

# TEDIUM AND CREATIVITY: THE VALORIZATION OF MANIOC CULTIVATION AND PIAROA WOMEN

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Through an exploration of Amazonian ethnographic material, this article challenges the idea that tasks normally associated with women are invariably considered to be less valuable than men's activities. I argue against the claims made by Rivière that manioc cultivation is devoid of creativity or differentiation. I find the process of manioc cultivation to be profoundly social; indeed, it provides a critical means by which prestige is attained, maintained, and expressed by Piaroa women. By gardening, Piaroa women create their own spaces and infuse the landscape with meaning. By processing manioc and thus providing the safest and most basic of staple foods, they create and re-create sociality and the conditions for humanity. Finally, I explore the ways in which the region's rapid and far-reaching economic and cultural transformations may affect the role of manioc and of women in Piaroa society.

There has been much debate about the division of labour which is observed in almost all Amazonian societies. Much of the discussion has focused on the conceptually risky activity of hunting, which has been presented as an almost exclusively male activity. Hunting is generally thought to confer greater prestige and power than activities which are typically associated with women, such as growing crops, preparing food, and gathering. The emphasis on hunting is so pronounced that the term 'venatic ideology' has been applied to describe its importance in Amazonian societies (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 472). In many, though not all, of these studies, this preoccupation with hunting has led to a corresponding neglect of gardening, a productive activity which is predominantly undertaken by women. In commenting on this bias, Overing observes (1986) that in many accounts, activities which are defined as women's work are often a priori assumed to be less prestigious than the work of men. The underlying premiss in such works is that women are 'put to work under male protection and given the least rewarding, the most tedious and above all, the least gratifying tasks such as agriculture and cooking' (Meillassoux 1986: 19). She, in contrast, describes a relatively egalitarian society in which both men and women freely choose when to work and when not to do so, and also when to marry and when to divorce. In Piaroa society both men and women are shown respect and are able to gain status in comparison with other community members of either gender (Overing 1986; 1989c).

Recent work emphasizing the generation and constant recreation of sociality within Amazonian societies holds that division of labour enforces and underscores the complementarity of gender roles, and that this complementarity is the basis of Amazonian social life (McCallum 2001). In this theoretical framework, which has been described as the moral economy of intimacy (Viveiros de Castro 1996: 189), the activities of both women and men are important – ritually as well as domestically. Indeed, in many Amazonian societies there is no clear-cut dichotomy between the arcane or ritual and the profane or domestic: what one finds instead is that peaceful domesticity is often the desired outcome of ritual as well as being a form of ritual activity in its own right (Storrie 1999). By building on the notion of a moral economy of intimacy, one may fully appreciate the extent to which many Amazonian peoples experience manioc cultivation as an activity endowed with profound importance and symbolic complexity. It is from this theoretical perspective that I draw the language with which to describe the quiet pride and philosophical importance that Piaroa men and women place on these apparently tedious activities.

This article focuses particularly on manioc cultivation and processing as a key factor in the sociality of Piaroa women. In their enactment of the skills and knowledge underpinning this most important of Piaroa staple consumption items, women gain the respect of others, moral rectitude, and a sense of pleasure and fulfilment.

### **Women and manioc in Amazonia**

In the long-standing debate about the status of women in Amazonian societies, there have been other works too which have addressed these concerns through a discussion of manioc work. Rivière (1987) took the view that highly complex manioc-processing techniques function to control women. He argued that in regions where manioc processing involved techniques that were less labour intensive, as in the Guiana Shield region of South America, one was more likely to find comparatively unstratified systems of gender relations. In contrast, he likened the complex and frequent processing of manioc in western Amazonia, particularly among Tukano groups, to sewing undertaken by women in nineteenth-century England, the idea being that in both cases women spent their time doing tasks that were both trivial and painstaking. Such work in his view served merely to keep them harmlessly occupied and disempowered (1987: 189). Rivière admits that women may gain prestige from being good providers, but only 'in the domestic sphere' (1987: 188). He then suggests that 'the prestige a woman may earn from her activities is a sort of consolation prize to be competed for among women only' (1987: 188). Rivière concludes that in virilocal, exogamous societies, control of women, which is the responsibility of male affines and their families, is more difficult to maintain. Therefore, manioc work will be made more elaborate by men to ensure less 'freedom of action' by women (1987: 197). By contrast, he suggests, in uxoriocal and endogamous societies, women are controlled by their parents, a safer and more reliable form of social control, with the result that manioc processing will be comparatively less demanding and less frequently

undertaken. Manioc work is thus seen here to be little more than a form of drudgery that women are duped into thinking is pleasurable (1987: 189). For Rivière, the evidence pointing to the importance of this kind of work to the subsistence of Amazonians is proof of women's subjugation and inferiority within their communities.

Rivière bases much of his argument on Christine Hugh-Jones's study of the Barasana of the Pirá-Paraná River in Colombia (1978; 1979). Hugh-Jones proposes that manioc production holds less prestige than hunting because it is a reliable and steady crop, and there are no risks involved in its harvesting. She says that 'the very reliability of the crop suggests that women harmonise with manioc rather than pitting their physical and mental powers against it' (1979: 173). Yet she does present a sophisticated analysis of the symbolic value of manioc processing, in contrast to Rivière, who treats this aspect of manioc work as mere mystification. This contrast is all the more notable in that while Rivière sees the ritual side of manioc cultivation as nothing but a device to mystify and suppress Amazonian women, the symbolic danger associated with hunting is seen by many ethnographers as proof of its importance and prestige.

Descola (1994: 214) on the other hand reports that among the Achuar of Peru and Ecuador, men's hunting activities are not seen as more prestigious than women's gardening. He describes the relationship between women and their gardens as being both maternal and risky. Since Achuar assign prestige to activities which they see as dangerous, the perception of risk in gardening is significant. The garden is seen as a place 'full of lurking vampire-plants' (1994: 214), a perception which ultimately serves to 'transform an obviously routine and typically domestic task into a hazardous undertaking'. He suggests that, because of the perceived danger of their tasks, Achuar women do not think of their work as inferior or their economic function as subordinate (1994: 215). Indeed, he says that, from an emic perspective, gardening is actually far more risky than hunting (1994: 304), and identifies a structural opposition between hunting and gardening that he sees as reflecting complementarity rather than relations of subordination and domination (1994: 303-7).

A number of authors have suggested that Amazonian women exchange meat for sex (e.g. Siskind 1973), but Gow (1991) has found that, among the Piro of Peru, a key expression of affinal relationships is the exchange of meat for manioc beer. He describes the importance of manioc beer in the economic structure of Piro subsistence. By showing how the manioc beer prepared by women enables men to mobilize sufficient labour to carry out necessary tasks, Gow documents the economic co-dependence of men and women which is ensured by the distinctive and intricate divisions of labour that are often seen in Amazonia. He too places emphasis on gender complementarity.

Guss (1989) also demonstrates the importance of gender complementarity to the Yekuana of Venezuela. He describes a ritual in which men turn over a newly cleared garden to women. Guss draws parallels between house and garden and male and female spaces in these sites. In the course of the ritual their places are exchanged; in this way the spiritual power<sup>1</sup> which is usually associated with men is transferred to the women, who take the power to their

gardens. In the gardens, an area is established which is both female and spiritually powerful. This ritual, an acknowledgement on the part of men that women's roles are integral to the functioning of society and vice versa, gives symbolic value to the tasks that are carried out by both men and women. He also comments on the perceived danger that is associated with manioc: 'The conversion of a poisonous tuber into a life-sustaining food is not only the result of ingenious technology of graters and presses, but of ritual skills that enable the Yekuana to detoxify these plants of even greater malevolent forces' (Guss 1989: 31). Thus he calls into question the supposedly 'harmonious', hence prestige-free, relationship between women and manioc.

It has been established, then, that manioc cultivation is far from being symbolically valueless and unappreciated as Meillassoux, Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971: 11), Goldman (1963: 30), and Rivière all claimed. On the contrary, a rich and socially important relationship between women and manioc has been documented and is emerging in the works of Gow, Rival (2001), Guss, Descola, Passes (2000), and McCallum (2001), among others. I now turn to the Piaroa with the aim of contributing further to our understanding of the significance that manioc cultivation and processing holds for Amazonians.

### **The Piaroa and manioc**

The Piaroa of Venezuela inhabit the Guiana Shield region of Amazonia, and Overing's classic ethnography of this group (Overing Kaplan 1975) is used by Rivière as an example of many of the general cultural traits identified with the region (Rivière 1984), including their agriculture. In keeping with Rivière's analysis of Guianese groups as being less rigid in organization than other peoples in Amazonia, there is some flexibility in who carries out agricultural tasks. Family groups often go to the gardens together, just as they go to the forest together, for outings that combine gardening, hunting, gathering, and sometimes fishing. Men may help in weeding, harvesting, and carrying full baskets back to the community. They are also responsible for the cutting and burning of new plots, and for the planting of certain crops, namely maize and tobacco. In general, however, women are in charge of garden work, and men are much quicker to lay down the machete from fatigue or boredom (except when they are clearing forest for new plots, a step that precedes women's involvement in the plot). The primary task that I saw being carried out by men in established gardens is caring for small children – this is a vital task, but one that is still subsidiary to the main purpose of the garden visit. Thus, once men have cleared new plots, they serve mainly as assistants and also as providers of moral support to the women whom they often accompany to the gardens. The only men I ever saw planting manioc were powerful shamans, who usually had gardens of their own which they cultivated independently of their wives.

According to Rivière (1987), Piaroa women typically spend relatively little time on manioc work compared to Tukanoan and other patrilocal groups, because they are endogamous and matrilocal. Zent (1992) carried out a detailed work allocation study involving several Piaroa communities in a

remote, interfluvial region. He calculated that the average amount of time spent on manioc cultivation and processing was about 3 hours per person per day (1992: 185, 245). The annual average of about 21 hours per week is somewhat higher than the 12 to 14 hours per week mentioned for Guianese groups by Rivière (1987: 184) and much lower than the 40 to 60 hours a week reported by ethnographers of various Tukano groups (1987: 185). Nevertheless, manioc is of central importance to the lives of Piaroa women who spend more time on cultivation and preparation of manioc than all other work activities put together (Zent 1992: 180, 185, 250).

Between May 1997 and September 1999, I carried out participant observation and semi-structured interviews with Piaroa women in the fluvial community of San Juan de Manapiare, Amazonas State, Venezuela. I frequently visited and worked in gardens and helped with manioc preparation tasks. San Juan is at the upper reaches of a major river system that is navigable by large river barges. The community consists of some fifteen ethnic groups, including Venezuelan *mestizos*, Brazilian *mestizos*, whites, and some twelve indigenous groups (CAICET 1997). It has a health clinic, schools, shops, and an airstrip, is the seat of the municipal government, and is connected to an agricultural co-operative and larger markets. About 150 Piaroa were living in a discrete neighbourhood at the time of my fieldwork.

### Piaroa women

While the entire process of manioc production, from preparing the garden plot to offering finished manioc flour to guests, is vital to the demonstration, maintenance, and control of Piaroa women's cultural capabilities and responsibilities (Overing 1989*b*), I focus on a few steps in that process. These steps are chosen because they clearly demonstrate the importance of manioc in determining the status of women and as a focus of the social relations that are so central in maintaining order and cohesion for Amazonians. They are: the creation of personal spaces in the form of gardens; the maintenance and exchange of varietal diversity; the transformation of toxic tubers into safe and nourishing food, and the provision of manioc beer. I illustrate these activities using the examples of several women from San Juan de Manapiare. Not only are they chosen for the eloquent manner in which they discussed their relationship to manioc with me, but they also represent a cross-section of ages and of mechanisms for dealing with the economic changes that have become such a critical force in their community. Thus while I describe the situation as I found it in the late 1990s, it must be borne in mind that local conditions are changing all the time. Piaroa women are negotiating and initiating these changes in complex ways.

#### *The moral and creative process of gardening*

‘Yoim̃or̃o p̃æthæna ichahusæ. Th̃iku, ukuku [Tomorrow, to the garden I go. You and I together]’. In this way Laura<sup>2</sup> informed me that I would

accompany her to the gardens the following morning. Unlike other Piaroa women who often responded coyly to my requests to visit the gardens, Laura was eager to show me her garden. She was confident about the quality of her garden and very aware of her status as someone with significant knowledge of plants.

Indeed, her garden was large and well kept, with thirty-nine varieties of manioc, as well as species of cultivated plants that were not seen in other gardens. Laura particularly enjoyed planting the seeds of wild forest species in her garden and around her house (Heckler forthcoming). If these seeds matured and bore fruit, she showed them to me with great pride, giving me their fruits as gifts and laughing happily when I responded with enthusiasm.

At the time of my fieldwork, Laura was one of the community's most prominent women. She was in her late 40s or early 50s and was married to the son of the most powerful shaman in the community. She took it upon herself to welcome me when I first arrived, gave me lessons in the language, taught me about both wild and cultivated plants, and also instructed me in local etiquette. Her house was the site of three of the four curing sessions that I witnessed in the community; she regularly had guests from other Piaroa communities, and she and her family were in charge of the traditional conical thatch hut that had been built by the community for the *sqrĩ*<sup>3</sup> ritual. She was highly regarded by other members of the community. I was often told that Laura was one of the most knowledgeable local informants on plants, both wild and cultivated, that her gardens were large, and that she worked hard and was therefore *adiu isahu* or a 'good woman'.<sup>4</sup> She used her agricultural skills to earn money by selling fruit from a wheelbarrow on the streets of San Juan. Manioc products, however, are so plentiful and so time-consuming to prepare that Laura did not consider the sale of manioc flour and bread to be a good use of her time.

Laura's pride in her garden and the recognition of her skill and hard work by other men and women stems from the fact that gardening is a reflection of a woman's moral status. While the primary public display of achievement for men is hunting, the chief source of pride for women are the gardens that they work and their ability to provide steady, safe, and abundant food for their families.

Some women with whom I worked, including Laura and María (see below), went to their gardens every day. They spent a great deal of time weeding, a practice that seems optional, since other women leave their gardens and visit other communities for months on end without any noticeable harm to an already established manioc crop (cf. Descola 1994). When asked, both women and men responded that they preferred to have tidy, well-weeded gardens, reflecting an aesthetic based upon the ideal of 'living well' (see Belaunde 2000: 209-10; 2001; Overing 1989a; Overing & Passes 2000: 2).

Despite claims that manioc cultivation is risk free, agriculture in Amazonia is highly prone to failure, as any Brazilian settler can attest and is also suggested by Hugh-Jones's ethnography (1979: 183). In juggling multiple crops, constantly changing plots, and soil conditions, battling against new pathogens, and adjusting gardens to incorporate new plant species, gardening becomes a

creative act that requires constant improvisation and innovation. As Leach says of the Mende of Sierra Leone, '[The] constant fluctuation [of annual cycles] turns agriculture into an annual performance with opportunities to play around and elaborate ... to construct spaces differently according to changing interests' (Leach 1992: 78).

### *Maintenance and exchange of manioc varieties*

Hugh-Jones asserts that manioc work has been 'routinized' for Tukano women (1979: 173). Rivière adds weight to this claim by defining routinization as a task that 'require[s] little initiative, deter[s] experimentation, [is] legitimated by some higher authority and often include[s] various actions which are not technically necessary' (1987: 189). In making these statements, both authors would seem to have overlooked an important aspect of manioc cultivation, this being the maintenance of manioc varieties. The process of obtaining and maintaining new manioc varieties involves both initiative and experimentation in gardening practices.

In her gardens, María spontaneously told me about the origin of the different manioc varieties they contained, as well as the identity of the particular person who had brought them to San Juan, often her husband or father (both now deceased) or her mother. She regularly planted varieties which she had not planted before. Other Piaroa, both men and women, told me that she collected and experimented with many varieties of manioc. Visitors brought her propagules as gifts, and she showed me the exceptional harvest of one plant that had been brought by a non-Piaroa from Bolívar State (a journey of several days by air or several weeks by land or river). I recorded twenty-five manioc varieties grown in María's gardens, the second-highest total of all the women with whom I collected data (in Laura's garden, I recorded thirty-nine varieties). Other women recognized the diversity of her gardens and visited them in order to collect propagules for their own gardens. They would spend a half a day working with María and then return with a basket load of propagules. She was held in high esteem within the community; she often had visitors and, like Laura, was one of the first people to whom I was introduced when I first arrived.

María was in her mid-40s to early 50s and spoke no Spanish. She was a widow and lived with her two adult daughters, one young son, one son-in-law, and two grandsons. She was clearly the head of her household. María, her sister, her sister-in-law, and her mother often worked together in the gardens. Each woman had her own gardens, but labour and produce were generally shared. María's mother, Alicia, was infirm and no longer worked full time in the gardens. Alicia's daughters, granddaughters, and daughter-in-law often helped with the maintenance of her garden.

Zent and Heckler (Heckler 2000) have identified over a hundred varieties of manioc grown by the Piaroa in only two of the dozen or so river valleys that they inhabit. It is probable that a survey of Piaroa as a whole would reveal many more varieties. While this may contribute to ecological risk aversion, it is clear from the attitudes of María and Laura that their primary reasons for cultivating many varieties are socio-cultural.<sup>5</sup> They are proud of the many

varieties which they cultivate and are eager to discuss the pros and cons of the new varieties that they acquire and cultivate experimentally.

Piaroa men and women claimed repeatedly in their discussions with me that people today have lost the know-how necessary to cultivate many varieties and do not 'know the names', a statement that may seem simple but is, in fact, a claim to having experiential knowledge of each variety. These claims are strikingly at odds with my observations, which suggest that the total number of manioc varieties cultivated by Piaroa women is actually on the increase (Heckler & Zent forthcoming). Although they are not explicit on this point, there is a strong indication that these comments were actually indirect references to an important Piaroa concept, *ta'kwayq*, a term which can be translated as knowledge of living skills (Overing 1989b: 175). More than simply knowing names and morphological characters of varieties, *ta'kwayq* refers to a person's ability to control the productive forces that are needed to cultivate manioc but can also become dangerous when applied by someone who is not skilled in their control. Thus, the cultivation of many varieties also reflects the general cultural skill that all Piaroa must acquire, assiduously cultivate and maintain throughout their lives.

In this way, a Piaroa woman's gardening ability is linked to her maternal ability, neither of which are considered to be risk free. The fact that shamans are the only men who plant manioc is an important indication that manioc cultivation is not left to women because it is too humble a task to be undertaken by men, but rather because most men do not have the particular type of strength required to control the productive forces involved. It is only shamans, with their specially developed powers of control and containment, who can safely deploy both men's and women's productive forces.

There is some indication that genetic recombinants are incorporated into gardens (see Rival 2001), but by far the main source of new varieties is through exchange. Women frequently visit the gardens of their consanguines, affines and/or neighbours in order to acquire cuttings for their new gardens. They exchange a half-day's work for a basket load of propagules. They also bring home cuttings from visits to other communities and there is an increase in the number of varieties that are exchanged as gifts between members of different ethnic groups when Piaroa live in or regularly visit multiethnic communities. In one case, I was proudly shown the manioc cutting that a man had brought back for his wife from a major political conference in another part of Venezuela. Thus the exchange of manioc varieties provides a means by which women engage in the reciprocity that is so important in establishing patterns of alliance in Amazonia (see e.g. Descola 1996: 244; Taussig 1980: 21). By conferring value upon new and unique manioc varieties, the economic and social act of reciprocity encourages the maintenance of a high degree of agrobiodiversity.<sup>6</sup> And by creating and maintaining varieties, women create variability within a resource that has often been treated by ethnographers as if it were undifferentiated. In this way, the number of varieties of manioc that is maintained by Piaroa women is far greater than that required for basic subsistence or by demands of culinary variety.

The wide variety of tuber traits available to women, including varying toxicities, hardness, maturation times, and protection against drought and

waterlogging, enables them to prepare many manioc products. Tubers with a low content of toxic compounds are eaten raw, boiled, and baked. Those with more bitterness are transformed into manioc bread, beer, flour, and extracted manioc starch. Each of these preparations and their variations are associated with preferred varieties and require different preparation techniques. This range of complexity in preparation techniques, from the five minutes necessary to pull up, wash, and eat a raw tuber, to the three or four days' hard labour required for manioc flour preparation, suggests that the processing of manioc, like its cultivation, is in no sense devoid of initiative or experimentation. This may be even more true of Tukano women who add several steps to the process.

Reciprocity, although it has important pragmatic results, is not an impersonal act that serves to create purely economic relationships. In fact, most transfers of manioc propagules are between people who have known each other all their lives and are acts of affection and personal interaction (see McCallum 2001: 117–19). The act of giving María a new variety is an act of personal importance. Her continued cultivation of the new variety is linked in her mind to a person who may be long dead, without its being dangerously associated with the spirit of that person. When she tells me about these varieties, she is evoking important memories or relationships in her life. María's garden, which is populated by varieties that create continuity between her, the women and men with whom she has had personal relationships, and the communities of her childhood, is a space infused with her own life history. Descola describes the gardens of Achuar women as private places where they can go to express emotions that are not considered seemly in the house (1994: 217), but in María's garden we see something more. In her garden, and in the gardens of other manioc experts, the very plants that are grown can be an expression of women's lives. In the sense that 'the real-world landscape in which [people] move about ... is infused with human meaning' (Ingold 2000: 57), María is creating memories of her ancestors and other kin in the space that is her most personal, her manioc garden.

### *Processing manioc and creating sociality*

María Gloria is an example of someone who 'doesn't know' manioc varieties. She insisted that she only cultivated five manioc varieties and that other women, namely María and Laura, knew much more about manioc ('no sé, ellas sí saben'). This was despite the fact that she could name many of the varieties which these other women cultivated and could also discuss their morphological and chemical traits. Despite this particular lapse in her manioc-based expertise, María Gloria is still considered to be *adiu isahu* (see note 4), but this is expressed through a different aspect of manioc production, namely its processing.

In my daily visits to households around the community, I would often find María Gloria toasting manioc bread or flour in the company of her mother, sister, father, brother-in-law, and the inevitable swarm of small children, dogs, cats, and chickens. I would stop for a few hours and help peel tubers or receive

a lesson in some facet of Piaroa life. I was not alone in this activity. María Gloria's kitchen was a frequent stopping point for neighbours and kin. In this way, as processing was carried out, the scene was alive with women chatting, laughing, peeling or grating tubers, stuffing mash in manioc presses, putting finished cakes in the sun to crisp, or drinking manioc flour in water (sp. *yucuta*). Men held babies, shooed away dogs, and occasionally peeled tubers as well, although they were generally less talkative than the women and were also outnumbered by them.

About ten years younger than María and Laura, María Gloria is the sister of one prominent political leader and the wife of another. She is fluent in Spanish and has part-time employment as a house-cleaner for a European man who maintains a house in San Juan. This European contributes positively to the Piaroa community and her affiliation to this man enables María Gloria to influence the distribution of resources, jobs, and political clout.

Because of the political aspirations of her husband and brother, her house is often the centre of political activity. Large feasts of up to four hundred people were held there during elections and political rallies and I witnessed an exceptionally large and dramatic shamanic session involving five shamans and over a hundred onlookers that took place at her house. In her provisioning of these gatherings, she is an essential contributor to the political power of her husband and brother, a fact which both of them often pointed out to me. Her role in the community presents a striking contrast to that of Laura and María. María Gloria represents the Piaroa to outsiders and is instrumental in bringing her community into the regional and national arena. Laura, on the other hand, is more concerned with the internal issues of the community and nearby kin. For all three women, however, manioc is crucial to the definition and expression of their role and status.

I was regularly told that María Gloria is hard-working and highly respected. It is recognized that she is responsible for feeding a large number of people, including her ageing parents. Her husband told me that he valued her as a wife because she made lots of manioc bread and flour, not only to support his political aspirations, but also ensuring that he and his children were always well fed. Men often cite the desire to eat manioc as the first reason for wanting to get married (*chukwæ ire'*), a reason that is also given by the gods when they decide to marry in Piaroa mythology (Monod 1987; see also Zent 1992: 246).

Women comment on other women as being *adiu isahu* because they work hard in their gardens, or bad (*suræw<sup>h</sup>æ*) if they are perceived to neglect their cultivation tasks. They talk to each other about the size and orderliness of gardens. They also show guilt and some self-deprecation when they tell me that they have not been to the gardens that day. They may say that they have been 'lazy',<sup>7</sup> even when they have been working at wage labour since 6 a.m. and are now washing clothes by hand while caring for three or four children at the same time.

The Piaroa of San Juan have something of an obsession with laziness, and there are only a few activities which can be cited as evidence by someone wishing to refute such a charge. Descola (1994: 293) has discussed the emphasis the Achuar of Ecuador place on not being considered lazy. He has noted the special emphasis on gardening in the identification of individual women as lazy or hard-working and productive. He notes that if men are unsuccessful

ful as hunters or fishermen, they too can be publicly stigmatized as lazy. Descola also points out that it is the quality of one's work that determines whether or not one is deemed to be lazy, rather than its duration.

Griffiths (2001) suggests that hard work is so highly valued by the Uitoto of Colombia that they associate it with expressions of humanity (reflected in action rather than form) and health. Therefore, the harder a woman or man works, the healthier, happier, and more moral he or she will be. This observation offers an alternative explanation for the long periods of time dedicated to manioc labour amongst Northwestern Amazonian groups, an explanation that applies to both men and women. Despite the fact that the Piaroa do not reside in Northwestern Amazonia, and are neither exogamous or virilocal, they value women for their assiduous dedication to manioc cultivation. Men are certainly valued for being assiduous in their performance of other activities, namely hunting and fishing, but also for doing their proper share of garden work: clearing, burning, and planting maize.

Manioc processing is the particular stage in food production that Rivière identifies as an instance of prestige-free routinization. In fact, however, manioc processing takes on new significance if it is examined as part of the moral economy of intimacy. Passes provides an example of this when he writes of a Pa'ikwené man who reacts negatively to a suggestion that he might obtain a manioc-processing machine: 'He ... did not want to lose ... the communality and congeniality characteristic of the "old" way of manioc processing: the singing, joking, laughing, talking, eating and drinking together which ... are an integral and defining aspect of the work' (2000: 102). He concludes that work is 'as fruitful emotionally and socially as it is materially'; thus work, like words, 'is not just intrinsic to but generative of sociality' (2000: 109). Passes's description of manioc-processing parties among Pa'ikwené corresponds exactly to the processing parties in María Gloria's kitchen, and the social significance of these work parties is as great for Piaroa as it is for Pa'ikwené.

While the activities in María Gloria's kitchen were primarily enactments of peaceful domesticity, the symbolic importance of manioc processing has been reported by ethnographers in other regions of Amazonia. Hugh-Jones's (1979: 180-92) account of the symbolic value of manioc processing focuses on the ritual significance of the separation of the starch and the meal, an extra step that is technically unnecessary. In her analysis this separation is revealed as a re-enactment of the separation and reintegration out of which both humans and society were created. Echeverri provides a particularly eloquent account of this as it is conceptualized among Uitoto:

Because the [pollution of the ground] stands in the way [the Creator] has to process [make good, usable, harmless] [the ground]. This preparation starts the great process of separation which inaugurates the cycle of events of mythic times ... In this manner he obtains the perfect substance of humanity. This process is comparable to the separation of the starch from the pulp of manioc. The starch is going to be humanity, the pulp the rest of nature (2000: 40).

Thus the steps in manioc processing that might appear to be the most superfluous actually turn out to entail the most important of all goals, 'the reproduction of human life' (Echeverri 2000: 40).

### *Manioc beer and ritual domesticity*

More than any other manioc product, manioc beer plays a prominent role in ritual throughout Amazonia (e.g. Gow 2001: 165, 170-1; Guss 1989: 48; Johnson 2003: 173-6). Its symbolic significance is often remarked upon by ethnographers; it is frequently associated with bodily fluids and functions (e.g. Descola 1994: 135; Gow 1999; 2001: 173). The most common Piaroa ritual is so closely associated with manioc beer that it bears the same name (*sari*). In preparation for rituals, powerful headmen and their wives often cultivate manioc gardens as large as 8 hectares, several times larger than the normal subsistence garden (Zent, pers. comm.; Overing Kaplan 1975: 35). The *sari* confers prestige upon the man who is able to provide food and drink to a great many people for the duration of the festival. While men are the most prominent actors in these events, dancing and forming politically advantageous alliances, a festival cannot take place without manioc beer.

The apparently modest role played by women in formal rituals of this kind in many Amazonian societies has been cited as evidence of female subjection. But if the symbolic importance of manioc processing and the semi-ritualized nature of peaceable domesticity are taken into account, the participation of women in these rituals takes on new significance. During festivals and social gatherings, while men are busy communing with spirits, women are busy communing with each other, discussing such topics as the health and happiness of kin from other communities, sex and birth control, the availability of different crops, and the amount of time spent by various women in their manioc gardens. Indeed, in the Piaroa rituals that I witnessed, including healing rituals, political meetings, and church services, I was particularly struck by the lack of attention directed towards the male participants, even though it was the men who were ostensibly playing the central roles in whatever drama was being enacted.<sup>8</sup> It became clear to me that one important aspect of these gatherings was the socializing between kin from different households and different communities, a process in which it is women who play a central role. In other words, the peaceful sociality being acted out by the women and children was both the end goal and a part of the rituals which were being enacted by the men. In this sense, the very lack of attention to the men's activities is the acknowledgement that the ritual is serving its function. Similarly, the matter of fact way in which men accept the gourd of manioc beer from their hostess does not mean that they do not recognize the important role that the beer and its preparer play in enabling life to continue as it should. Indeed, the tenets of humility prohibit calling attention to this fact.

Elsewhere in Amazonia, manioc beer is explicitly described as one of the basic ingredients in the creation and maintenance of sociality. Santos-Granero describes a mythical situation in which a Yanessa woman learns how to live well through learning about the experiences of those who had lived and died violently: 'Realising that the key to a good social life lay in [ritual] celebration, the woman and her children learn how to make the panpipes and drums, as well as how to brew manioc beer' (2000: 270). The importance of manioc beer and associated celebrations in achieving and maintaining the all-important state of conviviality appears repeatedly in Amazonian ethnography.

Outside ritual settings, manioc beer is a crucial lubricant of economic activities. Gow (1991) says that the communal work parties which are essential for the clearing of garden plots and the building of houses amongst the Piro cannot take place without manioc beer. It is of similar importance for the Piaroa. The unfermented form is presented to visitors upon their arrival and before they leave for the gardens with their hosts. Several people told me that it is the 'best' breakfast food and all the Piaroa families with whom I spent time made the unfermented precursor of manioc beer regularly.

### *Socio-economic change and the transmission of traditional knowledge*

Both in San Juan and throughout their homeland, the Piaroa are experiencing a dramatic upheaval in their way of life. They are increasingly involving themselves in the regional economy, which impacts on all aspects of their society and subsistence. Women and their knowledge are being affected by these changes just as much as their menfolk (Heckler 2002). But what exactly does this upheaval mean for the practice of manioc cultivation and preparation by Piaroa women?

At the time of my fieldwork, Antonia was in her early 30s and spoke good Spanish. She worked as a cleaner for the Catholic mission school. Her working hours, from 6 a.m. until mid-day, were during the prime gardening hours. She had five children under 12 years of age, the oldest of whom was at school. She cited the children as her principal reason for working, saying that she needed money for their schooling. She went to the garden in the afternoons and on weekends, working on manioc processing until well after dark. She did not let me visit her gardens, saying that they would not be interesting to me, but she did show me eight varieties of manioc during various processing sessions in her house. She often talked about the gardening skill and dedication of her mother, mother-in-law, and non-working sisters. She was sometimes given food by the mission, an activity that seemed to be regarded with suspicion by other Piaroa. For the Piaroa, eating 'unclean' food is one of the chief sources of illness (Oldham 1997; Overing & Kaplan 1988). At one point, Antonia developed an infected pustule on her face. The blame was immediately placed on some beef that she had been given by the mission. After that, she was much more reluctant to eat food that had not come from traditional sources: produce from her own gardens or game that had been hunted or fished and then purified through shamanic rituals, through accepted modes of distribution, or through appropriate processing.

While older women, such as Laura and María, continue to invest considerable time and effort in their manioc gardens, many younger women, such as Antonia, have a more problematic relationship with manioc. Women must choose between complying with the traditional ideal of an *adiu isahu* and meeting the demands of a market economy with all of its attendant expectations and values. In most cases in San Juan, young women are seeking ways of gaining money, if not through male kin, then through their own labour. In virtually all cases, the reason cited for this wage labour was the cost of sending their children to school. As in Antonia's case, much of this labour creates conflicts in terms of the time or energy that women are able to devote

to agriculture. The removal of school-age children from the labour pool also creates significant restraints on the agricultural activities of young mothers (Heckler 2002). For this reason, while they retain respect for older women's dedication to agriculture, younger women in San Juan find themselves less able to be devoted manioc experts. Through their obvious discomfort at having to admit to me that they did not work in the gardens every day, they indicate that wage labour does not carry the same positive moral value as manioc cultivation. But because they cannot devote the time and energy required to develop their *ta'kwayq*, manioc cultivation is not a creative exercise of their skill, but rather something they must do so the family can have food. Gardens are no longer places of pride in which women's and their garden's lives intertwine, but become, as in Antonia's case, places that are simply functional and not fit to be seen by outsiders. This translates into smaller gardens with less agrobiodiversity. To quote Hoffmann: the garden is becoming 'a rudimentary skeleton of what it was in the past' (1993: 274). There is thus a powerful irony here: what is happening both in San Juan and elsewhere is that women's activities are only now taking on the characteristics which they were long thought to have possessed in the 'traditional' past. That is to say, it is only now that women's manioc work is actually becoming both tedious and unvalued in Piaroa society, especially for the younger generation.

Nevertheless, as with all detailed studies of cultural change, the evidence is ambiguous. Although most young women have focused on school and wage labour, some young women have chosen to follow in their mothers' footsteps. María's daughters offer a compelling example of the variety of cultural influences that Piaroa women are incorporating into their agricultural practices. Marta, 23, was married with two young children at the time of my fieldwork. She had attended school for four years, which had enabled her to acquire passable Spanish. She and her husband lived with her mother and she spent her days with her mother in the gardens. As I was touring the gardens with María, Marta was there, acting as interpreter, and clearly interested in the stories her mother was telling me about the origins of manioc varieties and the history of the secondary forests and old gardens that we passed through. In 1999, Marta's husband had cleared her first garden immediately adjacent to her mother's and we spent several weeks planting the new garden with cuttings from María's garden. Rita, on the other hand, was unmarried (at only 17 this is not unusual) and attending a local agricultural college run by the state government. Rita was sophisticated in her Spanish and her dress sense, but showed no desire to leave San Juan for Puerto Ayacucho, the main urban centre in the region and capital of Amazonas State. Instead, she spent her week in the classroom learning how to plant cash crops in neat rows and apply chemical inputs, then spent the weekends in the garden with her mother and elder sister. In this way, María's collection of manioc varieties and at least some gardening knowledge was being passed on. The extent to which the daughters, particularly Rita, can integrate María's lessons of *ta'kwayq* with what they learn in school remains to be seen.

Another area of particularly complex cultural change is that of attitudes to and consumption of manioc beer. Evangelical (New Tribes) Protestant mis-

sionaries, who have been established in the area since the 1970s, have powerfully affected the lives of San Juan Piaroa. In declaring a ban on alcohol consumption among their followers, they have split the community into those who regularly drink fermented beer outside of the overt rituals of *sqrj* and those who never drink at all. Certain families hosted gatherings nearly every weekend,<sup>9</sup> which often included visitors from distant communities and certainly contributed to the central status of Laura, who presided over many of these sessions. Meanwhile, other families expressed disapproval and carefully avoided these households during gatherings.

Yet it would be an oversimplification to view manioc beer drinking as the 'traditional' way of doing things and abstention as a response to missionary activity. Both Overing (pers. comm.) and Zent (pers. comm.) report that the Piaroa with whom they lived never drank fermented beer outside of the *sqrj* ritual. Thus the dichotomous split in San Juan between drinkers (sometimes with *sqrj* gourd in one hand and rum bottle in the other) and non-drinkers (serving the sugary soft drink Kool-Aid at official gatherings) represents two different adaptations to rapidly changing perceptions of sociality.

Nor can the regular drunken binges occurring at Laura's house simply be dismissed as a sign of social breakdown generating alcoholism and other associated pathological behaviours within the community. In fact, these drinking sessions often took place in conjunction with shamanic drug-taking and other ritualized activities and certainly involved extended families, men and women, with a certain sociality and a lack of violence not seen in the bars in the *mestizo* part of town. The multiple implications of these changes are yet to be seen.

## Conclusion

Those authors who have assumed that manioc cultivation offers no room for creativity or who have argued that processing is a static and timeless skill have disregarded a wealth of detail which indicates the rich and complex significance of manioc-related activities. If Piaroa perspectives and the dynamic nature of manioc cultivation are taken into account, we must call into question the assertion that manioc cultivation and processing are risk free and taken for granted.

Through the stories of Laura and María, gardens are seen to be an aspect of a woman's basic identity, a way in which she defines her role in society. They are master cultivators whose gardens are personal achievements, places into which they have woven their own lives. Through the cultivation of different varieties, Piaroa women demonstrate their mastery of *ta'kwqyq*, reflecting not only their agricultural expertise, but their controlled productive abilities in many aspects of cultural life. For María Gloria, instead of being a 'necessary evil' that both expresses and enforces gender stratification, manioc processing is both symbolically rich and socially important. It is, in itself, almost a ritual in its chemical and symbolic transformation from a toxic substance to the safest of foods. Thus the manioc processing parties at María Gloria's house were both a demonstration and a source of sociability.

For the Piaroa, manioc beer drinking is done in social gatherings, at the very centre of which are the women who provide the beer. Embedded as they are in the social and moral structure of everyday life, these drinking parties are predictably changing with changes in all other aspects of Piaroa lived experience. Nevertheless, their emphasis on sociality infuses them with significance that is especially compelling as the Piaroa form political alliances and reconstruct their identity to become more central agents in Venezuelan society (see Oldham 1996). In this way, there is some hope that the significance of manioc may be retained through its association with conviviality.

Overing and Passes (2000) apply the term 'conviviality' to a moral ideal towards which many Amazonian societies strive. They describe this ideal as 'including [features of] peacefulness, high morale and high affectivity, a metaphysics of human and non-human inter-connectedness, a stress on kinship, good gift-sharing, work relations, and dialogue, a propensity for the informal and performative as against the formal and institutional, and an intense ethical and aesthetic valuing of sociable sociality' (xiii-xiv). All of these features are emphasized and created through a dedication to the cultivation, processing, and consumption of manioc. They also emphasize the centrality of the domestic sphere in the lives of men and women and reject any idea of a sharp dichotomy between the domestic and the politic (2000: 3-6), thus rendering meaningless Rivière's notion of women's prestige arising from manioc work being limited 'only to the domestic arena' (1987: 188).

Through other ethnographers' work and also from my own fieldwork among the Piaroa, it can be seen that a core objective of both men and women in Amazonian societies is to provide sustenance and to contribute to conviviality in all its fullness and complexity. Through the stories of San Juan women and their relationships with manioc, I have shown how the Piaroa ideal of conviviality is played out in their everyday lives. By emphasizing the sociality and productivity of manioc focused labour, women are engaging in activities that are basic expressions of their humanity.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Guss describes 'power' as the ability to make safe the potentially dangerous and overwhelming *akato* (life force) found in every object. This power, for the Yekuana and other Amazonians, is the ability to maintain a peaceful domesticity and carefully controlled productivity.

<sup>2</sup> All names used here are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Zent (1992) translates *sqrĩ* as a term for beverages that may or may not contain manioc, but I never saw it prepared without manioc and my bilingual informants translated the term as *bebida de yuca* (manioc drink).

<sup>4</sup> The term '*adiwa*' is polysemic, covering all things that are seen to hold positive moral value. Thus the gloss 'good' does not adequately convey the moral judgement embodied in the phrase '*adiu isahu*' (*adi* + female classifier, 'woman').

<sup>5</sup> See Boster (1985) for a detailed discussion of models of manioc varietal classification and the ways in which these have affected the biology and ecology of manioc maintenance.

<sup>6</sup> Agrobiodiversity is an established technical term that refers to the biodiversity of agricultural systems, in this case, to varieties of a single species. It is considered by agricultural

specialists to be important in risk aversion and food security for small-scale agriculture around the world.

<sup>7</sup> In most cases, this sentiment was expressed using the Spanish word, 'flojo'. The Piaroa translation is not straightforward, but feeling bad, not acting well and being *flojo* was often expressed in Piaroa through the use of the polysemic term 'suræw<sup>h</sup>æ', which can be considered the antonym of *adiwa*. Oldham (1997: 234) lists an illness which he calls 'i<sup>h</sup>ænuæ' and which can be translated into Spanish as 'pereza'. Thus the idea of laziness has connections with illness that can be treated shamanically.

<sup>8</sup> I never witnessed a *sari* ceremony during my time with the Piaroa, but accounts given to me emphasized that women play an active role in the central drama being enacted. In the ceremonies that I did witness, men invariably took on the obvious and active roles of preacher, shaman, orator, and politician while women were an often-rowdy audience, providers of beer, patients, and child-minders.

<sup>9</sup> The habit of not working on Sundays is one of the main ways in which Piaroa Christians manifest their faith. Furthermore, the conformation of Piaroa working schedules to the markets and employers has led them to adopt a five-and-a-half-day working week.

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## **Corvées et créativité : la valorisation de la culture du manioc chez les femmes Piaroa**

### *Résumé*

En explorant des matériaux ethnographiques d'Amazonie, l'auteur remet en question l'idée selon laquelle les tâches normalement dévolues aux femmes seraient systématiquement considérées comme ayant moins de valeur que les activités masculines. Prenant le contre-pied de Rivière, pour qui la culture du manioc est dépourvue de créativité et de différenciation, l'auteur affirme que chez les femmes Piaroa, cette culture a une fonction profondément sociale et constitue même un moyen essentiel d'acquérir, de conserver et d'affirmer leur prestige. Par le jardinage les femmes Piaroa créent leurs propres espaces et insufflent un sens au paysage. Par la transformation du manioc et la production de l'aliment de base le plus sûr qui soit, elles créent et recréent le lien social et les conditions de « l'être ensemble » humain. Enfin, l'auteur analyse la manière dont les transformations économiques et culturelles rapides et profondes de la région peuvent affecter le rôle du manioc et celui des femmes dans la société Piaroa.

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