BAKAIRÍ: THE DEATH OF AN INDIAN

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Peruare hanged by his neck from a tree in the garden. Yuka found him and cut his body down. Although Peruare was dead, Yuka ran back to the village to get help, as if believing the medical attendant could save the man. By the time he and the villagers returned, big scavenger birds soared above the corpse. The men shouted and waved their arms, but the birds did not retreat very far. A discussion ensued. Why had Peruare killed himself? Suicides were uncommon among the Bakairí. In fact, no one could remember a similar incident. What should they do?

Someone should inform the government agents. The Indians had worked with the other Brazilians long enough to know about their penchant for keeping records. Yet the Indians delayed, knowing these outsiders always complicated matters. The villagers wanted to sort things out first.

Someone asked, “What about his wife, Neude?” Yuka and the other men carefully kept their faces blank out of respect for dead Peruare. Yes, someone had to tell Neude. A few men agreed to remain in the garden with the body, keeping the birds at bay, while the others returned to the village.

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**The Bakairí**

The Bakairí Indians live in central Brazil. They inhabit a reservation in the state of Mato Grosso, a rapidly growing part of Brazil. A hundred years ago only Indians and an occasional explorer or missionary passed through this region. Today the proliferation of towns, family-owned ranches, and agribusinesses is evidence of how extensively Brazilians have penetrated their country’s interior.

When Europeans first arrived on the east coast of South America many indigenous groups either died from the effects of diseases brought from Europe or fled west into the forests. Mato Grosso, literally the “Big Forest,” was one area where many Indians survived into the twentieth century in relative isolation. However, non-Indians eventually pushed into this part of Brazil, too, causing the indigenous peoples to relocate, or be relocated, onto tracts of land where the National Foundation of Indians (FUNAI), an organization very similar to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the United States, took responsibility for them. FUNAI agents discouraged their migrations, monitored their health, and tried to teach them Portuguese. Today peoples such as the Bakairí continue to speak their own languages and practice traditional customs, while developing a growing awareness of how contact with non-Indians has irreparably changed their world.
Who are the Bakairí? To identify these Indians, we usually say they are Carib-speakers, Carib being one of the four major linguistic families of lowland South America. We also call them “riverine” Indians, as opposed to “foot” Indians. This signifies that they depend more on fish than on game for food, and that they travel by canoe on the rivers rather than on foot over land.

To identify them further we might say they were once part of the Xingu culture area. The Xingu River is a major tributary of the Amazon. Its headwaters lie in an isolated part of Mato Grosso. In the nineteenth century the German explorer Karl von den Steinen visited the region and discovered that at least ten different tribes coexisted in these headwaters, sharing common cultural traditions yet speaking different languages. Today the Alto-Xingu, as it is called, has become even more linguistically and culturally complex because FUNAI designated the territory a reservation and relocated a number of different tribes there to protect them from harmful contact with Brazilian road builders.

The Bakairí used to live in the headwaters of the Xingu River, where they traded and intermarried with members of other tribes. Von den Steinen visited some of their villages along the Batovi and Kuliseu rivers and wrote about his observations. Later, however, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a series of epidemics devastated the region’s population, causing strife and panic. The Bakairí began to migrate out of the Xingu area, traveling southwest to the headwaters of the Paranatinga River. Agents from the Indian protection organization that preceded FUNAI eventually contacted them, and in 1918 they demarcated the Bakairí reservation.

The reservation is currently located in the municipality of Paranatinga. (A Brazilian municipality is similar to a county in the United States). Its capital is the town of Paranatinga, which lies about 120 kilometers from the reservation. In 1979, when I began fieldwork with the Bakairí, it took about six hours, when the roads were at their best, for the FUNAI-owned truck to creep over the deeply scarred roads that connected the reservation to the town. At that time Paranatinga was a dusty village with dirt roads and small shops where we bought kerosene, cigarettes, aspirin, and staples such as coffee and sugar. I revisited Paranatinga in 1989. It still had narrow dirt roads, but some roads were also paved. And the shops, more numerous now, were stocked with various kinds of merchandise. I was also amazed to see a real restaurant with cloth-covered tables. It was amazing how rapidly the influx of newcomers transformed the region.
Paranatinga is located northeast of Cuiaba, the capital of the state of Mato Grosso, and west of Brasilia, the capital of Brazil itself. Researchers like me visit these towns to secure government authorization to enter Indian lands or to meet with other scientists. It is also easier to purchase gear for the field and do banking and telephoning in larger towns such as Cuiaba. The Bakairí, however, rarely travel to these larger, more distant cities. Not only do they lack the resources, but also they complain about the frantic pace they sense in these towns.

The following describes a mystery I stumbled upon while I did fieldwork with the Bakairí. It is “true” in that the events I describe really happened, although I changed the names to protect people. And it is a “mystery” in that I really do not understand what happened; I give readers a choice at the end of the story, allowing them to make up their own minds. In the process of showing how I heard about the puzzle and why I found the official explanation of it unsatisfactory, I provide a context that ultimately, I hope, informs people about Bakairí culture.

THE BAKAIRÍ RESERVATION

The first thing that struck me when I arrived at the Bakairí reservation was the heat. I flew from Cuiaba to the reservation by small plane, landing on a dirt airstrip near the village. Cuiaba was hot, but the reservation felt a lot hotter to me. Maybe it was because the landing strip lay some distance from the cool forests and high banks of the Paranatinga River I could see in the distance. I climbed down from the plane onto the bleached lateritic soil that felt harder than concrete. The ground radiated heat back up onto my face while the sun beat down from above.

I remembered reading that the region’s climate was classified as hot and semihumid. As was typical of places close to the equator, there were only two distinct seasons: the rainy and the dry. The rains occurred between November and March, and the dry season took place between May and September. Faced with the blinding, enervating heat of the dry season, I thought I would prefer the rains. My opinion changed, of course, when I experienced the red mud and copious mildew that accompanied the rains.

The landing strip lay close to Pakuera, the largest village in the reservation. Of the 430 or so people who lived in the Bakairí territory, about 170 belonged to this village. Another ninety Indians
occupied Aturua, the second largest village, and the rest of the Indian population inhabited five other hamlets in the reservation. I later discovered that there were also about forty non-Indians living illegally in the reservation. FUNAI personnel clearly wanted them to leave because of the dangers of landless farmers invading and taking over the Indians’ lands. However, they lacked the authority to force these people to move on.

Yuka, a heavyset man with a grown son standing by his side, approached me. He spoke gruffly without smiling, and I found him to be somewhat intimidating. Later I discovered that Yuka was, in fact, tough and aggressive. He had the courage to visit the capital of Brazil where he lobbied for his people in the offices of FUNAI. And he was extremely bright. He spoke Portuguese fluently, although he and his family spoke Bakairí at home, and he had served as headman, or cacique, of the Bakairí who lived in Pakuera. But Yuka could also be warm and concerned, as he was the time I got sick and needed help. And I noticed an impish sense of humor once in a while, especially around his wife, Beri.

Yuka invited me to live with him and his family, and I quickly and gratefully accepted. Choosing where to live when one does fieldwork is always a hard decision. By living with a family one runs the risk of inadvertently getting in the middle of warring political factions, but by living alone one misses opportunities to practice speaking the language and to join in family activities. I always preferred to live with families although I knew other anthropologists who felt strongly about remaining independent.

I followed Yuka down a lane lined with tall, fragrant mango trees. Since he spoke better Portuguese than I did, I was able to ask him who planted the trees. He said that when he was a child agents from the Indian Protection Agency reorganized the Bakairí village, arranging the houses in rows, rather than in traditional circles. At that time the agents also planted trees and bushes. Although contemporary FUNAI personnel tried to be more sensitive about such Indian practices, Pakuera’s houses still formed neat lines that ran on an east-west axis, intersecting at a point where the Bakairí built a men’s house, the site of important ritual and political activities.

We arrived at Yuka’s home, which was a square house with clay walls and a thatched roof, another deviation from tradition (the old-style homes were elliptically shaped and covered with thatched palm). Yuka explained that men and their male kin constructed a house by erecting a wooden frame, which they then covered with wet clay. Women gathered and dried palm thatch, which
the men then arranged in thick layers on top. Later, when I observed young Jere building a home for himself and his wife, I noticed the festive atmosphere that pervaded the scene. The work group appeared to be enjoying themselves, laughing and joking with people who passed by, seemingly oblivious to the hard work they were doing.

Yuka’s house was several years old, and he said that sometimes the roof leaked when it rained. Inside it felt cool and restful to me after the hot landing strip. Yuka told me to sit down, directing me to a chair of which he was clearly proud. A chair was a luxury, brought from outside of the reservation. Most Bakairí homes were furnished only with hammocks and an occasional stool or cured animal skin. Women made the hammocks of cotton from the gardens or of palm from the forests, while men carved the stools from hardwood, often making them in the shape of an animal such as an armadillo or a turtle. I glanced around the room and saw no such stool, but draped over an interior wall there were several hammocks, obviously pulled out of the way of daily traffic. I suspected people would sleep in them that night.

Beri, Yuka’s wife, shyly entered the room. Her mother Alia followed her more slowly. Over the years that followed I became very fond of Beri. I admired her sense of humor, her concern for others, and her gentleness. I liked Alia, too, but she did not possess Beri’s mildness, though she was a hard-working, energetic person. The first day I met these two women I immediately saw a family resemblance. Both of them left their dark hair long and unbound, unlike some of the younger Bakairí women who cut their hair short, imitating Brazilian women they saw in Paranatinga. And they were both under five feet and relatively slight compared to some of the other Bakairí women, who were five feet or taller with more robust figures. Beri and Alia wore shiftlike dresses similar to those used by the Indian women in the Bakairí reservation. These dresses were simple to cut out and sew on a manual sewing machine or by hand. Women usually owned two or three such shifts so that they always had a clean one to put on, even after working in the garden.

Beri asked if I would “accept a cafezinho,” a tiny cup of the strong, sweet coffee that is so popular in Brazil. The Bakairí acquired this custom from their Brazilian neighbors, who drank many such cups in the course of a day. I accepted the hot coffee, which I found refreshing even in the midday heat. An uncomfortable silence fell upon the group. Clearly it would take some time before we felt relaxed around each other.
I tried to put Yuka’s family at their ease by asking some general questions about who lived in the house. Yuka began by listing himself and his wife, Beri. I did not need to ask if he had only one wife. I knew that the Bakairí had previously practiced polygyny, the tradition of taking more than one wife, but the influence of the missionaries and, to a lesser extent, of FUNAI had discouraged this. Now the Indians were monogamous. Beri’s father had lived with them until he died, but now just Alia, Beri’s mother, remained from that generation. Additionally, a young daughter, now visiting Cuiaba, normally lived there, and Nai, their grown son, and his new wife Rea belonged to the household. Rea had recently found out that she was pregnant, and the family looked forward to the arrival of its new member with obvious excitement.

I was curious about Rea’s presence in the household. Newly married couples tended to live with the wife’s parents until the birth of their first baby, after which they sometimes set up their own households. Although not unheard of, it was unusual for couples to stay with the husband’s family. The mystery appeared to be solved later in the week when a woman I thought was Rea’s mother stopped by, in an advanced state of pregnancy, with two small children tugging at her dress. She was stressed and tired and asked Rea to watch over what I assumed were Rea’s young sisters while she went down to the river to wash some clothes. I concluded that too many people were crowded into Rea’s parents’ home, so Nai and Rea had chosen to stay at Yuka and Beri’s house, which seemed roomy by comparison.

Bakairí women could expect to give birth to their first child when they were between fifteen and nineteen years of age. They continued to reproduce for the next twenty to twenty-five years, having, on the average, about five children. Children were widely spaced, and it was not unusual for mothers and daughters to be pregnant simultaneously. Birth control as we know it was not available, but infanticide, the killing of unwanted or deformed infants, as well as “benign neglect,” allowing children to die from lack of care, tended to keep the number of live children lower than expected.

Yuka counted six people living in his household. Later that month I visited each house in the village, introducing myself and doing a census at the same time. I found Yuka’s household was only slightly above average in size, the mean being 4.88 ± .48 persons. I determined that the majority of households consisted of
between three and six individuals, with a married couple making up the core of this unit.

After some casual conversation about my home and family in the United States, Rea, Beri, Alia, and I went down to the river. Three main rivers flowed through the reservation—the Paranatinga, Azul, and Vermelho. The Paranatinga River was the closest to the village, and it provided water for drinking, bathing, and washing clothes. The Indians also fished in the rivers and used the waters for transportation. They made their own canoes out of hardwood trees they found in the forests.

Alia and Beri chattered and laughed as they led me down the trail to the section of the river where the women bathed and filled huge cans with water. The men used a separate section, with a patch of trees dividing the two areas. To actually get to the water I clambered down a well-worn, rocky path that was slippery and steep the first time I attempted it. As I carefully picked my way through the rocks women in their sixties and seventies, with wet clothes and water cans balanced on their heads, barreled past me as if I were standing still. Once on the rocky beach I admired the green water and the huge trees that lined the river. It was quiet and peaceful, and the hum of the women talking as they worked and the shouts of the children playing contributed to my sense of tranquility.

We splashed around in the water for a while and then filled the cans with water to take back to the house. I offered to help, but the women agreed I had to practice negotiating the path before I could carry things. So I helped Rea raise a heavy can to her shoulder, and then to her head. Later when I learned to carry water this way, I discovered getting the can up to the shoulder was the hardest part of the task. Once on the shoulder or head the weight was not difficult to manage because it distributed itself evenly.

We climbed up the path and walked the kilometer or so back to the house. It was already getting dark even though it was only 5:30. Being from a temperate climate, I was always surprised by the early sunsets close to the equator. My mental clock equated hot weather with long days; the nearly twelve hours of darkness in the tropics were unexpected.

Back at the house Beri helped me set up the hammock I brought from Cuiaba in the small area the family had generously vacated for me. Nai and Rea set up their hammocks close by, while Beri, Yuka, and Alia shared a space in another part of the house. It seemed we all had a modicum of privacy.

However, sounds carried easily in Indian homes. Walls reached only three-fourths of the way to the ceiling, allowing air to pass
through, and, of course, soundproofed materials were unavailable. As I swung back and forth in my hammock, congratulating myself on a relatively painless beginning to a fieldwork session, I heard the murmur of Nai’s and Rea’s voices. Then silence fell. Not wanting the keep the family awake, I blew out the candle I had placed on the ground next to my hammock. But I lighted it again a few minutes later. I could have sworn I heard someone crying.

After a while I lay back down, deciding it must be Rea. She was the closest to my sleeping area, and it would not be unusual for a young girl, newly married and pregnant, to cry at night, especially when she probably felt homesick for her mother and sisters. After all, she received little or no support from her in-laws. Relations between the girl and them were cool and restrained in accordance with Bakairí traditions, which assumed that there would be less conflict if in-laws ignored each other. I thought no more about Rea’s tears until later.

**IN THE GARDENS WITH THE BAKAIRÍ**

A few days later Beri, Alia, Rea, and I were carrying baskets slung over our shoulders. When the baskets were full, the basket straps went around our foreheads, supporting most of the weight of the potatolike manioc we harvested in the gardens. But for now the baskets were light, and we moved quickly down the path through the cerrado.

Cerrado, which resembled a dry prairie, covered most of the Bakairí reservation. The Indians used this land mainly for hunting, cattle raising, and, more recently, a modern agriculture experiment. They made their gardens in the rich gallery forest soils, which lined the banks of the major rivers. Some fields lay quite far from the village, but, on the average, the Indians made them about four kilometers from Pakuera. Locating these gardens was very difficult for the novice, as I was to find out when I did a land use census. But that day I was with Beri and her relatives, so we unerringly made our way to a section of tall forest that loomed before us. We passed through a green, tunnel-like strip of trees that divided the garden from the cerrado, and then we walked into an open space. The garden lay before us.

The Bakairí practiced both traditional subsistence methods and, to a lesser extent, modern agriculture, which FUNAI introduced in 1980. Traditional food production consisted of slash-and-
burn horticulture in which a man asked his kinsmen to join him for a
day or two to cut down the underbrush in a section of the forest.
They then chopped down the trees, leaving the vegetation to dry out
in the hot sun. A Bakairí man generally carved out of the forest a
garden about four thousand square meters, or slightly under an acre,
in size. His family depended on the crops from this field for several
years, but since the household head cultivated a new area each year,
they harvested food from several gardens simultaneously.

Garden clearing took place at the beginning of the dry season,
when little rain fell. Several months later, around the beginning of
September, the men began to scan the sky, anxiously trying to pre-
dict when the first rains would fall. They had to set fire to the
dried-out vegetation and burn it all to ash before the rains began,
but they felt compelled to wait until the last possible moment
because prematurely burned fields would not burn completely.
When this happened there was little ash—a natural fertilizer—for
the crops. Also, a partially burned garden was hard to cultivate.
Vines tripped people, and thorns cut into their skin. The need to
weed was also greater in such a garden.

After the garden was burned the women joined the men in
planting crops such as manioc, corn, beans, rice, and fruits such as
melon, pineapple, banana, and sugar cane. The women also took
responsibility for harvesting the crops, although men helped them
as needed. They harvested the manioc tubers gradually, but the
entire family turned out to harvest the rice and corn all at once
because these crops could not remain in the field after they matured.

Beri and Alia planned to harvest manioc that day. But that did
not stop us from eating some pineapple first. Beri chose a beauti-
fully ripened fruit and cut huge slices from it with her machete, a
tool both men and women kept close at hand. After I ate mine I
explored the garden. Unlike the clean-cleared farmlands in the
United States, Bakairí gardens seemed to the untrained eye to be a
confused maze of plants, tree stumps, and branches. I really
needed a machete to cut my way through the tangle of vines and
weeds. I was grateful I had had the sense to wear a long-sleeved
shirt and slacks, instead of shorts and a T-shirt.

I found the edge of the garden that bordered the river and was
surprised to find a bank about twenty feet high. Disappointed, I
told Alia I would be unable to bathe after working in the garden.
She laughed and said I would not want to go swimming there even
if I could. Anacondas rested in waters that were undisturbed by
people. Anacondas were heavy snakes that grew up to thirty feet
in length. They either crushed their victims or snapped their necks
in order to incapacitate and then eat them. Although human adults were not usually in danger of being attacked by an anaconda lurking in the shadowy waters, I felt considerably less interested in having a swim after talking to Alia.

Beri and Rea were already digging up manioc with sticks and machete points. They quickly accumulated a pile, and before long we were stuffing manioc in our baskets and making plans to start the trip home. Beri and Alia accepted my offer to help this time, and Rea assisted me as I lifted the basket on my back and arranged the strap across my forehead. They gave me the lightest basket, I noticed, so the band did not cut into the skin as it might have. We left the garden in single file, trekking quietly through the green tunnel out onto the hot cerrado. It would take us over an hour to get back to the village.

Beri and Alia walked in front of me, and Rea followed behind. The two older women conversed in low tones. Since I did not yet speak Bakairí, I could not understand the words I occasionally heard. I let my mind wander until I suddenly heard fear in the voices of the women. I looked up and saw a cow standing in the path before us. Other cattle gathered in the area, peacefully grazing on the cerrado grasses. Beri and Alia were clearly agitated. They did not know how to force the cow off the path, and they could not go around it because of the other animals in the way.

After some discussion we decided to brandish sticks and machetes above our heads while yelling as loud as we could. Timidly at first, but then with more energy, we stamped our feet and waved whatever we had in our hands. I was convinced we must have looked like crazy fools, but after a while the cow languidly walked away. It showed no sign that we troubled it in the least, acting as if it were simply bored with the grass in that spot.

Beri and Alia started to laugh nervously. After congratulating ourselves on our bravery and quick thinking, we walked on. I asked about the cattle. Who owned them? Where did they come from? Alia explained that a long time ago diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis killed most of the Bakairí. Agents from the Indian Protection Agency came to the tiny remaining village with a heifer. They showed the Indians the animal and said that any couple who had a child would receive one as a gift. Additionally, for the birthday of every child up to five years of age they would donate another heifer.

The Bakairí eventually responded to these incentives, and their population began to increase again. However, at first the Indians feared the cattle. Their huge size and horns terrified them. They did not understand how to milk the cows nor did they have a taste
for milk. Being riverine Indians, they ate mostly fish during that early period and even had food taboos for many kinds of meat. By the time I began my fieldwork fifty years had passed, and the Bakairí were more or less accustomed to the cows. They ate beef whenever a steer was slaughtered, distributing the meat throughout the village. And they drank milk once in a while. Yet, as the incident on the trail showed, the alliance between the Indians and cattle continued to be somewhat uneasy.

**A Bakairí Tragedy**

Our small band continued walking through the cerrado, and Beri and Alia resumed their conversation. About fifteen minutes later I again heard a tremor of emotion in the women’s voices. I looked up, expecting to see some more cattle, but there was nothing. The women appeared to be looking at a wall of trees to the west. There were expressions of dread on their faces. I asked what was wrong. I thought maybe they spotted a jaguar, an animal indigenous to the area as well as prominent in Bakairí myths. Beri lowered her voice and explained that four years ago a man named Peruare hanged himself in his garden. She raised her arm and pointed to a spot in the distance. His garden was located there, she said. Yuka discovered the body, and apparently the incident deeply disturbed him as well as the rest of the family.

I turned to Rea and found to my surprise that she was weeping silently. I asked her what was wrong, but she did not answer me. She lowered her head and walked on quickly toward Pakuera. I asked Beri and Alia why Rea was so upset, and they told me that Peruare was Rea’s father. After some confusion, I sorted things out, discovering that the woman Rea called “Mother” was actually the sister of Rea’s biological mother.

Taiwa bore Peruare four children before she died of malaria. Rea was the last one born and the only daughter. Of the three sons, one had died, one now lived in Cuiaba, and one lived in Pakuera but was bewitched. His name was Marce, and after Peruare’s death he and Rea were raised by Tena, Taiwa’s sister.

I thought Marce and Rea were lucky to have Tena. Maternal aunts were frequently perceived as comothers, and were even addressed with the kinship term “Mother” in societies that used what anthropologists called the Iroquois kinship system. Marce’s and Rea’s adoption by Taiwa’s sister was also consistent with this
model in that comothers were expected to share child-rearing responsibilities with their sisters.

Alia was making disapproving noises as she went on to tell me that Marce’s and Rea’s lives were difficult even before their father’s suicide because of his remarriage to Neude, a beautiful woman who was considerably younger than Peruare. In fact, she was only sixteen when they married. According to Alia, Neude was unprepared to take on the responsibility of managing a household and raising nearly grown children. Additionally, she found herself interacting with stepsons who were her age. In fact, Claudio, the oldest son, was born the same year as Neude. Their proximity in age led to gossip, as people speculated about a possible sexual relationship.

Peruare and his family resolved this problem much as families do all over the world. Claudio simply left, moving out of the reservation to Cuiaba, and Rea and Marce spent more time at their Aunt Tena’s. When Peruare died they moved their personal belongings there. Neude, with the one child she had by Peruare, returned to her father and mother’s home. She quickly remarried.

By this time Beri, Alia, and I were hurrying after Rea toward the village we could now see in the distance. The sun was setting so we had little time to get home. I kept my head down, straining against the basket strap, but every so often I glanced up. The light-colored thatched roofs of the houses with their dry clay walls faded into the backdrop of trees. Smoke rose above the houses from the fires where women roasted manioc pancakes and fish.

Peruare’s tragedy and his children’s pain were far removed from the tranquil scene before us. It seemed so unlikely that a Bakairí Indian would commit suicide. No history or tradition of such a behavior existed, and I had come across no other account of such a case in the FUNAI agent’s records or in the literature. It was inconsistent with what I knew of the Indians’ culture. Perhaps I did not understand suicide, but I usually associated it with an atomized society in which people felt alone and unsupported. Either high pressure or despair factored into one’s decision to die.

The Bakairí world contrasted sharply with this description. Each individual was highly integrated into the social system on the basis of many criteria. Although clans and highly developed lineages were absent, most belonged to large extended groups of kin. Family members provided each other with assistance, both on a regular basis and in times of special need. Individuals were rarely alone because they always had kin to keep them company.

Age and gender were two other factors that divided people into complementary groups. For example, the old were highly respected,
contributing to society in such important ways as teaching young men to chant mask songs. And although females were considered subordinate to males, they performed tasks that the group recognized as important. No one person stood alone; everyone was part of at least several groups, each of which was valued for some reason. There were no “untouchables” in the Bakairí village.

It was an egalitarian world where gross discrepancies in wealth and power were absent. Everyone had equal access to resources such as land and technology. People did not even own their own gardens, but had the right to use the land only temporarily before rotating to another part of the territory. They shared their personal effects willingly, afraid of being called “stingy” in a society where being “good” meant being generous.

Furthermore, high-pressure situations or sources of despair also seemed foreign in the village. Men hunted, fished, worked in their gardens, watched their sons, and performed rituals that their grandfathers used years ago. Women bore children, washed clothes at the river, harvested food in the gardens, processed manioc, and also performed community rituals. Although I do not mean to describe a Shangri-La where everyone is always happy and at peace, it struck me that the Bakairí suffered less from the stress and anxiety associated with so-called modern living. Peruare’s suicide sounded a jarring note in a musical score filled with playfulness and moderation.

We entered the village as dusk set in. I saw Yuka sitting in his chair in front of the house, exchanging affable greetings with the men and women who walked by. Rea was nowhere in sight. One thing was clear: Her tears at night were probably from more than just being a newly married, homesick girl. Her father’s dramatic death four years ago and her brother’s bewitching, whatever that meant, must have traumatized her. I realized, as I finally put the basket of manioc down in Beri’s back yard, that these were additional dissonant notes I was hearing. I looked around me with concern, asking myself what other invisible currents I had missed.

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**In the Public Arena**

**With the Bakairí**

Time passed rapidly while I was with the Bakairí. The puzzle of Peruare’s death continued to intrigue me, but other aspects of the Indian culture claimed my attention. At one point I set for myself the
goal of trying to describe, as completely as I could, how the Bakairí were politically organized. I knew that the villagers informally chose headmen, or caciques. These leaders possessed limited powers that were mostly persuasive in nature. If, for example, they wanted the village men to clear grass and debris from the central plaza in front of the men’s house, then they would begin to clear the area themselves, calling others to join them. If no one helped out, they had no authority to command or to punish those who did not participate.

Many Brazilians operated under the misconception that caciques controlled their people, erroneously believing that headmen actually exercised power over other Indians. This, of course, was not true. Probably the misunderstanding arose because headmen acted as information conduits, informing villagers about what was going to happen. This allowed the Bakairí to meet and discuss a plan of action. When they reached a consensus, they acted. However, to the Brazilians who were unaware of the middle part of the process, it appeared that the Bakairí were following orders.

For example, FUNAI wanted to vaccinate everyone against measles on a given day, when they planned to send in a plane with a medical team. They told the headman to gather the people in Pakuera, where they should wait for the arrival of the medics. Most of the Bakairí were there waiting for the plane when the team arrived, but it was not because the headman told them to be there. Rather, the Indians took medical treatment very seriously, and when the cacique informed them of the vaccination team’s intentions, it did not require a great deal of discussion for the villagers to decide to cooperate.

Another example of how Brazilians misunderstood the headman’s role concerned some squatters who lived illegally in the reservation. They arrived one day in the Bakairí village, telling a harrowing story of flight during the night from a rancher who threatened to kill them, rather than pay them for work they had done for him. The father and two of his grown sons helped the headman count cattle one afternoon. FUNAI needed to know the exact number of heads in the reservation for an annual census it was doing. Bakairí men and children milled about chatting and laughing as the process took place. At one point the headman suggested that one of the Brazilian adolescents move over to the other side of the field to make sure no cattle slipped by uncounted. The young man responded, “What the cacique commands, I do.” The Indians laughed uproariously at such a notion, while the Brazilians stood there looking slightly perplexed.

A shaman was also an important figure in the village. He was
a specialist who cured diseases or cast spells on enemies. A respected professional, he worked hard at his job, depending on knowledge learned during a lengthy apprenticeship. Central to the power of a shaman was his ability to call on a spiritual guide who was invisible to everyone except him. While other Indian shamans used hallucinogens in order to communicate with the spirits, Bakairí shamans used tobacco to bring on the trances in which they conferred with their spirit guides. Advice from the guide allowed the shaman to more effectively find the cause of the illness. During a curing session he used his spirit’s help as he chanted, rocked, and massaged his patient’s body. After he forced or coaxed the disease-causing agent out of its hiding place, he regurgitated the foul matter into his hand to show to his audience.

Later, when I told friends about my experiences with Bakairí shamans, they always asked me if shamanism “really worked.” They contrasted it with Western medicine and doubted that it could help people get well. I was intrigued by the fact that the Bakairí never asked me a similar kind of question. That is, no one ever asked if Western medicine practiced by FUNAI medics “really worked,” in spite of the fact that the Indians witnessed plenty of Western failures. For example, there were people in the village who were unsuccessfully treated for cancer, tuberculosis, and the Gillian Barre disease, which was referred to as “French polio” at that time. I asked an older shaman about the spotty success rates of both Indian and Western models of curing, and he simply shrugged and said one worked in some instances, while the other worked under other conditions. Clearly he did not stay up nights worrying about it.

Bakairí curers, as well as the Bakairí people in general, lived comfortably in a dual world, accommodating conflicting world views that created cognitive dissonance in other societies. The belief in the existence of microbes was another example of the delicate balancing act these Indians perform. One month a FUNAI medical team came in to treat sick Indians. I was with a group of Bakairí women who were squatting on the ground preparing a meal outside one of the houses. A Brazilian nurse walked by, then stopped and spent some time explaining that it was not healthy to prepare food on a dirt surface. After some discussion she mentioned that “microbes,” or tiny invisible things, lived in the dust and crawled on the food, which people then ate. The microbes caused illness in the bodies of their victims. I expected the Bakairí to laugh or to ignore the woman, but they absorbed what she said with little comment or disagreement. Later, when I discussed the matter further with them, I realized that at least half
of what she told them was consistent with their own world view. The Bakairí, like many other indigenous people of the New World, had an explanation of disease and curing that involved invisible and dangerous items that lodged themselves inside the bodies of humans and caused disease and death. These dangerous items had to be removed in order for an individual to be cured.

However, one key difference distinguished Western and Bakairí explanations of disease. Western science did not ascribe a personal factor when explaining why a specific individual contracted a disease. For example, if I came down with the flu, it was not because a friend cast a spell on me after I missed a lunch date with her. On the other hand, the Bakairí model assigned primary importance to personal variables. A sorcerer psychically hurled an invisible, disease-ridden object through the air at high speed to penetrate the body of the victim if an angry enemy paid the sorcerer to do so.

The nurse who advised the women not to prepare food on the ground did not speculate about the origin of the microbes. She assumed that it was understood that things such as bacteria and viruses naturally populate a world we can only access with microscopes, while the Indian women assumed no such thing. Disease emerged out of conflict between people. The dirt on the ground may or may not house such dangerous entities, according to these women. It all depended on one’s enemies.

A shaman was not only a curer or sorcerer; he also exercised political power by using his skills to manipulate community events. Factions coalesced around him, tipping the balance one way or the other when conflict threatened to break into violence on the village plaza. Lino was a shaman when his brother, Tavio, was headman of Pakuera. Some villagers accused Tavio of stealing and then selling community cattle. People almost came to blows in front of the men’s house, where such important issues were frequently discussed. Tavio, in shame and anger, took his wife, Jude, and retreated to the garden to save face.

He left Lara, his influential mother, Lino, his brother, and Veri, Jude’s brother, to clear his name. Lino did not waste any time. He publicly recounted conversations with his guide in which the spirit warned that he would send a huge wind to blow his brother’s enemies away. One rainy evening, when he talked about this, Lino dramatically raised his arm and pointed to black clouds that were rolling across the sky. He said the end would look similar to that unless he could persuade his guide to leave Tavio’s detractors alone.

The metamessage in Lino’s communiqué was clear. The supernatural had labeled Tavio’s enemies as wrong and deserv-
ing of punishment, while Tavio was cast in the role of a misunderstood leader. Lino gained prestige because he was seen as the peacemaker. He was responsible for soothing an angry spirit who could have wreaked havoc in the village. Eventually the problem of the missing cattle was resolved, and Tavio returned home.

I tried to work with shamans like Lino, interviewing them about their beliefs and about what they do during their long apprenticeships. This was a complex area of Bakairí culture that required sophisticated control of the Bakairí language and worldview, things I felt I did not perfectly understand. However, I sat on the earth floor in Lino’s house, plodding on with my questions, when Marce, Peruare’s youngest son, entered the house.

Marce was in his midteens when his father died; when I first met him he was twenty. He seemed shy and gentle, with a quiet voice and serious demeanor. He was extremely thin, with small bones, lacking the physical development of most Indians. The active, hard-working lifestyle of the Bakairí resulted in muscular physiques in both the men and women. Marce looked frail in comparison.

Additionally, his skin was pale yellow, a color that I only saw when a young boy was in seclusion for a long period of time. As a boy passed through adolescence his father and uncles required him to remain in a specially partitioned section of the house. To strengthen the boy physically and spiritually his elders forbade him to speak above a whisper or to walk outside during the day. Above all he could not look at or be seen by people outside his immediate family. Because this seclusion period went on for months, the boy’s bronze tan usually faded, and his skin acquired a creamy yellow shade that the Bakairí people considered beautiful.

Marce’s entire presentation was much like a young man in seclusion. His skin, his frailty, his voice, and his avoidance of my eyes all suggested a person set apart. He spoke with Lino in low tones and then silently left. I asked Lino about him, and he told me that after the death of his father, Marce had tried to escape the whispers and stares of the villagers by going to Cuiaba to live with his brother Claudio. His transition to life in the capital of Mato Grosso was not successful. He began drinking, was unable to keep a job, and, finally, began a downward spiral that so concerned Claudio that he brought his brother back to the reservation, announcing to everyone that he was bewitched.

Tena, his aunt, speculated that someone in the city had taken possession of Marce’s body and soul. She asked Lino to treat him, and he met with the young man, questioning him about his symptoms. Marce responded that he constantly had a headache, had no
appetite, was weak and lethargic, and frequently felt confused and sad. Curing treatments hastily began.

I thought some North Americans might describe Marce’s problem a little differently than did the Bakairí. A psychotherapist might conclude his father’s sudden and violent death shocked andanguished him. He felt unable to cope with what was happening because there were few immediate family members left to support him. He confronted the additional stress of living in a small society. Such a world could be warm and caring, but when something unusual or dangerous occurred victims like Marce, perhaps made into scapegoats out of fear, could not escape the intrusive and punishing gaze of the villagers. There was really nowhere to hide, and his desperate attempt to live outside the reservation proved how tough it must have been for him in Pakuera.

After my conversation with Lino I was certain I had learned a lot about the devastating impact Peruare’s death had had on Marce. Yet I had also discovered something about shamans, I thought. Lino was not Marce’s kinsmen, but he supported the boy and helped him as few others in the village had. He was not only Marce’s healer, but also his friend. A thread of compassion ran through his actions, a quality that I had not, up to that time, associated with shamans. My study emphasized the side of shamanism that involved power and manipulation because, I thought, that would help me understand political events in the village. I had almost overlooked another, more humanistic dimension of the tradition.

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**OUT BACK**

**WITH THE BAKAIRÍ WOMEN**

Beri woke me up early one morning to let me know that Ivane, the daughter of Marti, had eloped to the gardens with Odi. I quickly threw on some khaki slacks and a fresh T-shirt and joined the other women in back of the house where they squatted around a fire. The sun had not risen but a gray light permeated the scene. Beri poured some coffee into a tin mug and handed it to me. Although she did not drink the beverage herself, she prepared it over the fire for me every morning, for which I was grateful.

Alia was torn between being irritated that she had not predicted the event and being gleeful that it had taken place. Clearly this was no painful tragedy. Even Odi’s wife, who stormed home
under the cover of darkness the night before, was reportedly more furious than sad about her husband’s defection. Her family was keeping quiet, as was Marti’s kin. No one wanted to trigger an open conflict before figuring out what Ivane and Odi planned to do.

The couple had been having an affair for some time. This was not uncommon in Indian villages. Many anthropologists have reported high levels of sexual activity among South American Indians, and the Bakairí were no exception. However, the Indians considered an affair one thing, and divorce and remarriage something quite different. Affairs, if handled discreetly, affected only two parties, while divorces affected families and disrupted the entire village. Odi and Ivane’s flight to the gardens signaled that they were taking the ultimate step. They were going to marry. They would remain in the gardens until Odi’s wife had moved home and the village gossip died down. Then they would quietly return to the village to resume their daily routine as nonchalantly as possible. Under the best of circumstances, that would be the end of the story.

Alia muttered darkly about Marti’s daughters and the trouble they caused. When I asked what she meant, she burst out angrily that Neude was Ivane’s sister. Neude had many affairs while married to Peruare, and she had not been at all discreet. In fact, everyone knew when she became seriously involved with Wito, the youngest son of Maka. The two were regularly and obviously together, something that caused Peruare great pain. It was clear, Alia said, that Peruare killed himself because he felt such anguish and humiliation over his wife’s infidelities. She bitterly concluded her story by saying Ivane was no better. It must run in families.

Alia energetically slapped the manioc pancake that was toasting on the clay griddle over the fire. But I saw her lips trembling and knew she was distressed. Although Peruare had not belonged to Alia’s age cohort, he was close to her in age and experience. When members of small societies like the Bakairí died, it was keenly felt by everyone. Death left huge gaps in people’s lives, even though they said they tried to “forget the sorrow.”

The sun rose as we squatted there eating manioc pancakes. I thought about Peruare’s death. Was it possible that he killed himself because of Neude? It seemed unlikely to me because so many Indian men and women were having extramarital affairs that it was practically the norm. It would have been a gross overreaction on the part of Peruare to hang himself over a wayward wife. Even if he had thought that Neude was going to leave him for Wito, that still would not lead to suicide. He would simply remarry as he had when Taiwa, his first wife, died.
Alia continued to complain about Marti and her girls. She said that she had not raised her daughter Beri to behave in such an ugly fashion, and neither for that matter had Lara, whose girls were also well-behaved. I tried to remember Lara, mentally reviewing the rough map of the village I sketched during my first month in Pakuera. Lara was a women in her sixties or seventies who lived with her many daughters and sons at the west end of the village. I recalled that at first I confused her with Marti, who occupied the central part of the village near the men’s house.

Suddenly I realized that another powerful old woman inhabited the eastern part of the village. Her name was Maka, and she was Wito’s mother. She was one of the few Indians in the village who had white hair, but she was still strong and able to influence her five sons and three daughters, all of whom were married with children.

Lara, Marti, and Maka—these were three powerful women leading three powerful village factions consisting of sons and daughters and their spouses and children. At that point I had been with the Bakairí long enough to know that some individuals consistently took certain predictable positions regarding issues affecting the village. Was it possible that the village factions did the same?

For example, Joi, one of Maka’s sons, aggressively supported the mechanized agricultural project promoted by FUNAI agents. He was an articulate and public advocate of the practice of modern agriculture in the cerrado. His brothers and the husbands of his sisters, as far as I could remember, all held similar positions. They voted as a block.

I thought about the agriculture project. It was considered to be the salvation of the Bakairí by some and the bane of Bakairí existence by others. In 1980 FUNAI transported a tractor to the reservation and supplied the Bakairí with rice seed and chemical fertilizers. They instructed the Indians to clean clear the land, plow it with the tractor, plant and fertilize the seeds, and harvest the rice using modern harvesting machines. The goal, they explained to the Indians, was to sell the crop to middlemen in Paranatinga, who would in turn take the harvest to markets in the cities. FUNAI hoped the Bakairí would use the cash proceeds to purchase more fertilizer, seeds, and diesel fuel. It seemed simple enough.

The project only produced about fifty percent of the anticipated harvest that first year. FUNAI and the Indians hoped to harvest about 1000 sacks of rice, but only 450 sacks were filled. The Bakairí worked hard, but a number of obstacles stood in their way. Their lack of know-how, the absence of technical support from FUNAI, equipment malfunctions, and early rains all conspired
against the initial success of the Bakairí’s project. During subse-
quent years FUNAI support dwindled as the organization itself
underwent reform. Yet, the Indians managed to harvest quite
respectable amounts of rice from time to time. For example, one
year they cultivated only 25 hectares, but harvested 680 sacks of
rice. This was substantially more than the 450 sacks they managed
to squeeze from the 50 hectares they originally plowed.

One of the controversies among the Bakairí about the project
concerned how it affected village life. Some Indians pointed out it
reduced the people’s reliance on traditional gardening and
increased their dependency on FUNAI. A study I did while in the
village tested this hypothesis. The data I gathered indicated that
since the modern agriculture project was introduced, fewer house-
hold heads made traditional manioc gardens in the gallery forest.
In 1981 16.9 percent (10 of Pakuera’s 59 households) did not make
traditional gardens in the gallery forests along the rivers. In 1989
48.8 percent (20 of 41 households) lacked gardens. Although I dis-
covered that the reasons for not making gardens varied, people
who did not have them turned to FUNAI or other organizations for
food or cash in order to survive. It seemed the critics of the project
were right about the dependency issue, at least.

When I reviewed my field notes I identified many village
issues on which Maka, Lara, and Martí’s factions differed. Some
were trivial and simmered in the background, but others led to
public conflict and threats of violence. In fact, sometimes, under
the cover of darkness, men fought each other with knives, and the
losers fled to their gardens to heal their wounds before FUNAI
agents discovered internal disputes the Indians wanted kept secret.

Was it possible that the death of Peruare had more to do with
village politics and conflict between factions than with Neude’s
affair with Wito? Suicide seemed highly improbable, which left
accidental homicide or murder. I needed to know if there was a
possible motive. Subsequent conversations with Alia and Lino led
me to conclude there were plenty of reasons, both new and old, for
Peruare to come to blows with members of one of the factions. For
example, Peruare was not a member of a strong kin faction. In fact,
he had few relatives in the village. Many anthropologists have
reported how vulnerable Indians were to accusations of witchcraft
and general persecution if they lacked kin to defend them.3

Additionally, Peruare advocated a more traditional lifestyle.
He, like many of his generation, felt uncomfortable with the recent
changes in the reservation. He avoided traveling in the truck, did
not own a radio, and rarely left the reservation. He kept to himself,
not even cultivating friendships with FUNAI agents, potential 
allies in a village where he counted few friends.

Villagers such as Yuka and Lino described Peruare as detached 
and quiet. He did not laugh or joke with people, which probably 
did nothing to increase his popularity among the Indians, 
because the Bakairí valued a good sense of humor. He was appar-
ently somewhat intense, which was also problematic because one 
needed “thick skin” in the village, where the rub of daily interac-
tions took its toll.

Although I did not identify a specific issue that might have pre-
cipitated a violent altercation, I was satisfied that, given the Bakairí 
cultural context, Peruare’s personality would have increased the 
likelihood of a confrontation, then a fight, and finally his death. I 
could imagine a variety of scenarios, but there was one that seemed 
likely given the location of his body. He was probably alone in his 
garden, without help from the few kin he had, when a man or a 
group of men came by to visit, as was common among the Bakairí. 
Etiquette dictated that Peruare offer them some fruit and then chat 
with them cordially before going on with his work. However, he 
was noted for his taciturnity, so he probably ignored his guests until 
they teased or jeered at him. Then, provoked, he probably attacked 
them, or was perhaps attacked by them. The fight took an unfortu-
nate turn, and Peruare lay dead. The fact that he was strung up from 
the branch of a tree suggested to me that more than one man was 
eventually involved. I figured that if the altercation was originally 
between only two men, the visitor could have panicked and run for 
help from a kinsman when he realized he had killed Peruare.

But how would I find out the truth? I could not ask Lino or 
Tavio, two important village leaders who surely knew what hap-
pened. They were the brothers-in-law of Wito, Neude’s current 
husband. (Jude, who was Wito’s sister, was married to Tavio.) And 
no one in Martí’s faction wanted to discuss this possibility because 
the truth directly affected Neude. FUNAI officials did not possess 
all the facts because the Bakairí took care about what they reported 
and did not report to these officials. Although the courts could not 
prosecute and send Indians to prison because they were wards of 
the state, the Bakairí claimed FUNAI inflicted indirect kinds of 
punishment on them when they committed transgressions.

As the months passed I occasionally made an observation 
about Peruare’s death to members of Yuka’s household or to other 
Bakairí. But I made no further discoveries. People consistently said 
he killed himself. If I pointed out that Bakairí did not commit sui-
cide, they responded, yes, wasn’t that odd?
EPILOGUE

Almost ten years later I visited Pakuera again. I stayed in Yuka’s house and enjoyed seeing Beri’s wide smile and Alia’s unaltered pace. Yuka and Nai were both considerably heavier than they had been when I first met them, probably because of the dietary changes that followed increased contact with Brazilians. The adoption by some Bakairí households of the Brazilian method of frying rice in pork fat before steaming it had done nothing to improve the health of the Indians.

Rea looked great. She and Nai still lived in Yuka’s house, but now there were three extra mouths to feed. Beri and Alia spent an enormous amount of time fussing over the children. When I did a census during my previous fieldtrip I noted that couples whose children were grown frequently adopted or “borrowed” children from other village families. Although children were useful in that they performed important chores around the house, the Bakairí gave every appearance of doting on them. I suspected Beri and Alia worked hard to convince Nai and Rea to remain with them instead of building a new house close by.

Rea seemed quiet but content. I did not hear her crying at night, and the bouts of sudden weeping no longer occurred. I was relieved her life has assumed a kind of placid normalcy. After all the upset during her formative years, it must have been a relief for her to live without tragedy for a while.

Rea told me that Marce married a young woman named Yeda. It was probably not a coincidence that Yeda was relatively unknown in the village. I am certain he sought a companion who did not know all the details about his family. They lived with Yeda’s parents in a homestead located several miles from Pakuera. I visited the place on my first field trip and found that it was a lonely place that the Brazilians might have called triste, or sad, but maybe Marce needed the quiet and solitude.

My second day in the village I woke up and looked out the window to see Marce sitting on the neighbor’s stoop, looking as thin as he had a decade ago. I went out and greeted him. I asked him about his headaches and weakness, and he said he thought he was still bewitched. Lino and he continued to work on the problem. He explained to me that an Indian being bewitched was different from a non-Indian being sick and being treated by a doctor. It took a long time to cure an Indian. I told him that I agreed. I wished him luck, and sincerely meant it.
NOTES


SUGGESTED READINGS

Chagnon, Napoleon. *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, 3rd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983. Although many are not convinced that the Yanomamö people are, in fact, as fierce as the title of the monograph suggests, most readers agree that Chagnon has done an excellent job of describing a remarkable people.

Harner, Michael. *The Jívaro: People of the Sacred Waterfalls*. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1972. Harner’s book is still one of the most vivid accounts of headhunting and what to do with the head after it is cut off the body. Additional chapters on how the Jívaro see life after death are also excellent.

Murphy, Yolanda, and Robert Murphy. *Women of the Forest*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974. Mundurucu society divides women from men in many profound ways that are both different from and similar to North American society. The ramifications of this division, as described by the two anthropologists, will intrigue and surprise readers.

Stearman, Allyn MacLean. *No Longer Nomads: The Sirionó Revisited*. New York: Hamilton Press, 1987. This is a restudy of the Sirionó, who were originally described in Allan Holmberg’s 1950 *Nomads of the Long Bow: The Sirionó of Eastern Bolivia*. It is worthwhile and poignant reading because it shows what frequently happens to hunting and gathering bands when they are settled into villages by state governments and missionaries.

Werner, Dennis. *Amazon Journey: An Anthropologist’s Year among Brazil’s Mekranoti Indians*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990. This is great reading for those who are interested in learning in more detail what it is like to do fieldwork with Brazilian Indians. It also explains the different lifestyles that evolve when certain groups alternate living in large villages with living in “trekking” groups.