  
Northwest Amazonia

Christine Hugh-Jones

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

### **Focus of the study**

Pirá-paraná Indians see themselves as existing within an ordered cosmos created in the ancestral past. The world of their present-day experience is a residue or product of the ancestral doings related in myth, ritual chants and shamanic spells. From their own point of view, this cosmos and the mythical deeds associated with it control their contemporary social life and provide a moral framework for present-day action. Here, I work the other way round – from the inside out.

Instead of starting with the cosmology, I start with the building of basic units of social structure, families and patrilineal groups, through marriage and procreation. I begin by showing how different phases of that temporal processes are associated with different spaces within and around the longhouse and end by showing that the very same ‘space–time’ principles underlie the structure of the cosmos. I argue as if the basic principles of social structure were primary and the cosmos was a reflection of these but I do not mean to imply that there is a simple relation of cause and effect between the two or that they should be seen as ‘infrastructure’ and ‘superstructure’.

The anthropologist must regard the ancestral cosmos as an imaginary projection of present experience, but at the same time it is a projection which both controls present experience and forms an integral part of it. There is therefore a sense in which each world – the ancestral one and the present-day secular one – regulates the other. This interdependence is reflected throughout my study, because, although I work outwards towards the ancestral cosmos, I am forced to refer to my goal throughout. Without recourse to myth and exegesis I would be quite unable to construct any model of the present-day situation, because I would be unable to ‘see’ it. For instance, it is quite

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impossible to understand the simplest fact about Pirá-paraná social structure without first understanding ‘imaginary’ descent from the founding anaconda ancestors.

The theme of the book is more complex than the isolation of an inner structural level and an outer cosmological one would suggest, for I show that there is a compatibility and coherence between the various domains of experience which typically form the chapter headings of the social anthropologist’s monograph. I demonstrate that ‘social structure’, ‘kinship and marriage’, ‘the life-cycle’, ‘politics’, ‘economics’ and ‘religion’ are ideologically integrated just as they are also inextricably bound together in concrete behaviour. In this sense the book is an attempt to overcome the distortions and limitations resulting from the establishment of those anthropological sub-disciplines which separate off categories of data in a manner reflecting anthropologists’ professional interests rather than the nature of the societies they study. In the case of the Vaupés Indians, there is special reason to avoid such a rigid classification of data, because questions about almost any aspect of life are answered by the telling of mythical episodes, and in myth there is no convenient separation into discrete institutions.

People actually spend their time living, taking decisions, experiencing biological changes and promoting changes through their own activity. Even though anthropologists may choose to regard them as ‘actors’ who are continually ‘expressing social relationships’, this does not seem to be the way they regard themselves. At the same time, there is obviously a sense in which their culture and its institutions may be maintained in spite of the changes that are occurring on all fronts. I therefore describe Pirá-paraná society in terms of dynamic processes which take the form of repeated cycles. Even the systems of classification which seem to provide a fixed, ‘static’ framework for positive action can be conceived of in terms of dynamic processes. Thus the structure of descent groups, of the cosmos, of the life-cycle, of a meal and so on are all created by movements of people, ancestral beings or other elements through space and time. It is because these structures are created in this way that they possess the power to engender further creative change – this, at least, is the way in which I believe Indians see things, and it is also instructive for the model-building anthropologist.

The book contains a series of discussions of these separate processes, all of which contribute to the composite phenomenon of

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social reproduction – by which I simply mean the continuity of a population with a recognisable culture and set of social institutions. In the following chapter, I set out a model of Pirá-paraná descent-group structure and discuss its relation to the data from which it is drawn. Then I describe the process of reproduction of the local community through formation and dispersal of family units. In chapter 3, I take the specialist-role system associated with the internal classification of descent groups and show that its structure is related to the formation and dispersal of family units and also to the range of different types of communication with the outside groups that are potential sources of wives. In chapter 4, I describe certain aspects of kinship and marriage, concentrating on the role of marriage in creating close relations between opposed exogamous groups, which thus promotes changes in the network of intergroup relations over time. In chapter 5, I describe the life-cycle rituals in order to elucidate Indian concepts of the life process with its interwoven physical and social aspects. Chapter 6 is devoted to processes of production and consumption, particularly of food and ‘drugs’. I show how these are integrated with the ritually elaborated life processes outlined in the previous chapter. Finally, in chapter 7, I discuss the concepts of space–time which unite all these different processes, and develop a general model of space–time systems which accounts for the relationship between the world of present-day Indian experience and the ancestral past.

**Physical setting**

The Pirá-paraná and its tributaries lie between 70 and 71 degrees W. and the main stream crosses the Equator roughly halfway along its length (see map I). This part of the Northwest Amazon area is just inside the Colombian border with Brazil and lies in the administrative district of the Comisaria del Vaupés.

Geologically the area is the southern fringe of the Guiana shield. Most of the land lies around 700 feet, with isolated hills and mountains standing above the surrounding forest. Apart from a few open, sandy areas with tough and sparse vegetation and swamps with miriti palms (*Mauritia flexuosa*), there is a general forest cover. From the air this is dense green with an occasional flowering treetop; from the river it is an impenetrable and richly varied tangle of trees and creepers, but once in the forest, shaded by the canopy far above, it is

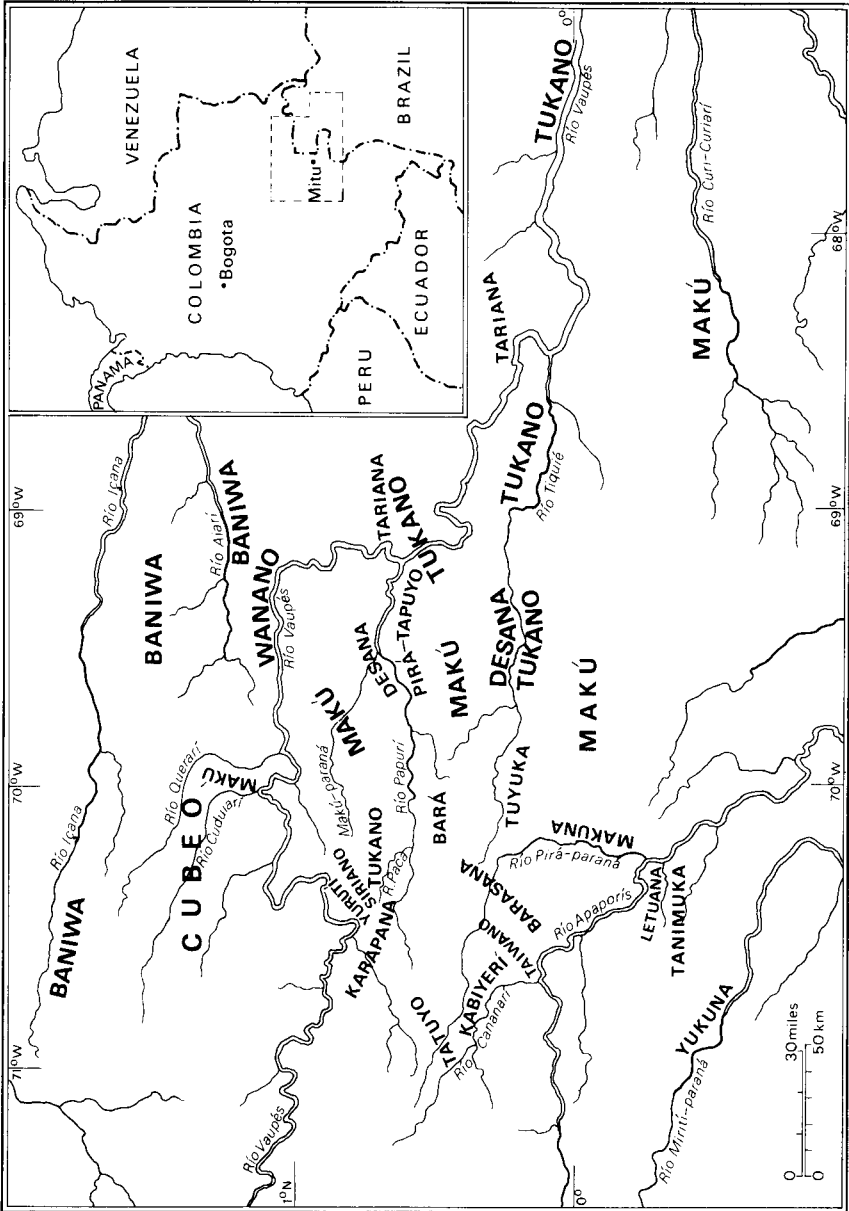
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Map 1 The Vaupés region

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damp and sombre and surprisingly open. It is only on the river, where a huge tree has fallen, or in a man-made clearing, that the colours are light and bright and it is possible to feel a sense of space and distance.

The average rainfall for the Vaupés is around 3500 mm but there is great local and annual variation (Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi 1969). There are two rainy seasons and two dry ones: a long dry season lasts from December to March; heavy rains fall until August or September and then a short dry season is followed by more rains. The temperature varies between 20 and 35 °C throughout most of the year, except during the *aru* or *friagem*, a cold spell characterised by fine drizzle, when it may drop to as low as 10 °C. Even in the dry seasons there is frequent rain, but the relative lack of it can be seen in the height of the rivers. At the wettest times of year the rivers flood the adjacent forest and all the lower ground becomes waterlogged; at the driest times, sandy banks and the rocks and dead branches lodged in the river beds are exposed.

The people of this area are scattered in small longhouse communities situated by rivers and separated by anything from half-an-hour's to a day's journey. They prefer to travel by river, even if it means a longer journey, but there are also many paths in use, particularly in headwater areas.

The Pirá-paraná and some of its tributaries are full of rapids and waterfalls which are rightly considered treacherous by both Indians and white travellers. The relative isolation of the Pirá-paraná from the encroaching white society and culture can be mainly attributed to the problems of travel. The establishment of mission airstrips has naturally been a major factor in opening up the area. Because the Pirá-paraná is an affluent of the Apaporis to the south, but is also accessible from the Vaupés system, its inhabitants have been influenced by whites from both directions.

**History of white influence**

This book is partly a salvage operation: because of the nature of the analysis, I emphasise the traditional aspects of Indian life at the expense of the features resulting from deculturation. Although I do incorporate processes of change into my analysis, these are changes within a traditional institutional framework and not changes of that framework itself. However, I do not want to give any false impressions about Pirá-paraná people as I knew them in 1970, and the following

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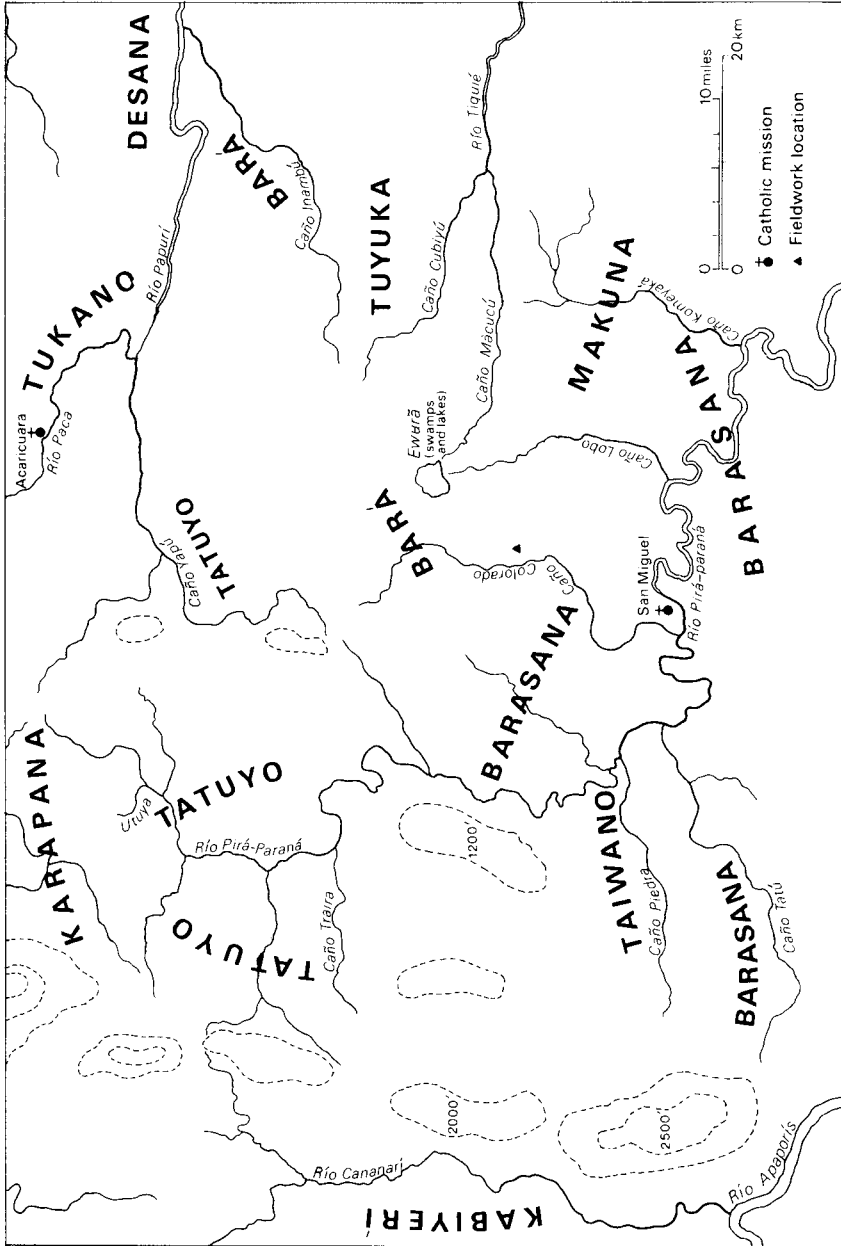
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account of their recent history is intended to set the record straight. When I use the 'ethnographic present', I refer to the period of my fieldwork – no doubt things are different now.

The first mention of the Pirá-paraná dates from the mid-eighteenth century (Brüzzi 1962 : 22). However, it was not until 1965 that the first mission outpost was established by North American Protestant missionaries belonging to the Summer Institute of Linguistics. This was closely followed by other SIL posts, so that in 1970 the Pirá-paraná had four, corresponding to the four main languages spoken along its course. The Catholic mission was established in 1968. The sudden influx of missionaries was accompanied by the appearance of many anthropologists, adventurers and students of this and that so that, rubber gatherers aside, Indians saw more non-Indian strangers in several years than they had done in as many centuries. However, the shock of change was not quite as great as this sudden influx would imply, because for many decades the Pirá-paraná had been surrounded on all sides by peoples whose ways of life had been more severely interfered with by missionaries and rubber gatherers than had their own. As an index of this, by the time of our fieldwork, the Pirá-paraná, adjacent parts of the upper Tiquié, a few isolated areas on the Papurí system (such as Caño Inambú where Jean Jackson did her research) and, to the south, parts of the Apaporis system, were the only areas where Tukanoan groups were still living in longhouses. In most cases these were not built to the traditional size but they did, at least, conform to the traditional structure.

In the Pirá-paraná area, the influence of the rubber trade was first felt in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the industry reached its height in the first decade of this century. After that it went into a gradual decline until the Second World War brought a sudden increase in demand. By 1970 there were rumours that the market was approaching total collapse and that government support for the industry was to be withdrawn. The rubber gatherers (*caucheros*) entered the Pirá-paraná from the Vaupés and Apaporis and, in most cases, carried off the able men by force, often killing others and raping women. Many Indians tell how the reprisals against the brutal intruders were also extended to fellow Indians who had directed them to hidden longhouses. The location of longhouses was an indication of white activity, because Indians fled to the headwaters and concealed approaches to their longhouses when times were bad, and then moved back to the larger rivers as white people withdrew.

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Map 2 The Pirá-paraná and surrounding areas

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Besides reducing the population and disrupting social life in these ways, the rubber trade introduced new diseases on a large scale. It also changed Indian culture and aspirations by creating new needs for white men's merchandise. But the *caucheros* did not purposefully attempt to change Indian culture from within by altering patterns of social and domestic life. Their very lack of interest in Indians as anything beyond a workforce to be ensnared in an eternal credit system meant that those who escaped their recruiting drives continued to live in a traditional way. By the period of our fieldwork, the methods of *caucheros* were less violent, but nevertheless very variable. Many Indians born in the upper Pirá-paraná were permanently living in rubber camps on the Vaupés or beyond, while others in the lower Pirá-paraná worked regularly on the Apaporis for a part of each year.

The missionaries played a complementary role to the *caucheros*: proclaiming themselves to be against the economic exploitation of Indians, they set out to convert and 'civilise'. The first missionaries to enter the Colombian Vaupés area were Montfortians, who settled along the Papuri following an exploratory voyage in 1914. They destroyed longhouses and burnt ritual goods, and forced the inhabitants to build wattle-and-daub villages, each with its own church. The manner in which they waged their war against sin softened over the years, especially with the replacement of the Montfortians by Colombian Javerians in 1949, but the aims remained basically the same until around 1970 when there came a wave of radical questioning of missionary policy from within. As the methods of persuasion became more gentle, the bond between Indian and missionary strengthened in economic content. The labour required to build airstrips and to feed and maintain mission headquarters and boarding schools was bought with manufactured goods. As these became indispensable, Indians found themselves dependent on mission centres and so the inflationary spiral of demand for manufactured goods began. Such demands are met by working for the missions and this both accelerates the acquisition of mission values, and increases mission power by augmenting capital resources such as airstrips, buildings and so on. In this way, the act of earning manufactured goods strengthens the acculturative force and so creates the desire for more goods.

Many Pirá-paraná Indians had visited mission centres outside the Pirá-paraná area long before missionaries visited them and all were familiar with the elements of Christianity. The Vaupés marriage system, which requires each man to find a wife from beyond the area



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### *Changes in traditional life*

occupied by his own linguistic group, creates a network of alliances which facilitates the spread of missionary culture well beyond the limits of missionary activity. However, at the time of my fieldwork, the disparity between longhouse life in the Pirá-paraná and missionary village life in the surrounding areas seemed to have dampened the exchange of women across the divide, so that Pirá-paraná society taken as a whole was relatively endogamous and culturally distinct (in terms of existing culture rather than traditional culture) from the rest of the Vaupés.

The influence of the four North American SIL teams working on the Pirá-paraná during the time of our fieldwork was almost purely economic. Their policy was to sell merchandise in exchange for labour, food and artifacts and to offer limited medical aid. Meanwhile they would concentrate on a few suitable candidates for conversion, but by far the greater part of their energy was devoted to language learning. Each team (a married couple in all cases on the Pirá-paraná) would spend stretches in a small house built alongside a longhouse. These were interspersed with periods at a large residential base, outside the Vaupés area, where work among Colombian Indians was administered and co-ordinated. The second stage of true evangelising and education had to await New Testament translations and had hardly got under way in the oldest-established Pirá-paraná post before we left.

### **Changes in traditional life**

As a result of white activity, Pirá-paraná Indians had steel axes, machetes and knives, aluminium cooking pots, some shotguns, fishing nylon and hooks, cotton hammocks, clothing, matches, beads and so on. They still used plenty of ceramic pots and some string hammocks and blowpipes, all of which they made themselves. Women wore home-made skirts or full dresses made from manufactured cotton textiles, while men were sometimes clad in G-strings alone and sometimes in ready-made trousers and shirts. Stone axes were never used, but the older men could remember when there were only very few steel axes which were circulated from house to house for felling cultivation sites.

These white goods must have produced considerable changes in the Indian economy. The time required to fell trees, build houses, collect firewood and peel manioc is so much reduced by the use of steel that there can be no doubt that potential productive capacity

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has increased. We know from descriptions of travels in the past that longhouse size has actually decreased, but it is reasonable to assume that cultivation size has increased. In fact it is impossible to imagine otherwise, because even now, with the help of steel, the annual felling lasts several weeks and the women's daily round of cultivating and processing manioc and gathering firewood absorbs very nearly all the daylight hours. It would be impossible to achieve the same output with instruments of wood, stone, tooth and bone. The older women describe a number of edible, wild starchy roots which are never collected now; this also suggests that manioc production used to be on a smaller scale.

The use of shotguns and fish-hooks has changed the entire style of hunting and fishing, particularly in its social aspects. These are now mostly individual pursuits: the individual puts in a great deal of time searching for game or waiting for fish to bite and brings in a relatively small catch at the end of the day. In the past much more time was spent in preparation for capturing fish and game: traps, blowpipe darts, arrows and other devices were made with considerable expense of time and effort – often communal effort. My impression is that the result of these indigenous methods was larger but more infrequent catches, corresponding to the larger scale of each enterprise. Shotguns and fish-hooks and line do not lend themselves to group expeditions, and they may well have been additional factors in the breakdown of large longhouse groups in many regions. Lastly, there is no doubt in Indian minds that shotguns are to blame for the present poverty of game in most of the Pirá-paraná area.

Hand in hand with the economic changes has come the decline in intergroup hostilities. This is one of the most difficult of the processes of change to assess because there was evidently an intermediary phase when much of the killing among Indians was directly related to white activity. Indians give two reasons for the cessation of hostilities among themselves: one is the general upheaval, dispersal of groups and terror caused by the arrival of whites; the other is the order to stop killing issued by the priests. I think it is safe to assume that whatever the direct or indirect effects of the missionaries on fighting, the decline was under way long before they arrived. It is likely that the scale of fighting decreased even before the first *caucheros* arrived in the Pirá-paraná, because many traders must have already used this known thoroughfare linking the Vaupés and Apaporis.