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Yopo, Ethnicity and Social Change: A Comparative Analysis of Piaroa and Cuiva Yopo Use[†]

Robin Rodd, Ph.D.* & Arelis Sumabila, Ph.D.**

Abstract—Most Orinocoan ethnic groups, including the Cuiva and the Piaroa, use yopo, a hallucinogenic snuff derived from the seeds of the *Anadenanthera peregrina* tree. This study contrasts Piaroa and Cuiva attitudes toward and uses of yopo in light of ongoing processes of social change. We do not believe that these sociocultural forces will lead to a phasing out of yopo in Piaroa and Cuiva life. However, we demonstrate how, in nearby communities, a combination of historical and ethical contingencies lead to very different patterns and understanding of drug use. Yopo is strongly associated with the performance of narratives central to each ethnic group's cosmology and identity. Cuiva yopo consumption is also a means of resisting persecution and asserting the right to a just reality. Piaroa attitudes towards yopo are affected by the interplay of shamanic ethical principles and missionary activity, and are sometimes paradoxical: yopo is the reason for harm and the means of salvation; required by shamans to create the future and yet regarded by many laypeople as a relic of the past. We identify persecution, local responses to missionary activity, and shamanic ethics as key factors affecting the evolution of hallucinogen use by Amazonian ethnic groups.

Keywords—*Anadenanthera peregrina*, Cuiva, Piaroa, shamanism, Venezuela, yopo

The mid-upper Orinoco River is the world's cultural and botanical centre of psychoactive snuff complexity (Wassén 1979). Almost all of the indigenous groups inhabiting this area use or have used yopo, a hallucinogenic snuff derived from the seeds of the *Anadenanthera peregrina* tree (e.g. Cure 2005; Rodd 2002b; Overing & Kaplan 1988; de Smet & Rivier 1985; Coppens 1975; Fuentes 1980; Altschul 1972; Schultes 1979; Chagnon, le Quesne & Cook 1971; Coppens

& Cato-David 1971; Granier-Doyeux 1948; Wassén 1979, 1965).¹ Several scholars have pointed out, however, that little ethnographic work has been done to assess the cultural framework within which yopo use exists (Altschul 1979: 313; Wassén 1979: 303; Chagnon, le Quesne & Cook 1971: 74). Recent comparative studies of psychoactive snuffs have not shed light on the local meanings and social forces affecting consumption (e.g. Ott 2001, 1996; De Smet 1985).

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Wassén (1979: 303), Chagnon and colleagues (1971: 74) and Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971: 171-2) each used the words “fertile field” to describe the potential for investigating the contexts of use and meanings associated with Orinocoan psychoactive plants. Since the 1970s, relatively little work has been done to assess the cultural contexts of hallucinogen use in Venezuelan indigenous communities. Moreover, there appears to be a gap between studies of “traditional use” and studies of hallucinogen use associated with urban, syncretistic religious practices or tourism in South America (e.g. Dobkin de Rios 1984; Luna 1986).

This article explores how Piaroa and Cuiva people conceive of and use yopo in light of ongoing processes of social change. Over the last thirty years, Venezuelan and Colombian indigenous communities settled along the Orinoco and its tributaries have experienced significant cultural changes in settlement patterns, trade and subsistence activities, the transmission of mytho-historical and ritual knowledge, and in their relationship to state and missionary organisations. We do not believe that these sociocultural forces will lead to a phasing out of yopo in Piaroa and Cuiva life. However, this article demonstrates how, in nearby communities, a combination of historical and ethical contingencies lead to very different patterns of drug use. We argue that higher levels of yopo consumption among the Cuiva (compared to the Piaroa) can be explained in terms of a lack of ethical structures associating yopo with terror, fear and madness, the expression of cultural solidarity in the face of ongoing persecution and a less consistent history of missionary activity (than among Parguaza River Piaroa people). Piaroa attitudes to yopo are shaped by both shamanic and Protestant ethics. However, responses to missionary activity vary by community and over time. Although persistent missionary activity has led to a decline in overall yopo consumption, yopo use is also an expression of Piaroa identity in the face of “imperialist gringo missionaries.” Yopo is strongly associated with the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and the performance of myths that are central to Piaroa and Cuiva cosmological systems and narratives of ethnic survival. Whereas among the Cuiva, yopo consumption may also be a means of resisting persecution and asserting the right to a just reality, Piaroa yopo use is paradoxical. It is a reason for harm and the means of salvation; required by shamans to create the future and regarded by many laypeople as a relic of the past.

First, Cuiva yopo use is discussed in relation to a history of persecution and the threat of extermination. Next, we discuss Piaroa yopo use, and assess the impacts that Protestant missionary activity and pressures to conform to ethical ideals have on this use. We conclude by proposing a comparative logic for understanding yopo use in relation to Piaroa and Cuiva sociocultural change, and highlight themes that may be of relevance for understanding the evolution of hallucinogen use by other Amazonian ethnic groups.

CUIVA

The Cuiva (Cuiba or Kuiva) belong to the Guahibo linguistic family, and live across tropical savannas and rain-forest areas in Apure State, Venezuela (Coppens 1975), and the Casanare and Arauca areas of Colombia.² Cuiva people make settlements along major rivers and their tributaries (such as the Arauca, Capanaparo, Ariporo, Casanare, Cravo Norte and Meta). For many centuries, the Cuiva have been hunter-gatherers who ranged in bands over an extensive area to seek food resources (Hurtado 1986). Some became temporarily sedentary, continuing to hunt and gather, while others started to cultivate the land or took temporary jobs on local farms or in towns. Each band is related to a geographic area, and based on a family group that maintains matrilineal residence.

Because the Cuiva are hunter-gatherers who move over an extensive area that criss-crosses the Venezuelan-Colombian border, and frequently cohabit regions with other ethnic groups, it is difficult to ascertain their exact population. The latest census data (OCEI 2002) indicate that there were 428 Venezuelan Cuiva. Sumabila estimates, however, that in 2002 there were approximately 1050 Cuiva living in the Romulo Gallegos Municipality (the Capanaparo River area) of Apure state, with three other settlements having at least 16 huts (24 at El Paso, 16 at Barranco Yopal, and 32 at Caño Mochuelo).

From the time of initial Spanish colonial contact, the Cuiva have been subject to the expropriation of their land, violence and extermination (Arcand 1972). During the late 1950s, the introduction of a land reform program became a legal justification for settler invasions of indigenous lands. The Cuiva were compelled to reduce their territory, forced to become more sedentary, and required to accept strangers using their hitherto traditional lands, which resulted in reduced access to resources (Fonval 1981). The nonliterate Cuiva were disadvantaged, relative to settler farmers, in negotiations with bureaucratic agencies and in their ability to interpret the legalities of their rights. Hence, the Cuiva have had to find new means of subsistence, most of the time by working on farms. Cattle production does not demand a large work force, however, and few Cuiva were ever employed. Those who do find employment on ranches receive low wages and few benefits. Displacement and persecution have a range of health sequelae, including malnutrition (Sumabila 2000, 1992).

The Cuiva battle for land and mobility is a battle for physical and cultural survival. The Cuiva have become infamous for their conflicts with local farmers, which have resulted in many Cuiva deaths. Meanwhile, cattle ranchers report the Cuiva to the local authorities (the police, the National Guard and the army) for “invading” ranches, theft and assault. During the 1980s and 1990s, Cuiva territory (especially in Colombia) was marked by constant tension between guerrilla groups, military and paramilitary organisations.

*Criollos*³ who wanted to rid the area of indigenous peoples accused the Cuiva of being intermediaries for Colombian guerrillas. At the same time, under the pretext of protecting themselves from the guerrillas, local farmers increased the number of firearms and armed men on their ranches. Both the Colombian and Venezuelan armies appeared to work more to protect the interests of landowners than the rights of the Cuiva.

Despite the fact that the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution highlights recognition and respect for indigenous land rights, culture, language and customs, in 2001, the Venezuelan government developed a plan to “improve” Cuiva social and economic conditions by reducing mobility. The Plan Apure-Sinaruco, which did not consider the needs of a hunter-gatherer ethnic group, was a civic-military arrangement oriented around limiting Cuiva mobility in a tense border zone (Asamblea Nacional de la Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela 2002). In 2003, the Venezuelan government started to restore the rights of indigenous peoples by following the principles of the country’s constitution. On October 12, 2005, Cuiva people received legal title to land, which is a first step in rectifying centuries of exploitation and extreme marginalisation. For the Cuiva, at least, more than principled policy will be required to remedy the symptoms and causes of injustice. Yopo may already be part of the answer.

PREVALENCE OF CUIVA YOPO USE

In 1971, Coppens and Cato-David (1971) noted that, while shamanic activity (relating to divination and healing) had certainly declined, overall yopo use had not. It appears, however, that rates of yopo consumption have continued to fall in at least some Cuiva communities. Based on Sumabila’s research, in Barranco Yopal and El Paso the percentage of the adult male population who consumed yopo more than once a week declined from 80 in 1987, to 73 in 1991, to 68 in 1993 to 61 in 1997. Over the same period, female consumption rates declined from 17, to ten, to six to three.

The cultivation, preparation and consumption of psychoactive plants are not restricted to Cuiva shamans, and it is not uncommon for women to consume yopo. The frequency of Cuiva yopo consumption differs greatly between the dry and wet seasons. Yopo seeds come to maturity during the dry season (November-March), when it is also easy to move through floodplains where yopo trees grow, allowing for ease of collection and preparation. During February and March, adult men consume yopo almost every second day. During the wet season, the frequency of consumption drops to once a week, provided seed supplies last.⁴

CUIVA CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF AND USES FOR YOPO

Cuiva people attribute their cultural survival to the use of yopo, which has enabled them to ward off colonists, other ethnic groups and illness. Yopo experiences mediate

relations among ancestors and the living, and are an integral component of the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Machagua, a Cuiva man from Barranco Yopal, maintains that “Yopo is part of our memories, our songs, and our ancestors.” Carmelina, also from Barranco Yopal, remarks that: “It came from our ancestors. They have left it to us. It is one of the most important things that they left us.” Another Cuiva man, Pancho Dua, put it thus: “Without yopo and capi we will pass away. Yopo enables us to live on this land.”

Coppens & Cato-David (1971: 16-17) argued that collective Cuiva yopo ceremonies are the “vehicle par excellence for the maintenance of harmonious community relations,” and forums for negotiating interfamily bonds and social hierarchies. Fari, a Cuiva man, emphasised the importance of yopo for keeping kin and community united. Group yopo sessions involve host-guest relations and the conjoining of families who might not otherwise interact on a day-to-day basis. Sharing yopo and visionary experiences encourages communication among participants and communities. Cuiva yopo use may be explained in terms of an expression of cultural solidarity in the face of extracultural forces, in this case *criollos* and the military more than missionaries who, like the Cuiva, have struggled to maintain a presence in a difficult, militarised border region. Coppens and Cato-David argued that Cuiva yopo use afforded visionary escape from the harmful psychological effects of persecution and exclusion.

Yopo allows refuge from the indigenous person’s reality of having to forcibly enter a new world, even when [the Cuiva] are aware that to enter this world involves suffering drastic changes that could lead to the definitive end of their culture, or even their physical existence (Coppens & Cato-David 1971: 21).

Perhaps it is not so much however, that yopo use provides refuge from social and physical insecurity, but that it has become a means of asserting *Cuivaness* in this world. Some Cuiva maintain that part of the reason they consume yopo is to envisage a beautiful world of bounty, which might be desirable given a history of persecution and the difficult social environment in which the Cuiva live.

In Cuiva mythology yopo enables men and women to metamorphose into other animals, communicate with ancestors and to envision the future. Shamans use yopo to get help and advice from the dead to restore the health of the living. Following yopo inhalation, a shaman is able to see possible causes of illness and can enter into battle with any human responsible for causing this illness. Any Cuiva man or woman may have a yopo vision about future events in their life, and may link these visions of the future to their contemporary reality. A *dopatubin* (a man who inhales yopo) can become an animal and adopt this animal’s powers to obtain resources for others. This was the case for a man who, after inhaling yopo, became a jaguar and killed a caiman in order to protect himself and satisfy his wife’s request for caiman

flesh. In another commonly told story, a woman leaves the terrestrial realm to live in the firmament after sniffing yopo (Ortiz 1994). Overall, yopo is held in high regard by most Cuiva people, whether or not they are regular users. This is not the case in all Piaraa communities.

PIAROA

The Piaraa have not endured a history of persecution and violence comparable to that of the Cuiva. Piaraa people have had to fight to maintain control of their traditional zone of habitation, and have undergone radical changes in settlement and political organisation. However, they have managed to preserve exclusive occupation of much of the country that their gods created and in which, in animal form, these gods continue to live. The Piaraa live along several rivers, including the Parguaza, Cuao, Sipapo, Autana, Cataniapo and Carinagua, in the Bolívar and Amazonas states of Venezuela. Piaraa territory spans tropical highland zones, dense lowland rainforest and savannah, and can be divided according to missionary activity and trade routes. Parguaza River Piaraa people are nominally Protestant, while Sipapo-Autana-Cuao River Piaraa may identify as Roman Catholic.

Piaraa subsistence activities are heavily oriented around the cultivation of bitter cassava, which is primarily the domain of women (Heckler 2004). Men fish and hunt, and both men and women collect wild fruits (Overing 1975; Mansutti 1990). The Piaraa economy is oriented towards trade with *criollo* merchants in major towns, and each area of habitation has its own transport system to move people and produce from gardens to *criollo* markets and back. Piaraa entrepreneurs or collectives have bought outboard motors and act as middlemen who buy manioc flour from growers in each community, and resell it for a profit in *criollo* towns. Some cooler highland communities, such as Salto Blanco (Parguaza River), are also able to cultivate lucrative cacao. Mountainous terrain separates the two most populous areas of Piaraa habitation (the Parguaza River and the Cuao-Sipapo-Autana Rivers).

Between the 1960s and 1980s, the Piaraa moved out of isolated, interfluvial highland zones to settle permanently along navigable rivers, where the majority of Piaraa people live in villages of between 50 and 500 people. This move facilitated contact with *criollo* towns and markets (Mansutti 1995: 66; OCEI 1993, 1985), and was accompanied by rapid population growth. The Piaraa population was very stable since the first census was taken in 1838 until the 1970s. Since then, the population has grown from 2000 to 3000 in 1975, to 7030 in 1985, to 11,539 in 1993 and 12,558 in 2000 (OCEI 2002, 1993, 1985). With the exception of the headwater areas of the Parguaza, Autana and Cuao rivers, traditional highland habitation zones have become depopulated (Zent 1993: 238-9). Cosmological structures, however, continue to be oriented more toward mountains than to rivers (Zent 1999: 95).

Piaraa society is marked by significant intracultural diversity and regional identities. This can be explained in part because trade routes are now oriented downriver toward major *criollo* settlements rather than overland to other Piaraa communities, partly because Piaraa territory spans Bolívar and Amazonas states, and partly because different regions of habitation share boundaries with different ethnic groups. Piaraa is one of the few Saliva languages spoken (Loukotka 1968: 151-2), and most Piaraa people speak at least some Spanish and/or the languages of neighboring ethnic groups (such as Guahibo, Curripaco or Mapoyo). Most of the fieldwork that Rodd conducted with the Piaraa was on the Parguaza River, with shorter trips to the Sipapo and Alto Caringua. It is difficult to say how representative the Parguaza River experience is of Piaraa society as a whole.

PREVALENCE OF PIAROA YOPO USE

In 1958, Wurdack (1958: 117) noted that yopo was in “general use among the Guahibo and Piaraa males.” In 1972, Altschul (1972: 28) stated that yopo was in “general use today among males of some groups [in the Orinoco region], who are avid yopo-inhalers.” Among the Piaraa of today, yopo is no longer in general use, being almost entirely restricted to highly trained ritual specialists, whose numbers are dwindling. Few Piaraa men other than shamans consume any yopo at all, let alone being avid inhalers. According to Mansutti (1986), each Piaraa community would historically have had one *yuhuähuäruhua* (a “master of yopo,” a senior shaman with high level capabilities for divination and sorcery) and two or more *meyeruwae* (masters of songs and cures, shamans with limited capacities to divine solutions to complicated problems or to kill by means of sorcery). Oldham (1997: 242) notes that whereas most Piaraa communities had more than one *meyeruwa* per village, there was only one *yuhuähuäruhua* per 824 people. On the Parguaza River today, there are eleven practising *meyeruwae* and four *yuhuähuäruhua* in a population of approximately 3400 (one *yuhuähuäruhua* per 850 people, and an average of one *meyeruwa* per village, although many villages have none).⁵ Going on the number of practising shamans alone, and bearing in mind that there is very little evidence to demonstrate any regular extra-shamanic yopo consumption, only 0.4% of the Parguaza River population consumes yopo regularly (daily or weekly).

Piaraa yopo is never sold but is traded among shamans, and can be given as a gift among good friends. There are no formal prescriptions preventing women from consuming yopo or becoming shamans. However, there do not appear to be any female shamans in contemporary Piaraa society. Piaraa shamans keep seeds collected from different stands of *A. peregrina* trees in air-tight two litre plastic soft drink containers, and prepare fresh yopo throughout the year, which results in minimal seasonal variations in consumption rates. Moreover, it is imperative that the Piaraa shaman

continues to consume yopo in order for him to study life, and to sing the songs required to prevent illness.

PIAROA CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF AND USES FOR YOPO

Yopo experiences underpin Piaroa notions of time, thought, creation and causation. For the Piaroa, “it is not only that thought precedes reality; but that drugs precede thought” (Monod 1970: 18, trans). Piaroa shamanism is oriented around an epistemology whereby the meaning or cause of events (parts) can only be understood through visions that afford a glimpse of the whole. People who cannot cultivate meaningful yopo visions are not able, in the view of Piaroa shamans, to understand why and hence to predict what.

The ability to envision, and to make visions material, enabled the creation of forests, rivers, mountains, and the first people (the Piaroa). The discovery of Piaroa food, hunting, fire and housing technologies are all attributed to the work of shaman-gods who turned yopo visions into reality (Overing 1986: 142). Piaroa ethnic autonomy is attributed to the efforts of shamans who fought, by means of yopo-driven sorcery, Spanish colonists and purportedly cannibalistic Caribs. When a smallpox epidemic ravaged the Parguaza River in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Piaroa people explain their survival, relative to the Mapoyo who also used to live on the Parguaza, in terms of superior shamanic knowledge and the ability to make and use better yopo.

Yopo is consumed during the performance of songs, myths and cures, to understand social and ecological relations in the present and to envision amenable futures (Rodd 2003), to defend or attack during sorcery battles, and in social settings among other shamans, family and friends. José-Luis, a senior Parguaza River shaman, explained that he consumes yopo to “find food, to protect my family,” and to provide a healing service to those in need. All Piaroa myths and shamanic songs can only be learned and recited during periods of yopo intoxication. Whereas many Piaroa people are familiar with sections of myths, only shamans and their apprentices learn myths in their narrative and experiential (i.e. during yopo and *capi* intoxication) entirety.

Yopo is ideally consumed among friends, and is considered vital for certain forms of communication. Shamans in Piaroa communities with more than one shaman (such as Salto Maraca and Alto Carinagua) gather in the house of their lead shaman two to four times a week to talk, sing, share stories, discuss local issues, smoke cigars and take *capi* and yopo. Every Sunday, Ingenio (Montenegro de Sipapo), considered by some to be one of the five most powerful Piaroa shamans, and old friends from nearby villages gather to spend the afternoon taking yopo and catching up on the week’s events. Ingenio treats patients in the mornings, and continues to inhale yopo with his friends throughout the

day. Betulio (Ingenio’s son) described these sessions by saying that: “Just as *criollos* get together to drink beer on the weekend, the shamans have their yopo.”

Yopo opens channels of communication that alcohol-fueled sociality cannot. José-Luis described yopo as “the indigenous drug used to travel and communicate with.” We can understand “travel” and “communicate” on at least two levels. Yopo experiences are communicated among shamans when they travel to meet each other. Yopo is also the means of travelling through channels of communication that are imperceptible during waking consciousness. Yopo visions are the shaman’s means of participating in and shaping animated information flows that are believed to underpin the behavior of matter. The idiom of “travelling” expresses the experience of navigating the space-time continuum. Spirit familiars deliver messages from the future and the past. Extremely strong visions enable the Piaroa shaman’s spirit to fly into sacred rocks and waterfalls that are home to gods and their knowledge.

Piaroa perceptions of yopo, and patterns of yopo use, vary considerably. Shamans and most elders hold the use and power of yopo in great reverence. To them yopo is a social gel whose correct use facilitates production and reproduction by encouraging insight into how to harmonise the interests of humans, other species and spirits. Rodd was met with the same response on each occasion he arrived for the first time in a Piaroa village inhabited by one or more shamans: “You want to know about our culture, you must know this.” The shaman would show his yopo kit, a small basket containing all essential snuff paraphernalia. Accordingly, losing the knowledge of how to prepare and consume yopo is conceptualised as “losing culture.” This view of the relationship between culture and yopo is not shared by all.

Many young men express a respect for yopo’s power, but also fear and/or incomprehension concerning its use and in some cases disdain for yopo’s capacity to make the shaman “drugged.” Among the middle generation of men (comprising most school teachers, medics and headmen), many look down on yopo-users who may become “inconsistent,” “unreliable,” “angry,” “unpredictable,” or “always drugged” and who, most importantly, hold the rest of Piaroa society back. Some people equate yopo use with backward traditions that impede Piaroa economic and political development. A great paradox of Piaroa society is that while shamans conceive of yopo as a means to understand the future, many lay people associate its use with the ways of the past. As one shaman put it: “yopo should be used like a compass. It shows you which path to take. It shows you the future.” Learning to see the future as a shaman does comes at a great price. Apprentice shamans must commit to years of scholarship and sacrifice, painful initiatory rites, and pressures to conform to a near impossible ideal of “lawful” shamanic activity. Few young men choose to devote their lives to visionary scholarship. Few elder shamans have the patience to teach young men who ask for “intensive courses”

to accommodate lifestyles ever more attuned to the demands of participation in the national economy.

LIVING BY THE LAW: INITIATION AND PIAROA YOPO ETHICS

Some of the resistance that Piaroa men have towards yopo use derives from the association they may have developed between yopo and painful, possibly terrifying, initiatory rites. Men's initiation rites (*maripa teai*), still performed in some areas of Piaroa habitation, are oriented around the consumption of yopo and capi (Rodd 2002a). These rites are performed when community elders, including but not exclusive of the region's most senior shaman, believe that the initiates have the maturity and knowledge required to become responsible adult members of Piaroa society. In order to acquire this knowledge, however, initiates must endure physical privations (fasting and painful rites) and consume yopo and capi to envision their own future. The performance of initiatory rites is considered to be a dangerous event, requiring at least one shaman to concentrate on defending the space in which the rites are performed from possible sorcery attack or the incursions of malevolent spirits (*mari*). The psychological space in which many young men are introduced to yopo, therefore, is charged with threats of danger, physical privations and "suffering of the spirit."

According to Oldham (1997: 236, trans.), *māripa teai* serve two primary functions: "Firstly, to learn the rules, customs and responsibilities that make social life possible within [Piaroa] society. Secondly, to acquire the conceptually dangerous knowledge that permits [the initiates] to become productive members of their communities." The ideal psychological and social conditions associated with being Piaroa, referred to as "living by the law" or "the good life of tranquility" (Overing 2000, 1989), are perceived by shamans during yopo visions and taught to children from an early age. Yopo visions provide the means for initiates to understand how to perceive their needs in relation to community needs according to an ethos that emphasizes cooperation, compassion and the avoidance of conflict and competition. Living by the law is considered by some Piaroa people, but especially shamans, to be a defining element of ethnic identity. According to José-Luis; "other people use yopo: the Hiwi; the Kurripaco; even the *criollo*. But they do not understand the law. Only the Piaroa understand the law. The law has made us who we are."

Unfortunately, Piaroa gods were not able to live by the law, and their legacy of abusive and unethical yopo use has also made the Piaroa who they are. Warnings of the dangers of drug abuse are dispersed throughout Piaroa mythology, which is replete with tales of gods whose lives fell to ruin because they could not maintain a healthy balance between waking and visionary life (Overing 1986: 145; Boglár 1978: 28; Monod 1970: 18). Despite creating the world, people, and many subsistence technologies, Kuemoi (jaguar) and

Wahari (tapir) never gained control of their visionary powers. Kuemoi and Wahari's incapacity to balance waking and visionary pursuits, and their competitive drive for power, led to Kuemoi's death at the hands of Wahari, to human mortality, and to the loss of Wahari's transformative powers. Neither Wahari nor Kuemoi, two of the greatest creator gods, provides a behavioral model to emulate.

Piaroa people recognize the possibility that one can live "too much in the other world" to the detriment of one's family and neighbours. Boglár (1978:8) notes that one *mey-eruwa* was relieved of his responsibilities as ritual leader for having repeatedly recited a song erroneously as a result of excessive yopo consumption. The negative consequences of this shaman's yopo abuse were purportedly manifest in his inability to prevent disease through the blessing of game meats, and his loss of memory and of working knowledge of sacred texts. Disgraced, the shaman became a social pariah who floated between communities. Many people of the lower Parguaza describe Mariachechi (of the upper-Parguaza) as an evil shaman. Adolpho, one of Plinio's sons, described Mariachechi thus:

He is always taking yopo, every fifteen minutes. He walks with a twitch, head down, stomping his feet and never in a straight line. He carries his rifle across his chest, and is always looking for a fight. He is crazy. When he comes to town, people stay inside their houses and close their doors . . . He had sex with his own daughter and burned down his brother's house.

José-Luis has gained a reputation extending beyond the Parguaza River for the size and frequency of yopo doses that he consumes. A brother-in-law was critical of José-Luis's yopo consumption, arguing that it caused José-Luis to have an uneven temper, and to fail in some of his economic ventures.

He is always drugged . . . He used to have an outboard but never maintained it and abandoned it. He used to have a stereo. What happened to it? He became angry one day and threw it in the river. Why? Because he takes too much yopo.

Piaroa shamans, including José-Luis, however, are aware of the danger of losing control of their faculties as a result of excessive yopo intoxication. According to José-Luis:

I don't take yopo every day. Sometimes only once or twice a week. Other times with a friend, 60, 90, 120 snuffs a day. But your family has to come first: grandparents, children, and the house. You've got to make sure that things are kept in order. Otherwise . . . it's the same with rum. You can't go drinking every day. This is what some people do not understand.

PROTESTANT AND PIAROA YOPO ETHICS

The stories of Kuemoi, Wahari and wayward shamans unable to integrate visionary experiences in the interests of social harmony have left a cautious approach to yopo that discourages recreational use and allows for convenient evangelical interpretations of Piaroa mythology.

Long-standing associations among yopo, sorcery and madness have probably facilitated Protestant teachings that drug use is unethical and unhealthy. Mansutti (1986: 68, translated by author) wrote: "Today, more than half of the Uwojtjuja [Piaroa] profess to be evangelical or Catholic while only a few express an interest in continuing to be believers of their own religious discourse." Identification with some sort of Christianity, however, masks a wide variety of syncretistic or idiosyncratic religious beliefs that vary from community to community. The capitán of Cerro Cucurito (Upper Parguaza) explained that: "We have left the vices of our traditional ways while maintaining all that is good about our culture . . . our houses, our clothing, our food. Yopo and capi, they are the substances of the devil." In some villages where there are no practising shamans, people were eager to tell Rodd that their faith in the Christian God afforded them protection from eternal damnation, a fate met by deceased shamans, and that Piaroa mythology was a lie. "How could it have been possible for Wahari to have created the world if there is only one god, and *He* was the creator?" the Salto Blanco (Upper Parguaza River) school teacher asked.

Cerro Cucurito and Salto Blanco might be winning the battle against the devil's substances. Protestant missionaries, however, have been no more able to quell belief in sorcery or evil spirits than their Catholic counterparts. Sorcery accusations continue to have major psychological and political repercussions, even in towns with no shaman and even when the accused is barely known to the accusers (Rodd 2006). Fear of succumbing to a sorcerer's will or to the power of evil spirits (*mári*) during yopo visions is the ultimate disincentive for recreational use. Some of the same factors that discourage Piaroa yopo use, however, also perpetuate it. Although yopo is associated with sorcery and danger, yopo-using shamans are the only people capable of protecting others from sorcerers and evil spirits. Unlike shamanism, Christianity provides neither protection from sorcery nor healthcare.

It is difficult to assess the impact of missionary activity on Piaroa attitudes towards yopo. Over the past generation, along the Parguaza River, several shamans or men training to become independently practising shamans converted to Protestantism. Most of these "retired" from active service, and do not sing the health-promoting *meye* (shamanic songs) or consume any yopo at all. Although people from some Parguaza communities couch their disdain of yopo and yopo users in terms of the devil, other nominally Protestant villages (i.e. Fundo Nuevo) appear to be experiencing a resurgence in respect for shamans and their drug habits. Protestant missionaries have not been able to maintain or build on their influence over the religious beliefs of Parguaza River people, and express a lack of satisfaction in their ability to train new Piaroa missionaries.

Salto Maraca, which had been home to a series of American New Tribes Missions (a Christian evangelical group) families from 1946 to 2005 (until they were expelled

from Venezuela) is also the Parguaza River's centre of shamanic activity, boasting the greatest concentration of practising shamans anywhere on the Parguaza and the river's most powerful shaman (Plinio). Plinio's house, where up to five other *meyeruwae* meet regularly for yopo and *meye* sessions, is a stone's throw from the missionary's house. According to Plinio, the presence of American missionaries had not diminished popular support for his practice. On the contrary, the permanent presence of *gringo* missionaries seemed to galvanise community support for Plinio and his trainees' activities, particularly as it became obvious long ago that the New Tribes Missions were not able or willing to provide material support or education. Many people resented *gringos* chastising them for walking on a mowed lawn in their own town. Politically-minded Piaroa from as far away as Colombia and Alto Carinagua spoke of Salto Maraca as a flashpoint where ethnic autonomy and freedom of expression should be maintained in the face of imperialist forces. Plinio's successful practice seemed to feed on latent desires for the expression of Piaroa cultural values in the face of an imperialist presence that, by 2001, was wearing out its welcome.

In centres of shamanic activity where the shaman is also headman, such as Salto Maraca, Montenegro (Sipapo River) and Alto Carinagua, shamans continue to exert significant influence in social life. People continue to seek treatment for any number of ailments, and return because they believe in the effectiveness of the shaman's cures. The people of Alto Carinagua also speak highly of Bolívar's ability to create a flexible social order. One man described life in Alto Carinagua in the following way:

Look at how we live here. We can choose Jesus Christ and [President] Chávez or follow the headman [and shaman, Bolívar]. The missionaries tell us that we shouldn't marry our cousins, but if we want to, we can. The people [of Alto Carinagua] have the choice to live according to their own beliefs, and to make their own reality.

DISCUSSION

Ideologies resulting from psychoactive plant use are paradigmatic to Piaroa and Cuiva conceptions of identity, thought and survival. Yopo consumption is restricted to Piaroa shamans and their apprentices, while a much larger proportion of Cuiva people, including women, consume yopo regularly. Despite the decreasing prevalence of consumption in each ethnic group, there is no end in sight for Piaroa or Cuiva yopo use. Members of each ethnic group assert narratives that link yopo to cultural identity through gods and ancestors (i.e. the past). Similarly, members of each ethnic group believe that yopo visions open paths to the future. For the Piaroa, whose "fallible gods" left no clear behavioral models to emulate (Overing 1989), yopo offers three paths: destruction; harmony through learning a difficult system of ethics taught by ever fewer shamans; or

the expression of cultural vitality in the face of “imperialist” missionaries. Cuiva yopo use, by contrast, makes a future possible by encouraging sociality and solidarity in the face of exclusion and persecution. In each case, yopo is fused with narratives of ethnic survival.

Comparison of Cuiva and Piaroa yopo use highlights ways that sociohistorical contingencies and culturally-specific beliefs interrelate to affect patterns of drug consumption in Amazonia. Cuiva people explain yopo visions in terms of experiencing a world of beauty and abundance. Piaroa shamans work to cultivate beautiful visions. However, they envision neither matter that they do not have nor physical security that they do not enjoy, but perilous knowledge that regulates the behavior of matter. Piaroa identity, and the tenor of yopo visions, is marked by the failure of creator gods to learn how to use yopo without causing chaos and harm. Mythological warnings of the dangers of yopo abuse, and missionary teachings that yopo is devilish, act as major disincentives for the casual cultivation of visions, and impose limitations on the evolution of yopo use in Piaroa society. Nonetheless, yopo-driven services are in high demand, even or especially in areas of high-intensity Protestant missionary activity. Cuiva yopo use is less fettered by ethical worries about the potential dangers of losing a productive balance between the visionary and waking worlds and, until recently, less affected by missionary activity.

The example of Plinio’s thriving shamanic practice outlasting the Parguaza River New Tribes Missions presence illustrates the nonlinear relationship between missionary activity and yopo use. Missionary teaching devalues the legitimacy of yopo use. Simultaneously, however, the centrality of yopo and shamanism to conceptualisations of ethnicity provide support for yopo users in the face of the activities of missionaries. Some people who converted to Christianity have also withdrawn their faith in Jesus Christ and now look to shamans for spiritual protection from sorcerers and *mãri*. It remains to be seen to what extent Piaroa shamanic practice can adapt to changing cultural and environmental conditions. However, the diversity of responses to missionary activity, and the strength of shamanic activity in the face of consistent pressures to convert to Christianity, indicates that yopo will continue to play an important part in Piaroa cultural evolution.

Until now, there appears to have been a higher degree of coherency in Cuiva attitudes towards yopo than is perceptible among Piaroa communities, which vary greatly in their perceptions of yopo and yopo users. This can be attributed to an inconsistent history of missionary activity and a less extreme initiatory complex and ethical framework for yopo use. Recently, missionaries have established a solid presence in some Cuiva communities. Sumabila notes that yopo consumption, particularly among women, seems to have declined in direct relation to missionary presence. Some Cuiva people appear to substitute alcohol for yopo, which is not the case in Parguaza River Piaroa communities.

It remains to be seen how these Cuiva communities adapt to missionary admonitions against yopo use. Cuiva people have endured decades of extreme violence and social exclusion. In this context, yopo use has been a means of linking sociality with the reproduction of core elements of Cuiva symbolic systems. Yopo, therefore, is a crucial axis in the nexus of behavior, experience and meaning that mediates cultural evolution.

We can explain the logic of Cuiva yopo use as follows: (1) the Cuiva place in the material world is relatively insecure; (2) yopo is a gift from the ancestors and a symbol and practice of identity and sociality; (3) yopo visions afford participation in a world of beauty and abundance; and (4) the social and visionary terrain of yopo use cannot be violated in the same way that human rights can be violated in the material world. By contrast, the following logic may explain why, given the small percentage of the population who consume yopo, it remains a vital element of Piaroa culture: (1) the Piaroa place in the material world is relatively secure; (2) yopo use is coterminous with ethnic narratives and ethical principles; (3) yopo visions are fraught with danger because beauty (i.e. knowledge) comes with difficult responsibilities (i.e. the law); and (4) although yopo use is restricted to a small number of ritual specialists, their services are required to maintain human health amidst cycles of intergenerational and intercommunity sorcery battles that missionaries have not been able to arrest.

NOTES

1. In 1916, Safford provided evidence that snuffs being recognized variously by the terms *yopo*, *niopo*, *yupa*, *yupa*, *wilca* and *cohoba* were all derived from the seeds of the same leguminous tree, *Anandenanthera peregrina* (Safford 1916). Later, it was discovered that the seeds from *Anandenanthera colubrina* were also used by certain indigenous groups in Argentina, Chile and Colombia. Both *A. peregrina* and *A. colubrina* have been demonstrated to contain the psychoactive agents 5-Methoxy-N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (5-MeO-DMT), 5-Hydroxy-N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (5-OH-DMT) and N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) in their seeds and bark (Fish, Johnson & Horning 1955; Stromberg 1954). Several other ethnic groups also prepare a snuff made from the resin of *Virola* species bark (e.g. the Waiká, Seitz 1979). We use the term “yopo” to refer to *A. peregrina* snuffs in this article because this is the Venezuelan Spanish colloquial term used in Amazonas and Bolívar states. For detailed descriptions of yopo preparation see Schultes 1979 and Rodd 2002b.

2. The Cuiva is a sublinguistic group of the Guahibo family. The Guahibo family includes the Sikuani, Yamalero (Gahibo playero), Maciguare, Macaguan, Amoruas, Sirupus and Cuiva.

3. *Criollo* is a colloquial Spanish word used by the Piaroa and Cuiva to refer to the settler society (i.e. Venezuelans who are not considered to be indigenous).

4. Piaroa and Cuiva people consume *Banisteriopsis caapi* (referred to as *capi* in colloquial Spanish, *tuhuipä* in Piaroa, and *dopa* in Cuiva) in conjunction with yopo. Capi can be grated, sieved and made into a bitter, acrid drink. More commonly, however, the bitter alkaloids are sucked slowly from a wad of capi cambium. The combination of *B. caapi* and yopo is psychopharmacologically advantageous (Holmstedt & Lindgren 1979). The use of *B. caapi* in decoctions that usually contain N,N-Dimethyltryptamine rich plants (such as *Psychotria viridis*) is well-known (c.f. Luna 1986; Dobkin de Rios 1984b; McKenna, Towers & Abbott

1984; Rivier & Lindgren 1972). The cross-cultural prevalence of *B. caapi* use in snuff-using societies is unclear.

5. There are two practising *meyeruwaes* who live on the lower Parguaza, two on the mid-Parguaza, five in Salto Maraca, and two in villages on the upper Parguaza. It is hard to determine exactly how many *meyeruwaes* per capita there are because more men are trained as *meyeruwaes* than practise as *meyeruwaes*. Numerous shamans have converted to Protestantism in the last few decades, or have simply retired from active practice.

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