ANAIS
DO
XXXI CONGRESSO INTERNACIONAL
DE
AMERICANISTAS
SÃO PAULO

23 a 28 de agosto de 1954

organizados e publicados por
HERBERT BALDUS

VOLUME I

EDITORA ANHEMBI
São Paulo
1955
SOME ASPECTS OF WAICA CULTURE

(A preliminary report of the Frobenius Expedition 1954/5 to the upper Orinoco)

by

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Special ethnological interest, in the last decades, has been drawn to the study of the primitive groups of hunters, fishers and gatherers which still subsist in some regions of the world, living exclusively on what nature offers. These groups, generally speaking, are dying out in their isolation, and therefore the study of their conditions, from all points of view, is an urgent need for science, that should not be delayed.

Being aware of this situation, the “Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft” decided to sponsor, among other projects, the carrying out of field research with that specific interest. Within the scope of this project, the Frobenius Institute of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, at Frankfurt, as a center for ethnological research, started in the beginning of the year 1954, an expedition to southern Venezuela, in order to study the still existing primitive jungle tribes, especially the Waica, Guaharibo and Shiriana Indians which apparently may form an identical group. They inhabit the Orinoco headwaters region, and also the adjacent Brazilian area, and have remained up to the present practically unapproached by professional ethnologists. (Map 1).

The last summary of ethnographical materials on the subject, based on personal knowledge, goes back to the
well known German Americanist Th. Koch-Grünberg, and was published in the year 1923. The last expedition into the Waica region, in the first quarter of the century, was that of Hamilton Rice, which had to retire from the
"Raudal de los Guaharibos" due to the aggressive attitude of the Indians, the region remaining closed since then to new contacts for almost thirty years, when members of the North American "New Tribes Mission" reestablished friendly contact with these peoples. The present peaceful situation which permits further field research there, must be put especially to the credit of James Paul Barker who, during his missionary activities among the Waica, has acquired great knowledge of their language, and written the paper "Report on the Culture of the Guaika Tribe" which will soon appear.

In the year 1951, the "Expedición Franco-Venezolana al Alto Orinoco" was organized, consisting of a group of Venezuelan scientists and a group of French researchers, who discovered the Orinoco headwaters region after many months of hardships. Among the members of this expedition, we must mention Professors Cruxent and Anduze, who carried out, besides other duties, some ethnographical research among the Waica, which perhaps will be published in some Venezuelan scientific periodicals. Joseph Grelier, head of the French group, has just published his experiences in a profusely illustrated book, which contains also some ethnographic material about this people.

Another expedition which contacted the Waica-Guaharibo Indians, was the French expedition "Orénoque-Amazone" (1949/50), headed by A. Gheerbrandt, which met some groups of this tribe in the northern part of the region. Gheerbrandt speaks about it in his popular book, published in 1952.

One of the members of the "Expedición Franco-Venezolana", captain Félix Cardona Puig, should be mentioned too as a man with immense knowledge of the Venezuelan-Brazilian borderland, due to the numerous official explorations he has made during a wide span of years. Unfortunately he has not published any reports about his experiences, as far as we know.

Now, since the middle of April 1954, the "Frobenius Expedition" has established its base camp in El Pla-
tananal, which is the main missionary station of the “New Tribes Mission” in the Waica country, where J. P. Barker is also residing (Map 1). We began our fieldwork studying the material culture and social organization of the nearby Waica village Mahekodo-tedi. We immediately built up a large ethnographical collection too. Right from the beginning we started to learn the Waica language because without its knowledge it would be impossible to understand their mentality and penetrate their spiritual life. In this task we are kindly assisted by Mr. Barker who helped us also quite a lot as interpreter. There are no members of the tribe itself who speak enough Spanish to help us in our daily intercourse with this people.

Therefore I am not in a position to present a full picture of the Waica Culture to-day. To do so would also require more time than is at my disposal. Nevertheless it is possible to point out some aspects of the Waica culture, based on my personal observations, which, in my opinion, constitute important clues regarding the historical situation of these Indians and their cultural relations with other South American tribes.

Before touching on this subject, I would like to express my sincere acknowledgement to the Venezuelan Government, particularly the “Comisión Indigenista” of the Ministry of Justice, headed by Mr. Walter Dupouy, its Technical Adviser, for the help and advice which we received, and to Mr. Robert G. Shaylor, Head of the “New Tribes Mission” in Venezuela, and his collaborator Mr. James P. Barker, for the invaluable assistance given to our expedition right from the beginning and thereafter continuously during our fieldwork in the Waica territory.

THE WAICA, A MARGINAL TRIBE OF TROPICAL SOUTH AMERICA

The cultural status of the Waica-Guaharibo-Shirianá Indians within South American Ethnology has, in my opinion, been rightly determined by Julian H. Steward,
who places them among the more primitive peoples distributed in a vast U around the periphery of the Amazon Basin. Together with the Macú he includes them among the Guiana Internal Marginals, forming the north-eastern extreme of this U figure (Map 2). To the north-west of this group he places the North-Western Marginals (Guahibo, Yaruro, etc.). The northern section of the so-called Western Amazon Submarginals spreads from the northern shore of the Marañón up to the Putumayo Rivers, and includes the Zaparo, Peba and Western Tukano, while the southern section dwells in the back country which forms the watershed between the Ucayali, the Jurua-Purus Rivers, and the Madre de Dios River.

Map 2 — The Marginal Tribes of Tropical South America (according to Julian H. Steward). *Full* = Guiana Internal Marginals; *diagonal hachure* = North-Western Marginals; *horizontal hachure* = Western Submarginals; *vertical hachure* = Marginals of Southern Amazon Periphery; *cross hachure* = Mura.
basins. The southern section consists of several Arawak tribes (Amuesha, Campa, Piro, Machiguenga, Chonta-quiro, Masco, Sirineri, Tuyuneri, Canamari, Maniteneri) and some Panoans, especially the Mayoruna and even the Cashinawa, and extends into the Andes adjoining the Quichua on the upper Ucayali, and the Aymara nearer Lake Titicaca. — Although not mentioned by Steward, the Uru may be the missing link between these primitive proto-Arawakan and Panoan groups and the Andean population. — The Mura tribe on the lower Madeira river is also classified by Steward as submarginal. — The Marginal Tribes of the Southern Amazon Periphery, adjoining in the east the Marginal Tribes of Eastern Brazil, are represented by the Sirionó and Nambiquara, the tribes of the upper Xingu, the Carajá, Tapirapé, Tenetehara and Guajá — according to Steward.

Besides these above mentioned areas there are several tribes in Eastern Bolivia which preserve certain primitive features resembling the marginal tribes, and also some tribes in Northwestern Brazil which are somewhat marginal, at least in their technology (Eastern Tuca-noans, Witotoans, Tukuna).

THE ECONOMIC BASIS OF WAICA CULTURE

Now, I wish to draw your attention to Waica culture itself, concerning their subsistence activities. It is surprising to notice, that the Waica, formerly reported as a hunting and gathering tribe by visitors who had only superficial contact with them, are actually horticulturists. They cultivate mainly plantains and bananas (Musa paradisiaca normalis, Musa paradisiaca sapientium) and live mostly on these fruits. They do not remember any specific introduction of these plants from neighbouring tribes. On the contrary, the Makiritare neighbours of the Waica especially cultivate root crops, which are of less importance among the Waica. Therefore the raising of plantains and bananas by this tribe may go farther back than would be expected. The "ter-
minus ante quem" the Waica probably were not horticulturists, but only hunters and gatherers, coincides with the introduction of the already cultivated plantain from south-eastern Asia to the New World, whether before or after Columbus is not yet clear (Sauer, p. 526/7).

Furthermore it is of great interest that the Waica depend seasonally largely on the fruits of the peach palm (*Guilelma utilis*) and cultivate this tree by planting sprout cuttings, because the plant has lost the capacity to produce fertile seeds in many cases. The palm is said to be unknown in a truly wild state. But, unlike the plantain, the peach palm originated in South America itself, probably on the eastern side of the Andes in valleys of limited rainfall. The location of its cultivation may identify it with the proto Arawak and proto Chibcha areas as a quite old cultigen — according to Sauer's opinion (l.c., p. 525). — In any case, the peach palm appears to be older in South America than the introduced plantain.

Furthermore, it is of great importance to point out that the Waica main festival, called le ahuno, occurs during the months of January and February when the fruits of the peach palm, which they call lasha, ripen and are collected. The le ahuno feast of the Waica is so directly connected with the peach palm (*Guilelma utilis*) that it can be compared to the Guilelma palm feast which the before mentioned Witoto celebrate during the harvest of this fruit. In my opinion, the peach or pijiguao palm, as it is more commonly named, has, in its uncultivated state already played a fundamental role in the past of Waica economic life, when the tribe lived only as hunters and gatherers, and was not familiar with the plantain tree. Although the plantain became afterwards the principal foodstuff of the Waica, the pijiguao palm maintains its outstanding position in the socio-religious life of the tribe.

Considering the possible origin of the peach palm on the eastern slopes of the Andes, it is interesting to remark that the plantain has also a great importance among the Indian tribes of western South America. Thus
among the Panoans of eastern Peru the plantain ranks now with sweet manioc and maize, their staple crops. Among the Tacana tribes of Eastern Bolivia, bananas and plantains are the basic food.

THE WESTERN TRAITS OF WAICA CULTURE

What we have just pointed out in regard to these economic facts, namely the connection with the western Amazon Basin, can also be observed as to other elements of Waica culture.

One of the outstanding traits of Waica culture is *endocannibalism*. They burn their dead, and collect the semi-calcinated bones from the ashes, pound them in a wooden mortar, and finally mix this bone-powder in a ripe-plantain soup which they drink generally during the pijiguao feast. — Quite a similar custom is practised by the Sáliba, Guayupe, and Sáe in Colombia. — Also many Panoan tribes in the Peruvian Montaña coupled endocannibalism with cremation, first burning the body, then mixing the ashes with mazato and drinking this mixture during a wake (Cashibo, Conibo, Setebo, Remo, Capanahua, Yuminahua, Amahuaca). — The Cashinawa practised endocannibalism in former times, as well as many other Panoan tribes of the Juruá-Purus region, boiling or roasting and then eating the corpses of their dead relatives. Besides, they drank also the calcinated bone-powder mixed with chicha. — The Mayoruna, who with the Cashinawa belong to the southern section of the Western Submarginals, roasted the corpses with lamentation, cut them into pieces, and ate them. The bones were then ground, mixed with mazato and finally drunk. — The Icaguate, a western Tukano tribe of the northern section of Western Submarginals, indulged in an analogous practice. They cremated the body and drank the ashes mixed in chicha. — The Moré, a Chapacura tribe of Eastern Bolivia, make a cake of pounded Brazil nuts, mixed with the ground bones of their dead, and the relatives and guests eat it during a drinking
Among the Arapium, the flesh of the dead was eaten by the relatives. Old women pulverized the bones, and mixed the powder in drinks. — The Arapium were probably a sub-tribe of the Tapajoz Indians who lived in the vicinity of Santarem, and were reported to practise quite the same custom. They left their dead exposed until the flesh had decayed away. The remaining bones were then pulverized, and the bonepowder mixed with chicha was then drunk. — The Tapuya of Eastern Brazil, especially the Tarairiu in the 17th century, had their priests dissect a corpse, which was then cooked and consumed. The bones, however, were carefully preserved for a subsequent solemnity, when they were pulverized, mixed with water and drunk.

The highest density of the distribution of endocannibalism in South America appears to be located in the western part of the continent, and very often among marginal or submarginal tribes of the Tropical Area (Map 3). The evidence from the Tarairiu, who belong to the Marginals of Eastern Brazil, can be brought up in connection with that from the Arapium and the Tapajoz. But the Waica custom of cremating the body and eating only the pulverized bones points rather to the west.

Another characteristic feature of Waica culture is the use of Yopo snuff powder. By means of a reed tube one man blows the powder, generally called ebena into another man's nose. By repeated inhaling of the snuff the individual may become intoxicated, and is then able to establish contact with the kekula, the spirits of rocks and waterfalls, in order to induce them to bring mishap and sickness to the enemies of the village. Ebena appears to be made of the seeds of Mimosa acacioides or of a Piptadenia species.

Regarding the distribution of the Yopo or Parica snuffs in Guiana, Gillin states that the use of Parica seems to be another western trait, which had barely reached the fringe of the Guiana area at the time of our earliest knowledge. Besides, Gillin attributes its use to
the Parima River tribes, with whom the Waica can be connected, and also to the Mura and Maué on the southern banks of the Amazon River.

Cooper located the general distribution of this custom in South America and drew a distribution map for the Piptadenia snuff, which makes clear its western tendency (Map 4). Without going into details we can say that, among the North-Western Marginals, the Guahibo and Chiricoa specialize in the practice of taking Yopo snuff. We may add that the Tukuna and Uitoto, who can be considered to a certain extent as marginal, also use some kind of snuff.
Instead of Parica or Yopo snuff, we find tobacco powder used for the same purpose in the Peruvian Montaña, among the Panoan tribes of the Ucayali River, and furthermore among some of the above mentioned Submarginal Tribes such as the Coto (Western Tucano), the Campa, Piro and Machiguenga (Arawak), while the Careneri, also a primitive Arawak tribe, snuff a certain green powder of a yet unknown kind. Finally, in the Juruá-Purus region, both tobacco and Yopo powder are used for this purpose by many tribes, particularly the Panoan Cashinawa.

Map 4 — Distribution of Piptadenia snuff in South America (according to John M. Cooper). Waica = +
Although it is not precisely a chewing tobacco, we must refer to the use of rolled up tobacco leaves placed behind the lower lip, previously mixed with ashes, and acting as a stimulant, as another outstanding element of Waica culture. Regarding the distribution of chewing tobacco in Guiana, Gillin reports that it seems to have been restricted aboriginally to a few of the central tribes (Patamona, Acawai and Arecuna). But I do not think that the Waica-Shirianá — Guaharibo adopted this custom from these central tribes of Guiana, because here we find once more a western heritage, as shown in Cooper’s distribution map on the subject (Map 5). Without going into further details, I will only add that some of the primitive Western Tucano (Encabellado, Coto), the Tukuna, and the Western Submarginal tribes Machiguenga and Zaparo, are also acquainted with this custom.

**THE GUIANA TRAITS OF WAICA CULTURE**

Having discussed the strong western tendency of several important elements of the Waica culture, we have on the other hand the fact that their elements common to the Guiana tribes of a higher cultural level are comparatively fewer in number and of minor importance.

It is well to point out that the triangular temporary shelters of the Waica, which are their basic type of dwelling, correspond to the temporary shelters of the more highly civilized tribes which construct them only during their hunting trips or travels. For permanent dwellings the latter use a more developed and durable type of house.

The cotton hammock of the Waica, called *nu*, is a cultural element adopted from the Makiritare in a simplified form. It is not woven, but only knotted, with very few cross-wise strings binding the longer ones. The cultivation of cotton itself appears to be a relatively recent introduction, perhaps also taken from the Makiritare. Cotton yarns are used as ornamental bands for the body together with their more primitive type of ornaments. For example, men tie their penis upwards to
a waist-string, but at the same time they wear, often only for ornamental purposes, a thick cotton belt as well.

Map 5 — Distribution of Tobacco chewing in South America (according to John M. Cooper).

The elements referred to seem to be the only few which the Waica have in common with their more highly civilized neighbours in the Guiana region. Therefore, the Waica can be regarded as strange to their present habitat. All the more so, if we agree with Julian H. Steward's opinion that Guiana has been the center of dispersal of
the Tropical Forest Culture in South America, to which the Waica belong only as "Marginals".

THE PRIMITIVE STRATUM OF WAICA CULTURE

The marginal and primitive traits of the Waica culture can be summarized as follows: In spite of their horticultural activities of to-day, the primitive gathering pursuit is still quite alive. Hunting is especially practised in the dry season. It is interesting to note that the word ni meaning "food", is apparently connected to the word ni-ai, which means "to shoot with bow and arrow". We may infer, therefore, that in the mind of the Waica Indians, insuring their subsistence was intimately connected with the practice of hunting, because the bow and arrow are their favorite hunting weapons.

The bones of game are kept in their dwellings as trophies, but they are neither esteemed nor connected with any ideas about further hunting luck, as is the case for example among some primitive tribes in Eastern Bolivia, like the Chimane, Mosetene, and Yuracare.

The Waica are still semi-nomadic in spite of erecting permanent villages and practising incipient farming. During their seasonal wanderings they do not use the rivers as traffic routes, because they were originally ignorant of the arts of boat-building and navigation. They only travel on land by trails that cross the jungle in all directions, and cross the rivers by means of rudimentary bridges when the conditions permit it.

Regarding the various handicrafts, it can be said that real weaving is unknown, and that pottery is rather crude. Their basketry produces well-made and useful specimens, although the technique applied is that of twining, which is considered in South America as rather primitive, and has a marginal distribution there as shown in a map, drawn by Julian H. Steward (Map 6).

The use of outsize bows and arrows over two meters long by the Waica is a characteristic of the jungle nomads
of South America, such as the Sirionó. The only other weapon of the Waica are long poles used as clubs to settle local conflicts, which is reminiscent of a similar custom of the primitive marginal Botocudo of Eastern Brazil.

Another very primitive cultural element of the Waica is their simple hammock made of bast or bark-fiber, named by them toto. The strings are simply bound together at both ends, remaining loose for their entire length without any cross strings. A chisel of rodent teeth hafted to a wooden handle is a Waica tool, also common among the primitive jungle peoples of South America, like the Sirionó and Guayaki.

Map 6 — Distribution of Twined Basketry in South America (according to Julian H. Steward).
Another ancient custom of the Waica is the tonsure which was formerly widespread in South America. Contrary to the general practice of depilation, observed among the more highly civilized South American Indian tribes the Waica do not have this custom. This fact contributes in some cases to the primitive aspect of their physical appearance. It should be added that among the Waica the average size for men is only slightly over 150 centimeters, and for women only slightly over 140 centimeters. Nevertheless, the Waica have no marked uniformity in their physical appearance, as a diversity of types has been observed, which may correspond to the complexity also found in their culture. Before concluding, I must make it clear that this paper is only a preliminary report, because the fieldwork of the Frobenius Expedition among the Waica will continue until the middle of 1955.

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