

## Strategic ethnicity on the global stage: identity and property in the global indigenous peoples' movement, from the central Guianas to the United Nations

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### Abstract

*Based on fieldwork in Suriname, French Guiana and Geneva, this paper considers the implications of the discrepancy between contrasting representations of indigenous identity: the global Indigenous Peoples' movement and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples present indigenous peoples as descent-based groups; meanwhile Guianese Amerindians have a processual relationship with the environment, and use their relationships with the exterior to renew society. The differences between forms of identity in local and global contexts can thus be regarded as representing the dynamism and transformability of identity itself.*

### Introduction

In the global indigenous peoples' movement, concepts of identity and property are closely intertwined. «Peoples» claim «collective» rights to pieces of land, on the basis that it is their «ancestral» territory. As INGOLD (2000) has shown, these claims are not formulated in this way on the basis of indigenous modes of being, but instead on terms dictated by the colonial encounter. The very definition of the «indigenous» is based, for the purposes of the indigenous peoples' movement, upon the moment at which European powers colonised lands abroad, displacing or subjugating their previous inhabitants. It takes little or no account of previous or subsequent movements of populations. Consequently, indigenous claims to land, and claims to indigenous status itself, tend to be made by tracing identity back to the moment of this colonial encounter. This has little to do with the characteristic ontologies of so-called indigenous peoples themselves, which tend, especially in the cases of hunter-gatherers, to be founded upon present and continually engaged processes of being in the environment, or what INGOLD (2000) calls «dwelling». In this article<sup>1</sup>, I will focus on the themes of identity and property, for among the discrepancies between the daily practices of peoples classified as indigenous and the rhetoric that is used to represent them on the global stage, I regard these as most central to the problems which the indigenous peoples' movement strives to resolve. However, rather than simply pointing out discontinuities, I will present them from the point of view of the indigenous Amerindians of

the Guiana region of Amazonia, and I will show that from this perspective they make sense as part of the logic of social reproduction. In practice, social reproduction relies on the action of leaders, who act as mediators between the local group and outsiders, and between kin and affines. Through a comparison of rituals from different parts of the Guianas, I will reveal the continuities between different forms of mediation.

To begin with an example of the language used in the global indigenous peoples' movement, let us consider these phrases from the preamble to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

*Affirming* that indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples, while recognizing the right of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such. [...] *Recognizing* the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources. (UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2007)

These statements come from the opening paragraphs, which lay out the background and the foundations for the articles that follow. They express the issues of importance which the declaration is intended to resolve, but also reveal some of the assumptions upon which it rests as a whole. For example, in the first of these statements, no explanation is given of what constitutes a «people», and instead the category is taken for granted; at the same time, the idea of «peoples», of which «indigenous peoples» constitute a particular kind, is clearly of great importance. Meanwhile, in the second statement (to which I shall return later), attention is drawn to the central

<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon fieldwork carried out among the Trio, Wayana and Kali'na of Suriname and French Guiana, and data collected while working as a volunteer translator for DoCIP, a Geneva-based NGO providing services for the indigenous delegates to the United Nations. I am grateful for the generosity of my indigenous hosts and of the personnel of DoCIP, as well as to the ESRC for funding my research. Thanks are also due to the organizers of the CEISAL symposium in indigenous movements in 2007, at which I presented an initial version of this piece, to the participants for their comments, and to Vanessa Grotti for commenting on later drafts.

concern of land. The phrase, «*their rights to their lands*», preceded by the assertion that these rights are «inherent», is logically incoherent, because of the immateriality of the notions linking the beginning and the end of the statement: «[...] political, economic and social structures [...] cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies». The word that is conspicuously absent is «practice». Rights are supposed to be inherent to peoples, and the land to which these rights apply is something outside and separate from those peoples. If this is the case, then we must assume that the idea of a «people» is founded on some the notion of descent. Yet if we look at part of a statement from the indigenous peoples' representatives involved in creating the declaration, the Indigenous Peoples' Caucus, we find that relations with land played a central role in the development of the notion of indigenous peoples itself: referring to the origins of the process that led to the declaration, the chairman of the Caucus remembers, «Together we found out that Indigenous Peoples around the world shared a common situation of loss of control of our lands, territories and resources and a history of colonisation.» (MALEZER 2007)

What these phrases hide is that fact that the self-definition of «Indigenous Peoples» came about precisely through this process of discovering, through dialogue, a shared «situation» arising from the history of colonialism. Here, the use of the word «control» comes closer to the «practice» I referred to above. For, as INGOLD (2000) has argued, «culture» does not exist separately from «environment», but in fact what we call «culture» is instead an abstraction of the practical engagement between humans and landscape. I suggest that indigenous, as distinct from «non-indigenous» identity has come about through a relationship with land, and that the language of «culture» and «spirituality», by abstracting identity from environment, not only distorts the nature of both, but also reduces the force and effectiveness of the arguments in which it is used.

In this article I will address these broader questions, while at the same time attempting to close a gap that exists between two visions of indigenous lowland South American political action. On one hand, there have been attempts to describe «traditional» forms of leadership and political structures (e.g. CLASTRES 1974; KRACKE 1978; MAYBURY-LEWIS 1967; MENGET 1993; THOMAS 1982). On the other hand, more recently, political anthropology has tended to focus on indigenous identity politics and forms of «resistance» to national societies and to «modernity» (e.g. GROS 1998; HILL *et al.* 1996; RAMOS 1998; WHITTEN 1996). These later approaches privilege a singular, Western, or world-systems view of history, frequently portray indigenous groups as having a collective intentionality which reacts to externally imposed historical circumstances, and give little attention to culturally specific logics of motivation. Gow (2001) has made similar criticisms in the context of a discussion of myth and history, and HIGH (2006) and I (BRIGHTMAN 2007) have both analysed contemporary forms of Amazonian leadership without privileging either «traditional» or «modern» features, but in most cases there remains a considerable distance

between the ethnography of indigenous movements and identity politics and the fine-grained ethnography of everyday life, kinship and ritual.

This distance is all the more noticeable in studies of indigenous politics on a global scale, where the discrepancy between bureaucratic, «jet-setting» indigenous activists and the communities they represent might seem to justify a corresponding dichotomy in the anthropological literature. The ways in which indigenous peoples present themselves on the international political scene have caused some commentators to react with scepticism and some have dismissed them outright as fraudulent, notably Adam Kuper. Among other things, KUPER (2003: 392) argues that in the indigenous-peoples movement, «descent is tacitly assumed to represent the bedrock of collective identity»; this forms part of the «[...] uncomfortably racist criteria for favouring or excluding individuals or communities.» (2003: 395) However, the rhetoric of identity politics is, of course, largely about representation<sup>2</sup>. In the next paragraphs I will show how Guianese Amerindians represent themselves to each other, and how they represent themselves to the non-Amerindian, Western other, in order to explore how identity politics are in both cases about strategic approaches to authenticity. By doing so, I will show that attacks on indigenous activist images of authenticity privilege another, tacit claim to authenticity: that of the legal instruments created in the political fora, to which indigenous activism is addressed. The law, including the most wide-ranging instruments of international law formulated by the United Nations, is a creative sphere and, like culture, it is a product of ever-changing social processes. After showing that the creativity of lowland South American Indians is employed following a similar pattern in a variety of contexts, I will discuss political action from the point of view of the individual leader or mediator, and argue that the role of the mediator is one of the fundamental social categories in Amazonia, which manifests itself in interethnic relations and in trade, as much as in contemporary political relations with state and supra-state organisations. Finally, I will show that these continuities in form of innovation and type of role help to resolve some of the apparent discrepancies in contemporary indigenous politics.

### The global representation of indigenous identity

Although the term «peoples» can be said to imply the notion of descent, there is in fact no explicit reference to descent, or to rights based on genealogical relationships, in the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. Of all the language in the declaration, two statements come closest to the kind of thing Kuper criticises. Article 25 (UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2007):

<sup>2</sup> Commenting on Kuper's assertion that the movement's misrepresentation of indigenous identity necessarily makes it undemocratic, RAMOS (2003: 397) correctly notes that it would be «remarkable if representations and reality coincided».

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.

And the second of the statements from the preamble quoted above:

*Recognizing* the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources.

Certainly the very definition of the «indigenous» can be criticised, and it is indeed difficult to define in the abstract, but in practice, as I have shown, it is the history of colonialism by the European powers in the modern era that gives rise to contemporary indigenous identities. In the articles above, it is true that there are formulations which pose problems for any anthropologist. For example, there are many different kinds of relationship with the physical environment that human beings can have, and they are hardly the privilege of indigenous peoples; «tradition» is something that is continually invented and reinvented (HOBBSAWM et RANGER 1992); rights and characteristics cannot truly be said to be «inherent» to indigenous peoples unless they are made so by law or custom, and so on. On the other hand, the idea of a «relationship» to the land seems to be more appropriate than to express indigenous «dwelling» in other terms; meanwhile, the notion of «tradition», though vague, is far preferable to that of genealogical descent, since the former allows for change and current practices. However, the declaration is clearly not intended to be read as a piece of anthropological analysis; the intention of the authors is not to present an objective picture of the world, but rather to change the world. The text is a cultural artefact in its own right, and its nature is political.

The same is still more obviously true of the rhetorical strategies of indigenous activists which have been used to create the original draft declaration. Here are some of the statements made by Alexis Tiouka, a Kali'na delegate from French Guiana:

It matters little to States that indigenous peoples have, since time immemorial, obtained the majority of their resources from these territories. Whether it be in the case of the peoples of the Amazon, Asia, or any other place, each time the process is identical and history repeats itself: States ignore the presence of indigenous peoples. (TIOUKA 2002)

Or this:

The Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1948 only addresses itself to individuals as such. One can very well defend individuals in speaking of peoples. Amongst indigenous peoples, the individual does not exist, only the group is of importance. If an indigenous

community loses its cultural and linguistic identity, then it is more appropriate to speak in terms of genocide. (TIOUKA 2002)

One can easily quibble with the suggestion that «indigenous peoples have, since time immemorial, obtained the majority of their resources from these territories»; although it is evidently true (in fact they obtained most or all of their resources from them until relatively recently), it is also a tautology, for it is only the monolithic and arbitrary categories of «indigenous peoples» and «territories» that make it true: in fact, of course, the Amerindians of the Guianas also have a long history of migrations and warfare among themselves, with and without the encouragement of colonial powers. But this need not prevent one from agreeing with the sentiment. The second statement, with its formulation that «Amongst indigenous peoples, the individual does not exist, only the group is of importance», is more interesting, and arguably problematic, coming from a Guianese Amerindian, because Guianese Amerindian society is known among anthropologists precisely for its so-called «individualism» (RIVIERE 1984). Tiouka's phrase is obviously rhetorical, but can he justify such a seemingly extraordinary distortion of his own cultural background? To answer this, it is useful to look at patterns of ethnicity in the central Guianas, a remote region of highland rainforest in north-eastern Amazonia, and to examine the nature of indigenous Amerindian individualism.

### Ethnicity in the central Guianas

The Trio, Wayana and other Amerindian groups of southern Suriname and French Guiana live primarily from hunting, gathering and swidden horticulture, their main staple being bitter manioc. An important feature of Guianese kinship is uxorilocal postmarital residence: men go to live with their wife's family, and have to perform brideservice: they help their wife's father with various tasks for a number of years. However, powerful men can sometimes manage to avoid brideservice, and so an ideal village consists of its leader, his sons and daughters, and his sons-in-law. Meanwhile, Guianese peoples' lives involve a great deal of mobility, men and, to a lesser extent, women, travel frequently over great distances. When there is discord in a village, the minority party will, in a serious case, simply leave, either to another village in which its leader has kin, or to found a new village (RIVIERE 1984; BRIGHTMAN 2007). This practice (which can be seen as a strategy for avoiding conflict), along with the understated and mild form of leadership that predominates, is perhaps the main reason for the image of individualism given to Guianese Amerindians, for ethnographers have described what amounts, in terms of conventional ideas of power relations, to a high degree of individual autonomy in terms liable to give the impression of an individualistic ideology. In fact, ties of kinship and affection bind people closely and inform their actions as much if not more than any economic considerations and, despite an almost total absence of coercion, individuals are far from autonomous in an absolute sense.

This form of «individualism» and autonomy corresponds closely to that attributed to hunter-gatherers by Ingold, which he characterises as «[...] *relational*; a person's capacity to act on his/her own initiative emerges through a history of continuing involvement with others in contexts of joint, practical activity» (INGOLD 1999: 408, original emphasis). He contrasts it with Western individualism which «[...] posits the individual as a self-contained, rational agent, constituted independently and in advance of his or her entry into the arena of social interaction.» (INGOLD 1999: 408) Hunter-gatherers' relational autonomy relies heavily on trust, and society is constituted through subjective relationships rather than existing as an abstract concept to which one may «belong»; indeed, Ingold goes so far as to argue on this basis that hunter-gatherers do not even live in «societies». However, it is unhelpful to apply a strict definition of society as corresponding to some sort of corporate group as Ingold implies. While hunter-gatherers, or Guianese Amerindians, admittedly do not have an «absolute boundary [that] separates relationships that are social from those that are not» (INGOLD 1999: 409), I find it hard to think of any kind of «society» that does have such a clear boundary in practice; moreover, the distinction between kinds of relationship (between members of society and «others», or between kin and [potential] affines) remains a distinction, albeit blurred.

In a similar way, among Guianese Amerindians it is no easy matter to separate «identity» into categories of «collective» and «individual», for identity is composed of a number of shifting layers which result from the movements of people due to disputes or marriages. Each person's identity, rather than being a matter of «belonging» to a category, is composed of her associations with other persons (it is «relational»). The most important factor of identity is residence, but at the same time people retain ties of affection to their previous places of residence, places they have travelled to, and homes of their kin. For example, a Trio man in Tëpu will, if pressed, speak of his origins on the river Paru or Mataware, and say that his parents were Parujana or Aramiso<sup>3</sup>. But this does not mean that his identity can be reduced to any of these names; moreover, he will only refer to himself as Trio if speaking in Dutch or Sranan, and if he is speaking in Trio he will refer to himself and his fellows as *Tarëno*, which literally means «the people here». Kinship in the Guianas is more a matter of living, eating, drinking and being together in one place than a matter of blood or soil, as GROTTI (2007) has shown. Territoriality is not emphasised, and the relationship with land is expressed in narrative: people remember living in a certain place, shooting a certain animal in another, and say that another is dangerous because of the spirits that live there. People «belong» to each other in a much more meaningful way than land can be said to «belong» to people; at least as far as the forest is concerned. But this does not by any means signify that the idea of property is absent from these societies. On the contrary, the idea of ownership is central to the way in which people relate to places. Ownership comes about through the process of living in a place, of «dwelling» (INGOLD 2000). A village is «owned» by its founder, and leaders are called the «owners» of their

villages. Places in the forest, meanwhile, are «owned» by the spirits or masters of animal or plant species that reside in them. If Trio or Wayana were to make claims to legal rights to areas of forest, these would ultimately be based upon the histories of their movements through these areas, and their relationship with the spirit «owners» of places within them.

What this amounts to is that the «right» to live in a given space is not separate from the fact of living there. As INGOLD (2000) has pointed out, in the rhetoric of the indigenous peoples' movement, descent is used as a basis for claims to property rights, although it is a concept alien to most hunter-gatherer peoples. As I have mentioned, while the notion of descent is absent from the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it remains true that it is implied in the use of the term «Peoples», which is not given a precise definition, and yet is clearly distinguished from the notion of «land». Although the Trio practise agriculture as well as hunting and gathering, descent is also practically absent as a principle in Trio kinship<sup>4</sup>. Trio and other Guianese peoples do not constitute collective identities by tracing back abstract genealogies, but by being and acting together, and nowhere is this clearer than in collective feasts, the major collective occasions common across the region in various forms.

These feasts involve the coming of visitors to the village, and include the Trio New Year celebrations, which go on for several weeks from Christmas well into January. Although they have recently become associated with celebrations in the Christian calendar due to the influence of Protestant missionaries and contact with urban populations, Trio say that they have always had similar celebrations at this time of year, at the end of the dry season, just after the clearing of forest to create new gardens, and before the rains arrive and soften the earth enough for planting. The principal features are the bringing of game or fish to the village, dancing in groups, usually of one sex, anticlockwise in the centre of the village, and the universal consumption of vast quantities of manioc beer. Before the Trio New Year, a group of men go fishing or hunting, while the women prepare great vats of beer. When the men return, bringing the game or fish, they constitute the «visitors» even though many of them are usually from the village where the feast is held, and they are led by a man from another village<sup>5</sup>. The men dance into the centre of the village carrying the game, and dance around the centre anticlockwise, before giving it to the women to butcher and cook, and the women give them beer to drink.

<sup>3</sup> «People from the Paru River», and «pigeon people» respectively; rather than totemic clan names, these categories are highly flexible, and frequently refer to subjectively observed physical characteristics of individuals.

<sup>4</sup> For the classic exposé of Trio kinship, see RIVIÈRE (1969); for another classic Guianese case, see OVERING (1975).

<sup>5</sup> Even if some of the actual visitors are women, and some of the hunters are local residents, the symbolic value remains the same.



As the ritual begins, there is a growing collective sense of excitement and expectation, but this is at first accompanied by only a slight lessening of everyday social restraint and reserve. The dancing continues, and more and more people put on feather headdresses and beads, and paint each other's faces; at times groups of women dancers take over from the men. The principal male group of dancers is led by a man from a neighbouring village who shakes a rattle to set the rhythm. He and other leading men exhort all the participants to drink and be happy (*sasame*). As the beer begins to flow, served in calabashes by circulating women or their younger male kin, this gradually gives way first to collective euphoria and eventually to uninhibited revelry, including open flirtation between the sexes, especially among adolescents<sup>6</sup>. This sexual dalliance occurs notably between more distantly related individuals than in ordinary daily life, and between classificatory cross-cousins, usually a relationship characterised by restraint, inhibition and even avoidance.

These roles of women and men, assimilated to hosts and visitors, make it clear that these rituals are concerned primarily with affinity. Meanwhile, the inhibition of everyday affinal relations appears to dissolve. The feasts celebrate and facilitate the shifting of identities on a collective level: as they go on, the difference between hosts and visitors gradually disappears, and identities merge. This is echoed by the histories of different ethnic groups of the region, which have multiplied through political fissioning, and merged through intermarriage and co-residence (BRIGHTMAN 2007). If fissioning is an individualistic phenomenon (insofar as it breaks down affective and substantial ties between persons), it is counterbalanced by the collective nature of ritual. In the context of the indigenous peoples' movement, these rituals bring us face to face with the contradiction presented by the genealogical basis for claims to property and identity; for the quintessential Guianese collective occasions, which define collectivity and subvert the characteristic individualism of the region's cultures, involve the merging and dissolution of distinct identities. Moreover, the unfolding of these events is based on individual action, for it is individual leaders who must take the initiative, invite the visitors, organise the hunting or fishing expedition, spread the word for manioc beer to be made by all the local women, and harangue the participants to dance and be merry; in short, he must already be able to mediate between kin and affines in order to prepare the feast and see that it takes place successfully.

### **Inclusion and exclusion: ethnicity as transformable**

An important feature of the Trio visitors' feast is that it celebrates the outside, and this frequently involves young men dressing up as White people or dancing in parodies of Maroons<sup>7</sup>. If any White visitors are present, they are invited to dance, and are sometimes painted and ornamented with feathers and beads like a local Indian. This is consistent with the dissolution of social categories, and especially the suspension of affinal inhibitions, observed above. However, certain peoples in the region with comparable rituals do not

extend the suspension of difference as far as the Trio do. The Kali'na of coastal French Guiana have a ceremony called the *Epekotono* (end of mourning ceremony), which also involves the creation of a collective space, and the participation of visitors from other villages (in fact it is open to all Kali'na) (COLLOMB 2006). Once again, the ritual involves drinking manioc beer, dancing, sexual flirtation and the loosening of affinal inhibitions. However, there is a notable difference from the Trio case: here, White people or Creoles, even those who are personal friends of local Kali'na, although they may be present, are alienated using various strategies, such as the exclusive use of the Kali'na language among a perfectly bilingual population, and a refusal to explain the unfolding of the ritual (COLLOMB 2006). Meanwhile, the *Epekotono* has become explicitly politicised as young politicians campaign for the further exclusion of non-Kali'na as part of a return to what they claim is an «authentic» version of the ritual (COLLOMB 2006). It is not necessary to claim in turn that, on the contrary, the central Guianese visitors' feast represents a more «authentic» representation of the Kali'na *Epekotono*, to notice an interesting paradox here. Rituals which are otherwise similar are distinguished by the inclusion or exclusion of outsiders: on the one hand, the Trio of central Guiana celebrate the outside and blur the boundaries between themselves and others, and on the other hand the Kali'na, who live on the coast, seek to exclude certain kinds of outsiders and accentuate the boundary between Kali'na and non-Kali'na. Here, it is once again leaders or mediators who are the protagonists. Although these are usually the individuals who have the most developed commercial and political relations with non-Amerindians, they choose to exclude these outsiders from what becomes, though this process of exclusion, a celebration of «ethnic» identity.

I suggest that this discrepancy has to do with different strategies for dealing with different forms of contact with Western society. These strategies can most easily be seen in terms of relationships towards land; and indeed land pressure plays a considerable practical role. If patterns of ethnicity in central Guiana are characterised by the movements of people and transformation of identity as described above, we might say that the nature of property as it exists in the Guianas is founded upon kinship, not land (BRIGHTMAN 2007). People choose where they live according to social relations (marriage

<sup>6</sup> Among the Wayana and Trio, the dancing takes place in a ceremonial house called the *tukusipan*, which means «hummingbird place», and the forward-back movement of the dance stands for the hummingbird's symbolic copulation with the flower.

<sup>7</sup> The Maroons are the descendants of African slaves who escaped from Dutch plantations in the 18th century to the rivers in the forest of the interior of Suriname, and adopted a way of life based on swidden horticulture learned from Amerindians. There are several distinct linguistic and socio-political groups of Maroons; of these, the Ndjuka and Aluku live on the Maroni and Tapanahoni rivers and have therefore had most contact with the Trio and Wayana.

and consanguinity), and only then do they transform the living environment to appropriate it and live from it. As I have shown, if this is a feature of an «individualistic» culture then it is characterised by an individualism of a very different order to that enshrined in European-derived legal systems. This difference is accentuated in the coastal regions of the Guianas, in which land is contested. The Kali'na have had a history of forced migration and radical reductions in the lands available for their use, like indigenous peoples around the world, whereas these are not yet major problems in the more remote «interior» of the central Guianas, although placer mining for gold and the newly created *parc amazonien* in southern French Guiana are already changing this. Among the Kali'na and other Amerindian peoples suffering from land pressure, collective claims become necessary precisely, and paradoxically, in order to maintain this Guianese «individualism» based on the possibility of leaving a village to found a new one or to live elsewhere. The very permanence of individual private property relations (as opposed to the indigenous form of property described above) makes Guianese «individualism» impossible to sustain. Collective rights provide a space within which social relations can be allowed to continue, and even if this sometimes means breaking off social relations within that space, it must be seen that this is a necessary condition for them to operate.

### Mediators and trading partners

Presenting the differences between central and coastal Guiana Carib societies in these terms may give appear to suggest that there is a radical difference between the two, however, which is not the case. The continuity between the forms of political action in different parts of the Guianas can best be seen from the perspective of individual actors. Political activity in the region is closely related to trade, and there is a long tradition of interethnic trade across the region, which has been the subject of several historical studies (BUTT COLSON 1973; MANSUTTI 1986; THOMAS 1972). These show that trade was often a specialised activity, conducted by powerful and skilled individuals who alone could survive the dangers of long-distance travel and frequent contact with strangers. Indeed, it was an activity closely linked to shamanism, because it involved entering other worlds among persons to whom one was not bound by kinship ties. Rhetorical strategies were used to create fictional kin ties to trading partners, in order to minimise the risk of contact; trading partners were addressed using terms for consanguines rather than affines, because of the risks associated with affinal relations, as throughout Amazonia (OVERING 1975). When the Trio began trading with Ndjuka Maroons, who had better access to industrially produced items (especially metal goods), they found in them ideal trading partners, because the Maroons, because of their different kinship system (based on matrilineal descent), were not considered marriageable; thus, the problems of potential affinity were further minimised. However, neither in the Maroon case nor in others are

trading partners truly considered to be either kin or affines; instead, they can be seen as a category that transcends the distinction between the two, and it is precisely this that makes them so important. SANTOS-GRANERO (2007) discusses these and related forms of transcendent relations as types of «friendship», but it seems to me that to do so neglects the highly political nature of these ambiguous relationships which must be constantly negotiated, and which are laden with economic and strategic interest.

Today, trade is an important activity of Trio leaders, who actively cultivate an eclectic array of contacts with outsiders; however, their speeches and actions emphasise not only their ability to obtain kinds of objects, but also their ability to speak numerous languages, and the many different places they have travelled to. This is not simply a matter of prestige, but of power by association; far away worlds, beyond even the ambiguous relationship with affines, are seen as dangerous and powerful, and relations with them are both necessary for the renewal and flourishing of society, and fraught with peril. A clear illustration of this is the traditional ceremonial dialogue found across Amazonia: by means of «strong talk», skilled and knowledgeable men would negotiate with representatives of distant groups (RIVIERE 1971; URBAN 1986). The more distant the interlocutor, the «stronger» and more difficult was the speech form required, and to communicate with spirits and other non-humans (the most distant interlocutors of all) the necessary form often was, and still is, song (BRIGHTMAN 2007).

This description of older forms of Guianese Amazonian trade and political activity shows that the two blend into each other. The charismatic behaviour of leading men who encourage people to drink, dance and be happy during the visitors' feasts described above expresses the same qualities, and is likewise involved in mediation between visitors and hosts. It is easy to recognise something very similar in the activity of leaders involved in indigenous movements. These, such as Alexis Tiouka, mentioned above, spend much of their time travelling, negotiating with far-off peoples, acquiring new and exotic forms of knowledge (including, for example, evangelical Christian knowledge and international human rights law) and, like traditional shamans, must be particularly careful not to become assimilated by the Other by losing contact with their kin. It is a role characterised by risk – the risk of alienation, which is frequently portrayed by the Trio and other Amazonian Indians as the most terrifying risk of all. It can be understood in terms of Amerindian perspectivism (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO 1998), according to which an individual person sees his kin and commensals as human, even if from the point of view of his prey he may be seen as a jaguar, while for a creature seeing him as prey he may be a peccary. Numerous Amazonian myths recount how men turn into eagles or jaguars as they are persuaded by an old man of one of these species to marry his daughter, and to share a meal with them<sup>8</sup>. This risk of assimilation, it is worth noting, is based precisely on the the

<sup>8</sup> See BRIGHTMAN (2007) for Trio and Wayana examples.

notion that kinship is a matter of processual relations rather than genealogically inherited essence. The precautions taken against it include eating bland food, but above all they involve spending time with close kin and eating and drinking with them; especially eating manioc bread and drinking manioc beer. Facing the risk posed by temporarily neglecting one's own kin to interact with Others, the rewards are social renewal, through the incorporation of new and exotic elements, whether material or immaterial, as goods or knowledge. These afford social creativity: by understanding other worlds, Amerindian political mediators can transform elements of them in order to renew and reproduce their own society<sup>9</sup>.

### Conclusion

I began this article by drawing attention to the contradiction between the processual nature of indigenous peoples' own relationships with each other and with the environment on the one hand and their use of the genealogical notion of descent in the global indigenous peoples' movement on the other. I then suggested that we should regard this contradiction as stemming from a strategic ethnicity, employed by indigenous peoples in their political interventions in a political arena whose terms are dictated by Western tradition. To illustrate this, I presented the case of Guianese Amerindians, and showed how they constitute their collective identities, while pointing to the contradiction specific to the region between the idea of the «collectivity» central to indigenous rhetoric, and the «individualism» supposedly characteristic of the Guianas. I showed that these both dissolve into an overall pattern of processual kinship and «being-in-the-environment», but that modes of relating to non-Amerindians change according to circumstance. Finally, I considered the role of mediator in Guianese societies, and found that the incorporation of foreign elements, whether in the form of objects, knowledge, etc., is central both to this role and to the renewal of these societies in themselves. In this light, it is obvious that, even if the genealogical notion of descent and the concepts of collective identities and rights are alien to indigenous peoples, their use of such notions is not foreign to them at all. For the incorporation and use of foreign elements is a characteristically «indigenous» Guianese practice.

Those who mediate with outsiders to incorporate foreign elements are also those who initiate and stimulate a feeling of common identity among local groups; indeed, they promote the renewal of the local group partly by inviting people from outside and organising rituals to break down the differences between hosts and visitors. But the true foundation of identity lies in everyday relations of kinship and commensality – it is these that generate the «trust» referred to by INGOLD (1999). If leaders, as mediators, spend time with outsiders to generate and maintain relations with them, they must also spend time with their families, or else they risk losing the very foundation of their role. Meanwhile, their relations with outsiders can never be equivalent to those with their kin; indeed they must never be, or else they

would find themselves suspended between two worlds. This can be understood in terms of Amerindian perspectivism, according to which a member of a given species or community «sees» or experiences as a real human being, no matter how that species or community appears to others (to jaguars or peccaries, for example) (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO 1998). «Perspective», or ontology, can be transformed through changes to the body, rather than to the inner essence or soul of the person. In this context, Amerindian leaders on the global stage can be seen as changing clothes, like shamans, in order to become temporarily «other»; except that they put on suits instead of a jaguar's skin. The danger, for the leader as for the shaman, is always that of becoming assimilated by the «other» which he himself has temporarily and consciously become; if this occurs, he loses his ability to see, and be, «double» (GROTTI 2007; VILAÇA 2006). For this reason, the «community» of indigenous leaders in the indigenous peoples' movement can never be equivalent to the «community» from which its members come, at least not for Guianese leaders (as long as they continue to represent the latter). In the former, a new and different form of sociability exists, but it remains fraught with risks alien to a close circle of kin.

By showing the ways in which indigenous identity has been constructed through the dialogues between political representatives about relationships with the environment and the colonial encounter, I have exposed deeper paradoxes about the indigenous peoples' movement than those about which authors such as Kuper have voiced concern. Yet, seen in the light of the actions of political mediators, and the ritual importance of the social incorporation of new and foreign elements, these paradoxes no longer seem problematic. Amerindian perspectivism may hold further clues for understanding continuities in newly emerging modalities of Amazonian identity politics; indeed, since this theory itself has so far been applied mostly to indigenous Amazonian shamanism, it would benefit from further exploration in contexts of social change. As I have shown, the concrete individual action involved in leadership, especially as mediation between kin and affines, local group and outsiders, is of great importance for the formation and renewal of social and political identities, and this suggests how the theory of perspectivism can be raised beyond the level of the individual person, and applied beyond the level of myth to daily life.

<sup>9</sup> HELMS (1988; 1993) has made extensive comparative studies of the political use of knowledge and objects from distant places.

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**Resumen**

*A partir de trabajos de campo en Surinam, Guyana Francesa y Ginebra, este artículo aborda las implicaciones de las discrepancias entre las representaciones de la identidad indígena: el movimiento global de los Pueblos Indígenas y la Declaración de las Naciones Unidas sobre los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas presentan a los pueblos indígenas como grupos basados en la descendencia; mientras que los Amerindios Guyaneses mantienen una relación procesual con el medio ambiente, y utilizan sus relaciones con el exterior para renovar la sociedad. Las diferencias entre las formas de identidad en contextos locales y globales pueden ser vistas como muestras del dinamismo y la transformabilidad de la identidad misma.*

**Résumé**

*Basé sur un travail de terrain au Suriname, en Guyane française et à Genève, cet article analyse les implications des manières contrastées dont l'identité autochtone est représentée: le mouvement global des peuples autochtones et la Déclaration des Nations Unies sur les Droits des Peuples Autochtones présentent ces derniers comme des groupes basés sur la descendance; cependant, les Amérindiens guyanais interagissent avec leur environnement de manière active, et profitent de leurs relations avec les étrangers pour renouveler la société. Les différences entre les formes d'identité dans des contextes locaux et globaux peuvent ainsi être considérées comme représentatives du dynamisme et de la transformation de l'identité même.*