

# Making Incomprehensible Relations Comprehensible : The Guagibo Hunter-Gatherers and their Farming Neighbors in 16th and 17th Century Llanos

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## **Making Incomprehensible Relations Comprehensible: The Guagibo Hunter-Gatherers and their Farming Neighbors in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Llanos**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Earlier representations of hunter-gatherer and farmer relations in the lowland South American anthropological literature have over-generalized and distorted a highly dynamic relationship, by removing the context in which interactions between nomads and farmers took place. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Colombian and Venezuelan Llanos was the setting for the clash of societies. The historical record shows a frontier in which the expansion of the Caribs, with the help of the Dutch, forced the Saliva and Achagua sedentary communities to relocate. At that time, an east-west movement of settlements was also evident. In this way, communities became increasingly close to the Jesuit missionaries who, in the name of Spain, attempted to restructure settlement patterns. A decomposition of the pre-Colombian network of alliances and trade systems was evident at that time. The *quiripa*, a shell used as a currency between societies, soon became a rare commodity that also lost its significance. It is in this context that the following observation is especially relevant. The Jesuit missionaries were puzzled by the interactions between Guagibo hunter-gatherers and farmers. The farmers tolerated, even welcomed, the Guagibo into their towns, despite their “abusing” and “tricking” the farmers at every turn. This seemingly incomprehensible relationship becomes comprehensible when it is recognized, based on the evaluation of ethnohistorical data, that the Guagibo offered more than goods to farmers; they provided information, a critical resource in a socially and politically changing landscape.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The following anecdote has been repeated over and over in the writings of 16<sup>th</sup> century missionaries to the Colombian and Venezuelan Llanos. Since it is not an absurd tale that emerged from the encounter of different cultures and their attempt to explain the “other’s barbarism” in a quasi-logical fashion, it deserves careful consideration. Instead of providing explanation, the story poses only a

question that has no evident answer. Rather than simply dismissing this question as just a hypothetical explanation used by past and present generations, the objective of this article is to reconsider the important theoretical issue buried in the missionaries' writings within a different context, and to examine alternative explanations.

My main source of information in this paper is a Jesuit friar, Juan Rivero, who arrived in December, 1720 in the Llanos, the Colombo-Venezuelan savannas that extend from the Andean foothills in Colombia to the mouth of the Orinoco River, in Venezuela (map 1). Rivero quickly mastered three native languages, Airico, Botoye and Achagua, and could also understand and speak Goagibo and Chiruva. In his book, *Historia de las misiones de los Llanos de Casanare y los Rios Orinoco y Meta*, the missionary describes an incomprehensible interaction between two different ethnic groups: the Achagua and the Guagibo/Chiricoa<sup>1</sup>. The following is an approximation to what Rivero saw.

### THE STORY

Rivero (1956: 150–151) tells about a visit by Guagibo/Chiricoa nomads of the plains to a village of sedentary Achagua farmers. Rivero compares these nomads to European gypsies, and, at the outset, warns of the infinite patience required when they descend on an Achagua village. The newcomers' impertinence and screaming can drive everybody insane, Rivero says. Soon after arriving, they



Map 1

separate into small groups that target different sectors of the village, all the while incessantly shrieking and constantly talking in one or the other direction. According to Padre Rivero, their constant chatter stuns you. After locating the area in the village where their acquaintances live, they start their *mirrays*, a rhetoric oration delivered to their friends (Rivero 1956: 117), giving information of things that exist and do not exist inland. For hours they keep up this strident talking, and in the process everything that crosses their minds is revealed to the patient spectators. Their long proclamations test the limits of Rivero's tolerance.

Then, when the *mirrays* are over, they start the *cambalache*, a formal exchange of products. From Rivero's point of view the Guagibo only have objects of very little value, such as Chinchorros (fiber hammocks) and oil from the forest. From the Achagua, they obtain beads, natural pigments like *achiote* (*Bixa orellana*), and maize beer (*chicha*) on which they get drunk, one of their favorite activities, as Rivero highlights in his writing. During these transactions the nomads take advantage of their sedentary "friends". Not long after the departure of the Guagibo/Chiricoa, for instance, the Achagua notice that instead of the "exotic" oil they wanted they only received dirty water: the oil was delivered in small squash containers filled with water, with a little oil on top. The Jesuit missionaries agree that the Guagibo/Chiricoa do not miss any opportunity to fool the Achagua and steal from them (Rivero 1956: 221-222).

The *cambalache* is followed by what Rivero described as the "begging process." Everything that the nomads see, they want. They walk around the village begging and searching for objects to satisfy their unlimited desire for possessions. Rivero believes that there are no other scroungers in the entire world so expert in this art; if they have a talent it is this ability to beg until they get something out of you. Giving in will not help you either, because they know that they can get much more, and so giving them things will only be your ruin. According to Rivero, the only way to stop their demands is to give them tobacco powder and assure them that in the future they will get everything they want (Rivero 1956: 151).

New dangers emerge when the nomad are ready to go back to the savannas. They walk into the agricultural plots and without any consideration for the crop owners take everything they want. Frequently, the nomads take not only food products, medicinal plants or raw materials, but even abduct children. The Jesuit missionaries know the future of those seized children: they will be exchanged as *macos* - slaves - with other communities.

The question arising in the missionary's mind, was why did the Achagua tolerate the Guagibo/Chiricoa thievery, impertinence and abuses, and, even more, why did they apparently, welcome them?

There is no answer to this question in the missionary writings; however, the issue provided Jesuits with a justification for their own work as missionaries. In the Jesuit's chronicle, the Achagua are depicted as a tolerant, peaceful and receptive people, characteristics that make them good subjects for conversion. In

addition, their sedentary lifestyle suited the missionaries' programs for colonization. Yet the Achagua are far from perfect; they have, according to Rivero, two main problems: an incredible inconstancy and a lack of courage. The nomads - Guagibo/Chiricoa -, on the contrary, are represented as "devils," a word referring to their evil spirit. Other words also used to characterize them are "barbarous," "brutal," "cruel," "fell," "roughshod," "savage" and "vicious." It is evident, based on the Jesuits' opposed perception of the nature of the sedentary people and their nomadic neighbors that the missionaries felt obligated to protect the Achagua and help them fight off the nomads. And they did just that. Rivero provides a description of the military skills they taught the Achagua to prepare them for the nomads' visits. Even more, some missionaries became, as they said, real soldiers at the service of God in those battles (Rivero 1956: 224).

How can this puzzle be solved and the barrier of ethnocentrism erected by the missionaries' representation of these groups overcome? A resolution might be found by moving away from the context of Rivero's words and considering the historical context in which the paradoxical interaction occurred. This endeavor will consist of approaching the socio-economic landscape of the indigenous world as disclosed by the anthropologist followed by an introduction of a map of the colonial world that was imposed over this system.

## THE CONTEXT

Anthropologists, ethnohistorians, and archaeologists have been interested in the links between societies with different cultures and economic systems in the Llanos since the early 1970s. Morey (1975), however, created a new framework by suggesting more than occasional contacts between groups with different economies. Indeed, working with historical sources, she described a robust network in which economic specialization based on ecological diversity fuelled a broad exchange system. Based on these ideas Arvelo-Jiménez and Bjord (1994), portray a regional system of interdependence based on economic and religious prestations and counterprestations. They envision the relationship between the Guagibo/Chiricoa and the Achagua as part of a system that, through reciprocity, overcomes the irregular distribution of resources in the western Orinoco llanos.

From the Guajibo we can apprehend the structure and functioning of interethnic relations in this section of the Orinoco llanos. Given the great variety of micro-environments, the Guajibo and their neighbours (mainly the Achagua) created mechanisms of cooperation and reciprocity that permitted them to exploit jointly those micro-environments with other culturally different groups. In this manner they were able to overcome the problem of competing for scarce resources despite their lack of membership in a large and unified polity (Arvelo-Jiménez and Bjord 1994: 61)

Those schemes, when combined with archaeological data, gave rise to different models for understanding the dynamics of such intricate systems (i.e., Zucchi and Gassón 2002).

Gassón (1996) proposed that the complementarity of populations was much more than ecological and had political and economic undertones as revealed by the exchange of prestige goods between the members of political elites. The degree of integration in this system and the types of organizations that acted as building blocks are still being debated. However, analogous systems described as multiethnic confederations have been identified in northeastern South America and the Caribbean as well. These political organizations have been considered to be the result of the integration of different ethnic units (Vidal 2002; Whitehead 1994).

Even more, *quirípa*, the exchange currency in the Meta-Orinoco axis, confirms the existence of a complex system of mutual dependence (Gassón 2000). *Quirípa* was made from a freshwater shell, which, in the sources, was referred to as *nemu* or *memu*. The hard tip of the shell served as the raw material for its production, while the rest of the shell was ground and used with a hallucinogenic drug (*yopo* - *Anadenanthera peregrina*) (Rivero 1956: 160). During colonial times demand for *quirípa* increased, forcing the use of the entire shell, and even stimulated the import of sea shells as raw material. Joseph Gumilla (1944: 124), a Jesuit missionary, mentioned how some natives used *quirípa* as necklaces representing prestige markers used by local elites. This was corroborated by Rivero, who mentioned how young important males of the communities carried *quirípa* around their waist and arms while women wore it as necklaces and bracelets. (Rivero 1956: 161). In addition, the *quirípa* was also used as a bride payment (Rivero 1956: 120).

However, as Joseph Cassani, in his chronicle of the Jesuit Order in Colombia, also highlights, the most important use of *quirípa* was as currency. Cassani writes:

... and whomever had *quirípas* in quantity was considered rich, because certainly at any time it was possibly to buy whatever was necessary; and from this came the name, or the meaning of money, to the *quirípa* because with it, like with money, it was possible to find anything desired; and until those days this shell money circulates on the Casanare, Meta, and Orinoco Rivers, as esteemed by Spaniards as by Indians (Gassón 2000: 594).

The Achagua purchased axes and other Europeans tools in their Meta River settlements with *quirípa* from the Caribs who in turn imported them from the Dutch colonies in Guyana (Rivero 1956: 39, 161). It is clear, therefore, that *quirípa* was important during the pre-Hispanic era, and evident that during colonial times it was incorporated into the new economic system developed by Europeans in the Llanos. The Europeans adopted the *quirípa* in an attempt to tap

and control the native exchange network. Nonetheless, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the *quirípa* had ceased to exist as local “currency”; new economic trends, demographic decline, and changes in the political landscape through the new colonies made it obsolete.

Another result of the intense contacts between different groups in the region is disclosed by some similarities in their myths and, consequently, in their cosmology explicating the order of the world. In her analysis of the rise of Kuwai religion and its spatial characterization, Vidal (2000, 2003) was able to map the native conceptual integration of a huge territory. She describes a native history within different historical periods which suggests the deep historical roots of a past system that integrated an enormous area. Missionary sources corroborate this ethnographic interpretation. Rivero notes that the Saliva, though very different in language, are like the Achagua in their ceremonies, traditions and costumes (Rivero 1956: 199). Based on archival documents, Whitehead (1990b: 148) points out that the Warao and Saliva had the same mythical origin. But not only that, through inheritance, marriage and alliances, by 1733, some Arawak, Guayano, Guayqueri, Mapoye, and Saliva became Caribs (Whitehead 1990a: 378). It is impossible to deny that there was a constant flux of people, ideas and objects in areas with different degrees of integration.

The above description of this broad system incorporating different ethnic groups, linguistic stocks and cultural traditions permits the understanding of what missionaries considered to be an “undesirable” relationship. After all, this is the context in which the interaction we are interested in is taking place. This system, however, has a history; like all systems it is in constant flux. Identification of some of its main characteristics permits its definition - *grosso modo* - but understanding the state of the system at a specific moment of its history requires further investigation.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the Orinoco-Meta axis became the center of a bloody war as the European powers - Spain, France, Portugal, Holland and England - attempted to profit from these new lands. However, to benefit they needed some degree of control over the region as well as an ability to expand while eliminating potential competitors. They combined two main strategies to achieve these ends. First, each power attempted to create strategically located centers that acted as trading posts and warranted access to the network of exchange. Stability in the main lines of communication depended on the relationships the colonies were able to develop and sustain with nearby native communities. A degree of peace required at the center of an economic system that lives on plundering and destruction was achieved by giving valuable gifts, such as metal tools, to the natives as well as by providing them with trade opportunities to access European products. But those privileges by themselves did not suffice in ensuring peaceful relationships. In some cases the Dutch also accessed local kinship systems by marrying into local elites. This gave rise to a robust scheme of obligations that they used for their own benefit (Whitehead 1990a: 366). The

Spanish crown, occupied with the exploitation of more immediately profitable regions like the Andes, adopted an inexpensive approach for the control of the region: establishing missions. This low cost tactic implied the relocation of diverse native populations into the most desirable locations, like the mouths of rivers that gave control of vast territories. However, as the Jesuits' writings repeatedly show, missionaries' attempts to conduce the nomads into a more sedentary lifestyle failed. As a result, all missionary efforts were concentrated on groups like the Saliva and Achagua whom they considered to be far more promising (Gumilla 1944: 110–111).

The second strategy, ethnic soldiering, which was not separate from the first strategy, furthered the stability and expansion of European occupation. Europeans depended on the military assistance of the native population against competing colonial powers, other native groups, and rebellious slaves. Therefore, native armies were formed to participate in local conflicts. In this way the Europeans not only were able to capitalize on previous local conflicts, including natives' earlier bad experiences with other colonial powers, but at the same time create a tool to expand their areas of influence. However, the ability of the Europeans to use ethnic soldiers relied on the individual relationships established with local chiefs. Consequently, albeit it had a deep impact on all native societies in the area, the degree of development and ultimate success of this strategy depended on local conditions (Whitehead 1990a).

The implications of ethnic soldiering were remarkable, particularly in relation to the Carib expansion in the Orinoco Basin. Rivero describes the terror when the Dutch and their allies, the Carib, spread throughout the region; often entire villages were abandoned by their alarmed inhabitants suspecting a Carib attack (Rivero 1956: 49).

A document from the time provides the following vivid description:

One grieves for so many women and children who are yet awaiting death at the hands of such inhuman savages, eaters of human flesh and heretics, enemies to our Holy Catholic Faith from whom God was pleased to deliver this town following its capture by the Caribs and Dutch, on the 22nd July, the Feast of St. Mary Magdelene (Whitehead 1990b: 149).

The consternation that Caribs caused in Achagua communities was explained mythologically; the Caribs' powers were justified by their ritual and shamanic practices. Indeed, as part of their preparation for skirmishing and attacks, the Carib were known to consume a manioc-beer containing organs of powerful animals like "tigers" (jaguars) and anacondas, thereby hoping to obtain the spiritual and physical force embodied by those animals. An oily substance containing worms collected from the claws and teeth of dead jaguars was smeared on Carib clubs and on the soldiers' arms (Whitehead 1990b: 152). Thus, during a Carib attack, the Achagua were not experiencing a natural force, a human enemy,



but the sons of the jaguar teeth, in their language *Chavinaní*, or the Jaguar-spear (Gumilla 1944: 109). The Saliva saw the origin of the Caribs in the decomposing body of an enormous snake, killed by the son of Puru, a mythological hero (Gumilla 1944: 108–109).

This extremely complicated political situation in a region affected by constant war and changing alliances had an impact on village structure. Morey (1975: 123) notes how Achagua settlements in areas subject to Carib influence were more nucleated and, in some cases, fortified. Hamlets clustered around a principal settlement in which a men's house (*daury*), was located (Rivero 1956: 197). Neighboring hamlets comprised a group of dwellings subject to the authority of a chief. The chief's authority was important only in activities like warfare (Morey 1975: 127–128) practiced to capture women and young children. One famous Achagua fortification was the town of Catarubenes, an important river port in the slave trade (Rivero 1965: 46); according to Morey (1975: 129) the Achagua were involved in slave-raiding and trading even before the colonial age, when slave-trafficking became one of the most important economic activities.

Since Rivero's description of the relationship between sedentary Achagua and nomadic Guagibo/Chiricoa may involved other factors, other elements could have contributed to the submission to the nomads by the Achagua as well. Also, it would be naive to assume that these contacts always took the same form, and that their structure was based on the "nature" of these two different populations, sedentary and nomadic, as the Jesuits believed. As with all human social relationships, these interactions were immersed in and determined by a gamut of changing social, economic and political conditions.

One potential source of Guagibo/Chiricoa power over the Achagua could have been their knowledge, since although usually scorned, nomads are respected for what they know about other "Worlds". This knowledge can be a source of supernatural powers. It was believed that the sorcery of nomads could be put to work against their enemies. Indeed, Rivero himself gave some examples. He mentioned that owing to Guagibo/Chiricoa's sorcery that was believed to have caused disease, some villages were abandoned and burned (Rivero 1956: 176). Even today the power of the Guagibo shamans echoes in Orinoco basin ethnographies showing the tremendous reputation of their magic to identify enemy sorcerers and to take vengeance killing enemies from a distance (Wright 2013: 126, 131).

Ironically, most of these diseases were introduced by the missionaries themselves. Rivero narrates (1956: 168–169) that one native noticed that although his people became sick and died like ants while the missionaries never got sick; he attributed this to the robe that the missionaries wore. There are few data available concerning the introduction of Old World pathogens in the Colombo-Venezuelan plains (Gómez, Sotomayor and Lesmes 2000). However, European diseases are blamed, in part, for the destruction of all sedentary societies (Morey 1975). Without doubt, the relocation and concentration of the communities in the

missions increased the dispersion of infectious diseases like smallpox, measles, yellow fever, chickenpox, influenza, whooping cough, and typhus. It is no coincidence that those viral infections evolved with the development of towns (Ramenofsky, Wilbur and Stone 2003). Rivero (1956: 327) himself provides an account of a missionary's fear of losing all the natives to small pox during their relocation to the port of Casanare. Other Old World diseases, like malaria, caused epidemics in the region in 1600 and 1650, and by 1648 an outbreak of yellow fever affected the area (Cook 1998). How these devastations were interpreted at the time has been little examined; obviously, blaming the nomads helped support the Jesuit missionaries' agenda. Fear was an essential element in the Europeans' program of dividing and conquering. The miracles of healing due to divine intervention, the salvation of the souls of the dying by confession and baptism were common missionary tricks. Indeed, Gumilla (1944: 321) mentioned that on each visit there were plenty of opportunities to baptize dying children and adults. Most likely, the Catholic rituals were complemented by shamanic practices to identify the enemies that cause the disease in an attempt to neutralize them. Native societies experienced one blast after another; unknown misery and destruction knocked on their doors, and rampant desperation filled the Llanos.

The conclusions reached by the Jesuits contrast with the anthropological point of view; missionary documents emphasize conflict and war whereas the latter highlights cooperation. Indeed, modern observers depict these historical interactions as examples of an extended system of reciprocal obligations that did not require a centralized authority for coordination. For them, those political strategies give rise to an open system of connections that works through intermediaries and involved multiple ethnic groups in a diverse but continuous space (Gassón 2014; Zucchi and Gassón 2002; Morey 1975). These opposite views are not necessarily contradictory. A couple of centuries have given researchers a secure place from which to view the outlines of a system that evolved through continuous and contradictory interactions. In contrast, eyewitnesses experienced the drama of a palpable reality during a very short period of extreme transformation.

Now it is time to revisit Riveros' description of the Guagibo/Chiricoa encounter with the Achagua.

### **MIRRAYES OF PEACE, MIRRAYES OF WAR**

As we recall, Rivero (1956: 117) described the *mirray* as a rhetoric oration delivered to guests. However, the function of *mirray* goes beyond its formal definition. Based on the study of documents and missionary texts, Gassón (2003) proposed that, in addition to being a mechanism to regulate conflict, *mirrayes* were a way of displaying power and prestige in the region. Rivero relates a case in which a confrontation was circumvented during a negotiation that took place within a *mirray*. On that occasion, a sedentary community was able to avoid an

assault by nomads. He also mentions instances in which a *mirray* acts as a declaration of war and a war harangue (Rivero 1956: 40). It is evident that *mirrayes* were formalized political instruments that allowed different communities to negotiate their interests. As a space for negotiation, they implied a structure and flexibility.

It is important to highlight that Rivero's description of the Guagibo/Chiricoa encounter with the Achagua is distinct from those he portrays between different sedentary groups, although he mentions on both occasions the *mirray*. *Mirrayes* among sedentary groups were highly structured ceremonies that entailed preparation for offering abundant food and alcoholic beverages to guests. On such occasions the guests were addressed with kinship terms, such as *mude* (cousin). After some drinking and eating, the ceremony opened with a rhetorical prayer that people learned from childhood. Rivero compares the memorization of this prayer with the learning of the Christian prayers in Europe, a very serious matter that requires a pupil's complete devotion. According to him, one important initial component of the *mirray* is when the host extends a warm welcome to the visitors. The chief repeats in many different ways how happy the people are with their visitors. According to Gumilla (1944: 319), the main body of the *mirray* comprises what happened to their ancestors, their happiness and their sadness, all of which are recounted in a sad tone.

Each nation has its own closing words for concluding this part; for the Achagua it is *yaquetá, nude, yaquetá* literally "it is true nephew, it is true". After that, all kinds of important matters, including community problems, news, myths, and historical information were discussed (Gumilla 1944: 319–320). *Mirrayes* were given in different languages, some of which were unintelligible (Rivero 1956: 430, 324). Dancing and club fighting associated with those encounters in which *mirrayes* were delivered were also practiced among sedentary communities.

To summarize, the structure of the *mirrayes* among sedentary communities presumed much preparation, which implies some type of scheduling. In contrast, visits of nomads seem to be less systematic. Probably the latter were frequent during the dry months, when travel was relatively easy, but unpredictable for the sedentary communities. It seems that the *mirrayes* of sedentary people and those organized for surprise visits, like those of nomads or missionaries, are different in their elaboration, but not in structure. The documents suggest that they follow the same steps.

## **WHY DID THE FARMERS TOLERATE THE NOMADS AND EVEN WELCOME THEM?**

Should an explanation be sought based on the axiom that relations are a route for material gain, there seems to be no logical justification for the sedentary community's tolerance of the nomad's impertinence and thievery. When Jesuit missionaries attempted to understand the relationship between the nomads and

their sedentary counterparts from this perspective, they became confused, since in economic terms the sedentary communities derive nothing but damage from this relationship. In contrast, it was easy for the missionaries to appreciate all the benefits that the nomads obtained from their regular visits to sedentary communities. Understandably, the missionaries found mysterious the nature of this unbalanced relationship. Blinded by their own logic, they were incapable of understanding this strange world. However, considering some factors that the Jesuits did not take into account shows that in fact both the nomads and the sedentary communities gain major benefits through these interactions.

Jesuit policy favoring the relocation of the sedentary populations and against the nomads was based not only on the protection (control) of the former, but on an attempt to isolate them from the native network that regulated their social and economic relations. As they did in Paraguay, the Jesuits intended to become the primary source for all economic transactions between the communities and the outsiders, while controlling the communities' internal production (Crocitti 2002; Sarreal 2013). Consequently, dominating the agriculturalist communities of the Orinoco Basin could be accomplished only after dominating their articulation with the outside world. Clearly, the multi-ethnic system described by anthropologists and ethnohistorians hindered Jesuit economic and political programs.

In a system as complex as that described in the Llanos it is vital for each community to participate in the local network giving access to distant interconnected areas. Relative position within the network guaranteed access to alliances and resources that were impossible to acquire outside the system; marriages (husbands and wives), trade goods, and raw materials, to name but a few. Subsistence security was enhanced for groups maintaining access to long distance social contacts in a large-scale network that guarantee resource availability. Given this context, the nomads were an important link in this pre-European network; their ability to cover long distances and their constant encounters with different groups provided them with goods and information that no other group was able to access. Therefore, as carriers of information and goods, they were transformed into the regular links that helped structure the system described by anthropologists and ethnohistorians.

Though, naturally, the nomads gained economic benefits from their visits to sedentary communities, at the same time, they were able to gather information that would be circulated, perhaps exchanged, among different groups. Thus, albeit the sedentary communities were fooled in the economic transactions, they received information of more or at least equal value to the material objects with which they were forced to part. Consequently, here is no discrete break between the valuables exchanged within the network. Rather, there are variations in relative frequencies of their materiality versus their immateriality.

We remember that Rivero not only witnessed the exchange, but also observed the way nomads split into small groups, targeting specific parts of the community - their "friends" - to perform rituals and to conduct the exchange. He saw how the

links that supported the system were renewed through rituals and the use of kinship denominations. Hunter-gatherer societies are often well-known for their fluidity, and in this case history demonstrates that, by the end of the collapse of the network system, nomads were able to incorporate many members of the sedentary societies (Morey 1975). That could not have been accomplished without strong ties. It is clear that the Jesuits' perspective attempts to reduce the value of these exchanges, although in many cases the missionaries could not understand their function within the system.

When a system, like that described for the Colombo-Venezuelan plains, gradually enters a stage of disorder it becomes even more urgent for small communities to redouble their efforts to understand the changes, so as to ascertain their place and role within it. In a period of commotion, participation in this network becomes crucial for the survival of communities, and it becomes urgent to forge new alliances and identify enemies.

The dramatic shifts in the political landscape of the 17<sup>th</sup> century demanded rapid adjustments, such that information became an invaluable "article" of exchange. Rivero states that, for hours, the nomads kept talking in strident voices to right and left, giving their friends information of "what exists and what does not exist" inland. This is what the sedentary communities valued most; this is what they are deriving from this "unbalanced" exchange. Through the *mirrayes*, sedentary communities were receiving from nomads vital elements for decision-making. In short, Guahibo/Chiricoa tales and stories were at the center of the assessment of the political, economic and ecological landscapes in which the sedentary communities evolved. Ceremonies and rituals, such as *mirrayes*, were the mechanisms used by these different social organizations to reaffirm social ties in the context of a complex system of material and non-material exchanges. *Mirrays* symbolize these ties, and at the same time embody them.

## DISCUSSION

Researchers attempting to understand hunter-gatherer lifestyles in South America have emphasized different aspects during the last 40 years. Mobility has been scrutinized, based on the analysis of food resources structure and its relation to past human activities (i.e., Balée 1992, 1999; Politis 1996a). Other factors, such as band composition, subsystem technology and social organization, have been carefully analyzed (Franky 2011; Franky *et al.* 1995; Mahecha *et al.* 2000; Politis 1996a, 1996b; Silverwood-Cope 1990). The study of the relationship between hunter-gatherers and their sedentary neighbors has always emphasis one of them. For example, the interpretation of the South American ethnographic record shows, as it did in other parts of the world, that hunter-gatherers depended on crops produced by their sedentary neighbors (Headland 1987; Headland and Reid 1989; Sponsel 1989). No less important has been the description of the assimilation or the development of movable societies, based on conflict and cultural

“degradation”. Indeed, at the very beginning of modern hunter-gatherer studies, Lathrap (1968) saw the origins of this social formation along the Amazon Basin in terms of lack of resources and cultural degradation. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968) supported this idea and called them “regressive” societies. Similarly, Balee (1992) argued that the Tupí-Garani foraging societies descend from a formerly agriculturalist society; cultural loss and ecological marginalization were also put forward as fundamental elements of a hypothesis that attempted to explain the difficult life of groups like the Siriono (Holmberg 1969). Other researchers highlight the hunter-gatherers’ relationship with agriculturalists in terms of their knowledge of agricultural plants (Rival 1998; Politis 1999). Those approaches stress one side of the equation, dismissing the interaction and its historical context. Only recently some authors, like Rival (2002), insisted that pre-conquest lowland hunter-gatherers living in isolated groups must be explored more carefully.

Following Yellen and Harpending (1972), researchers analyzed the problem of information and information flow as a way of increased hunting efficiency. For example Borrero, Martin and Barberena (2011) suggested that in areas like Patagonia, where nomads inhabited zones with dissimilar resources - i.e., lithic raw materials - sharing information is a crucial factor in their survival. Information sharing related to resource availability between group members seems to be a regular feature of mobile tropical rain forest groups (Rival 2002: 70).

Recently, a new preoccupation with the role of information in hunter-gatherer societies has led to the use of terms such as “informational mobility” (Whallon 2006). Informational mobility refers to the mobility of hunter-gatherers where collecting information is the primary objective; however, gathering information occurs in many different contexts - during logistical and residential moves - as well as in social “visiting”. According to Whallon (2006), this is mainly environmental information that can be used and shared as part of the subsystem. In any case, information of nomads has been approached from a perspective that circumscribes the analysis to the very same type of society that produced it - the hunter/gatherers in the case of South America - ignoring the mosaic of societies that interact with the nomads. It is evident that in the system described for the Orinoco Basin the information of nomads not only affects the behavior of the system, but it is at its very core.

The pattern observed in the relationship between Guagibo/Chiricoa hunter gatherers and the sedentary Achagua can be included in what Yellen and Harpending (1972: 247-248) described as a nucleated network. In this kind of network, the group of social units, which may be villages, families, individuals, or any other category, are organized into a network through a diffuse clustering of relations that include acquaintance, kinship and trading relations. This kind of system must be used to analyze the relationship and the role of information between hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists in the northern savannas of South America.

In summary, hunter-gatherer studies in South America often depict nomadic

groups as isolated units in which contacts with sedentary societies are defined in a hierarchical system. Organizing the data and ranking the type of relationship between nomads and sedentary communities not only produced misleading conclusions, but also rendered invisible the context in which those relations occurred. On the other hand, information has been considered mainly as a component of the subsistence system of the nomads, regarding specific activities, but was never considered as part of a vast system that comprised multiple cultures with different subsystems.

Two concepts could yield a better understanding of nomadic societies in northern South America. The idea of a “World System” seems to be particularly suitable for addressing some of the problems inherited from previous studies. Following Wallerstein (2010) a World System can be characterized as a large space system that implies more than one cultural group, which may or may not be politically unified. Consequently, a World System can be conceptualised as a network, in which the different inter-societal interactions have effects on the whole. The societies involved comprise numerous social and political organizations, that can include the bands of hunter-gatherers to the more elaborated sedentary organizations of agriculturalist, interacting all of them within historical fluctuating boundaries. In the case of the Orinoco Basin there is little doubt that at the time of the European expansion there existed a World System that incorporated a gamut of different societies in a network that implied a division of labor and a degree of specialization in terms of the production and exchange of commodities. Further, ethnographic data concerning the cosmology and the mythology of the different groups suggest a holistic view that integrates different groups in a historical system. Notwithstanding, the degree of interconnectedness within the small-scale systems - and this has been a source of debate in World System analysis (Chase-Dunn 1992) - can be difficult to determine, at this point, for the different periods of “Orinoco World System”.

The documents that describe the nomads and farmers’ relationship within the Orinoco Basin suggest a system structured as a mosaic of societies with fluid spatial boundaries organized non-hierarchically. Consequently, the use of a concept such as heterarchy, as Crumley (2006, 2008) suggested, could allow an even better understanding of the crucial role that hunter-gather societies play in this complex system. In short, heterarchy, as a tool, provides the flexibility needed to understand the structure of the Orinoco basin system during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century without recurring to the ranking of individual societies based on their organizational features. The nomads - Guahibo/Chiricoa - did not inhabit the periphery of a system marked by hierarchical powers, nor were they dependent on the sedentary communities. Neither slaves nor masters, they lived in a fluid world that allowed them to be the “center”, along with all other participants of the system.

**NOTE**

- 1) The denomination Guagibo/Chiricoa is used to denote the Llanos nomads, just as Rivero did (1956: 149). Notwithstanding that Rivero recognized that these two groups Guagibo and Chiricoa belonged to two different nations, he emphasized that they were very similar. Those differences are irrelevant for present purposes.

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