

“A Conspiracy against the Civilized People”: History Politics and Ideologies of Arawakan and Tukanoan Millenarian Movements of the Northwest Amazona

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RESUMEN

Tukanoan and Arawakan millenarian movements of the North-West Amazon are compared and interpreted through the ways in which messianic leaders sought to develop new forms of power and leadership in their struggles against the political-economic system imposed by non-native peoples and institutions in the 19th Century. While Arawakan millenarism developed a strategy of resistance through autonomy from the dominant order of the white man, the Tukanoan movements sought first to usurp and later to acquire its wealth and power. Ambiguities in Tukanoan ideologies of power are seen as one of the principal sources of internal tensions and conflicts evident in the movements.

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Introduction

The Northwest Amazon, border of Brazil-Venezuela-Colombia, has for long stood out in the historical ethnography of Amazonia for its millenarian rebellions of the 19th Century. In previous studies (Wright, 1981; Wright and Hill, 1986; Hill and Wright, 1988), we have reconstructed the history of these movements among the Arawak-speaking Baniwa and Wakuenai. In showing the foundations of millenarian beliefs and practice in indigenous religion, we argued that millenarian leaders improvised on the symbolism of the myth and ritual to formulate a strategy of resistance to the oppressive political-economic conditions imposed by non-native peoples and institutions.

Here, I give greater attention to a reconstruction and interpretation of the millenarian rebellions among Tukanoan and Warekena peoples of the Vaupés and Xié Rivers in 1858-9. Led by the messiah Alexandre Christu and others, these movements immediately followed the Baniwa rebellion of Venancio Aniseto Kamiko in 1857. My principal concern will be to give order to the large body of documents left by government officials, missionaries, and military who served in the region at the time and left records on the movements and the messiahs.

From this reconstruction, I show that the millenarian concerns and strategies of the Tukanoans differed in important ways from the Arawakans. While both were concerned with the inequalities of power existing between Indian and white societies, the Baniwa messiah Venancio Kamiko oriented his followers towards a rejection of and liberation from the dominant political and economic system. The Tukanoans, on the other hand, sought to usurp the power of the whites. Kamiko's influence remained strong for several generations. The Tukanoan messiahs, however, were plagued with problems from the start, specially doubts from their following and internal dissensions. This differences we see as related to pre-existing cultural structures and to the historical experiences which shaped the way the movements developed.

My fieldwork with the Baniwa in Brazil specifically studied oral histories and compared them with written sources from the 18th Century to the present. In my research in archives and published sources over the past 15 years, I have found the most extensive documentation on the mid-19th Century Upper Rio Negro in the Arquivo Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, and the

Arquivo Público do Estado do Amazonas in Manaus. This material amounts to over 500 pages of official letters, correspondence, and reports left by missionaries, military, and government authorities working on a day-to-day basis with the Indians of the region. Since 1985, my work has been more directly involved with documentation of the Indians' current struggles with corporate and state development projects, and with gathering oral histories from the Tukanoan peoples of the Vaupés. A comparative and global perspective on the peoples and cultures of the region has been essential to the interpretation of their historical and present-day experiences.

Arawakan and Tukanoan Peoples of the upper Rio Negro Valley

The Arawakan peoples of the Northwest Amazon, border of Brazil-Colombia-Venezuela, include, among others, the Baniwa, Curripaco, and Wakuenai of the Içana-Guainia drainage area;¹ the Wuarekena (or Guarekena) of the Xié River in Brazil and the Calto San Miguel in Venezuela; the Boré of the Upper Rio Negro between São Gabriel da Cachoeira in Brazil to San Carlos in Venezuela; and the Tariana on the mid-to-lower Vaupés in Brazil. To their Southwest are the Tukanoans, some 17 different groups² inhabiting the Vaupés drainage and its tributaries the Tiquié, Papury, Guerary, and Caduary rivers in Brazil and Colombia, and the Piro-paraná region in Colombia.

While Tukanoans share many cultural patterns in common with the Arawakans, there are fundamental differences which have implications for indigenous history. Both organize themselves into several exogamous, patrilineal

¹ "Baniwa" is the name used in Brazil for the Arawak of the lower-to-mid Içana, while in Venezuela, Colombia, and on the upper Içana of Brazil, the same people are called "Curripaco". Wakuenai ("People of Our Language") is an ethnonym used principally in Venezuela. The Baniwa of the lower Guainia river and tributaries in Venezuela and Colombia are a distinct people whose language is mutually unintelligible with the Baniwa of the Içana.

² Tukano, Desana, Ukarana, Tsyuka, Cuben, Tefiyin, Barasana, Borá, Karapana, Yurik, Arapaco, Yepómasa, Piratopuis, Siriano, Mirikitopuis, Yahuama, Nakuna.

phratries, each consisting of five or so named patrias ranked in a serial order. While the Tukanoan phratries are unnamed, not localized in discrete riverine territories, and internally divided into exogamous language groups (Jackson, 1983), Arawakan phratries are named exogamous units associated with specific territories. Both have myths of origin which recount the emergence of ancestors as a serial order of brothers in which the first-born is the highest-rank and the last-born the lowest. While the Tukanoan myths recount the journeys of ancestral anacondas which bring the ancestors of the different groups from a distant region up the Rio Negro and onto the Vaupés, with multiple sites of emergence, the Arawakan myths refer to a single site (or at most a few sites, the principal one being Hipana on the Aiary River considered by most Arawakans to be the Center of the World) in the earth from which all ancestors emerged. On the basis of these differences, (Hill, 1985: 31) has suggested that the Arawakan system of phratries has a "greater potential for evolving into a fixed system of the stratification according to inherited statuses", which does not appear to be as likely among the Tukanoans.

Ethnographers of Tukanoan societies (Goldman, 1979; Hugh-Jones, 1979; Jackson, 1983 among others) have long noted the existence of a dual tendency in indigenous social organization between the hierarchical ranking based on the birth order of a set of male siblings and associated with ascribed ritual specialist roles (shamans, chiefs, warriors, dancers and chanters, and servants), and an "egalitarian" ethos involving a greater element of achievement and competition, which is associated more with subsistence and productive activities, exchange relations with groups of equal status and symmetrical relations among individuals, with little or no specialization. The two tendencies co-exist but in tension; thus, frequent disputes over relative rank conflict with a more general egalitarian emphasis.

This dual tendency is also manifest in the areas of political leadership and shamanism. Among eastern Tukanoans, ideally, leadership at the local level, should follow the ranking order, although the application of this principle is subject to dispute. Local leaders may gain power and prestige through the organization of rituals, skillful manipulation of affinal relations, and shamanic activities. Yet, their power is limited by their capacity to give more than to receive. According to Jackson (1983: 66), the only occasion when indivi-

iduals might become powerful leaders is in the case of war chiefs who held a fair amount of power at times over much larger groups of people than normally: "headman who where successful war chiefs undoubtedly had much more power, at least during times of crisis".

Like the Arawakans, Eastern Tukanoans differentiate two types of shamans - shamans proper, and chanters, or "priests" (*kuku*) on the basis of training, curing activities, attributes, duties, and social status. While the Tukanoans "priests" hold a relatively higher status in the community and occupy their position through inherited attributes, they potentially conflict with the more democratic position of shamans who achieve their power through recognized abilities (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975; Hugh-Jones, n.d). The Baniwa, Wakuena, and possibly other Arawakans, by contrast, allow for both the individual achievement of leadership roles and the combination of shamanic specializations. The most powerful Baniwa shamans, for example, have had all of powers, attributes, and status of chanters.

These observations from ethnography are essential for understanding the directions the millenarian movements of the 19th Century took in the course of time.

The Millenarian Movements and Rebellions of 1857-9

Venancio Kamiko and Baniwa Rebellion

Venancio Anizetto Kamiko had been brought up by a famed Zambo preacher of San Carlos del Rio Negro known as Padre Amold, but he also had been trained in shamanic arts.³ His deep experiences of debt identified him with the oppression of most native peoples at this time. His bouts with the sickness cataplexy and miraculous recoveries he interpreted as divine callings, occasions when he would journey to heaven and speak to God, who

³ For a more complete account of Kamiko's life and legends of his deeds, see Wright, 1981, Wright & Hill, 1985.

ples. In late 1857, however, the local military brutally repressed millenarian dances on the lower Içana River, and the threat of the other military reprisals forced Kamiko and his followers to flee en masse to Venezuelan territory where they sought refuge in inaccessible areas. Despite later military efforts to persuade them to return, many Indians refused to do so, preferring to resist the interference of the Whites and maintain their political and economic autonomy. In Venezuela, Kamiko was taken prisoner on several occasions but each time managed to escape and pursue his messianic activities until his death in 1902.⁵

Kamiko was no doubt the most effective and influential of the various messianic leaders who arose at this time. By early 1858, his movement had spread to the Tukanoan and Warekena peoples of the Vaupés and Xié rivers. Large-scale dances were reported in half-a-dozen locations on the Upper Rio Negro and were characterized by the missionaries and military as "more militant and disposed to resist" White interference.

Alexandre Christu and the Rebellions on the Vaupés and Xié

According to the sources, in late February-early March, 1858, Alexandre, an Indian from the Upper Rio Negro, proclaimed himself to be Christ and was holding dances among the Indians of the lower Vaupés. As a youth, Alexandre had been brought up by a Portuguese trader, Marques Caldeira, near Marabitanas.⁶ In 1857, Alexandre had participated in Kamiko's dances

⁵ Kamiko's tomb, on the Aike River in Venezuela, is laid in concrete and marked by a cross. The *bantera* of the town of Maroa and vicinity continue their faith in Venancio today by visiting his tomb regularly to ask for his protection.

⁶ There is no other information in the documents about Marques Caldeira. It was a common practice for traders to take native children and bring them up as household servants. Although there is no indication they were accorded special status in Indian Communities once they left their patron's household, one might suspect they were in a privileged position of having known the white man's ways and the sources of their wealth.

São José de Marabitanas was a town of Bané and Marepitona Indians and the principal military border post until the Fort of Cucui replaced it in the 1860s. Its military commanders

on the Içana and was supposed to have been among the ritual leaders and a close disciple of Kamiko, although he was not noted for any special shamanistic abilities.

Following the military raid on the Içana, Alexandre decided to move to the Manau stream near Jauareté Rapids on the middle Vaupés, and went to the Vaupés to persuade his kin to settle with him. When he returned to his home in Marabitanas, he found that he had been robbed of five bushels of farinha and was told that two women had stolen the farinha to pay off their debts to the military. Highly vexed, Alexandre set fire to his house in Marabitanas and returned with his family to the Vaupés where they took up residence in the Tukanoan villages of Naná-rapecuma and later, Jquirá-rapecuma.⁷

The Tukano of these two villages may have participated in Kamiko's dances but after the military raid in 1857, they and other Indians of the lower Vaupés fled to the forests in fear of a second raid. The Director of Indians and military commander of the detachment at Marabitanas and Cucuy, Captain Joaquim Firmino Xavier, met these Tukano on the Içana during his reconnaissance mission in mid-1858:

"having fled from the persecutions of captain Mathias, who [...] sent to the Rio Vaupés to look for chickens, pigs and birds, without paying, and to take young men and women to serve him, such that at the mouth of the Vaupés, there were no Indians, and other chiefs had fled to the Içana."⁸

Xavier assured them that under his administration, life would be more agreeable; yet, Xavier proved to be little better for even the residents of Marabita-

were known for their heavy-handed dealings with the Indians of the Içana, specially in commercial activities. Various rebellions and 'desertions' of soldiers plagued the military order, particularly in the 1850s.

⁷ The populations of these villages were predominantly Tukano-speaking - Piratapua, Jurúá, Desana, Tukano, Arapáça, and Iravissu - and the Arawak-speaking Içana (Frei Gregório José Maria de Bene, "Mapa Demonstrativo," 1853, in *Arquivo do Amazonas*, hereafter AA, 1[2]: 32).

⁸ Joaquim Firmino Xavier-Presidente Furtado, in AA, 8 [4]: 123. All translations of documents are my own.

not, including Friar Salgado, the local Vicar, and Friar Romualdo, his assistant, decided to move to the lower Vaupés, along with a number of families, to escape Xavier's excessive authority. When the missionaries arrived on the Vaupés, they learned that on the river above, the Indians were engaged in millenarian activities with their proclaimed messiah, Alexandre Christu.

Romualdo reported that there were:

assembled many people, even to the forest Indians, of all nations, venerating the Christ, who there realized the same as occurred on the Firaivara on the Içana, that is, baptizing, marrying, and exercising other priestly functions; that this assembly consisted of more than 1,000 people with firearms and poison-arrows disposed to resist [...] in case there would take place what happened to Içana.⁹

The rituals were hidden from the missionaries because the Indians knew they would suppress them and were convinced of their own abilities to conduct ceremonies of baptizing, marrying, etc., without the missionaries. When Salgado and Romualdo made known their presence on the Vaupés, the Indians sent back message that "they did not need any Padres, for they already had their own".¹⁰

⁹ Romualdo-Furtado, in AA, II(7): 85-6. The area of Alexandre's greatest influence extended from approximately São Joaquim to Javuretê on the Vaupés, the Tiquié River and its tributaries, and possibly the Papury River. The area was predominantly Tukanoan-speaking. In mid-1853, the population of Indians settled in new or already existing villages within this area was approximately 1,200 (Jesuíno Cordeiro-Présidente, 05/07/53, "Correspondência dos Diretores dos Índios ao Presidente da Província," in APA). No doubt, this population had increased by 1858. Traditional dance-festivals numbered upwards of several hundred participants. War arrows, lances, and shotguns were sometimes used in these dances. The rituals Alexandre had started up, however, took place in houses he had specially constructed.

Estimates of the sizes of these houses varied between 32'36" x 10' and 39' x 27', both rather small in comparison with the traditional longhouses on the Vaupés.

¹⁰ Romualdo-Furtado, in AA, II(7): 85-6.

Friar Salgado decided to investigate. He proceeded with a party of about seven people, armed with five shotguns, in the last week of March, 1858. In Alexandre's village, they were received coldly and no-one claimed to know anything of the messiah's whereabouts. Salgado began preaching among the "multitudes" of men and women united in the chief's house, showing them the large metal cross hanging around his neck, preaching about the "true Christ" and ordering them to kiss the cross, "in respect and veneration". The people coldly turned their backs on the Friar and walked away.¹¹ Later, Salgado asked why they did not bring more children to be baptized and they replied that they had no use for Salgado's baptisms because they had already been baptized. Sensing a distinct hostility towards his presence, Salgado decided to return and requested that the chief assist him by ordering people to help in portage over the Rapids of Ipanorê. The chief responded that there was no-one to help, that no-one wanted to accompany them.¹² Salgado pleaded and insisted, becoming indignant as the people continued to walk away. Salgado called for help from his armed companions who took out their guns and directed themselves at the chief, threatening him with gunfire if the people made any move against them.¹³ The people had by then all but disappeared into the forests surrounding the settlement, leaving only the chief, his son, and two others whom the Friar ordered to help with their canoes.

Salgado's version of the history is that when they reached Ipanorê Rapids, the group disembarked to pass the canoes over the portage trail when the chief suddenly went to the woods.

Immediately afterwards, guns fired from the forest into their midst. One of their party fell wounded, and Salgado was hit lightly on the leg. The others took their guns, hid behind a clump of rocks, and made a small fire as a diversion tactic. The assailants continued to shoot from the forest using both guns and poison-arrows.¹⁴ After a half-hour skirmish, two of the assailants

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*: 86-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

were apparently fatally wounded, and the skirmish stopped. Salgado's party received about four wounds, one being near-fatal.

That night, while Salgado's party stayed in a downstream village, caring for their wounds, three Indians came to the village with the news that two of the assailants had died from the morning skirmish. They were informed that Salgado had gone to São Gabriel to get military troops and would return shortly for battle. The Indians returned upriver to inform Alexandre of their imminent return. This news sowed about as much confusion among the Tukano as the rumour of a second military invasion from Marabitanas had among the Baniwa a few months before. Most sources suppose that Alexandre had sent people to fire on Salgado at Ipanoré. Whether or not this was actually true, people had to prepare for the probable consequences.

It was precisely after this incident that Friar Romualdo wrote to the Governor of the Province about a "conspiracy against the civilized people", recommending as a course of action:

to capture the Christ, the chief, and the principal ones to be punished [...] for [...] this business of sainthood which is already generalizing in other villages, [...] seems to be a kind of conspiracy against the civilized people.¹⁵

Control and punishment of the leaders would eradicate the "evil" which the missionaries perceived to be a very grave and growing threat to the presence of "civilized" people in the region. Rumour also had it that the Indians were prepared to "impede the passage" of any merchant's or missionary's canoes past the first Rapids of the Vaupés.¹⁶

In fact, had Romualdo known the real reason behind the Tukanos' hostility, he perhaps might have shown more understanding. Months later, it was determined that just before the attack, the ex-Director of the Indians of the Vaupés (José Ignacio Cardoso), acting on orders from the Director General of the Indians of the Province, had sent an ally Tariana chief to take by force

("pega") two boys and two girls from the Tukano, and send them to Manaus to serve in the home of the General Director.¹⁷ Two or three people were killed in the act which provoked a "great irritation" among the Indians who decided to "station warriors so that no white man would get up the river beyond a certain point".¹⁸

Two weeks after the attack on Salgado, Captain Firmino Xavier received the first reports that there were millenarian dances taking place on the Xié River. It is possible that Alexandre left the Vaupés River soon after he heard the rumours of approaching military in order to join the Xié movements. Many rumours floated around from then until October or so as the Indians and officials alike tried to figure out what the other was doing. It was a complex time in which the scenes shifted and the actors moved on and off the stage quickly. The following reconstruction is based heavily on the reports left by the Chief of Police and Municipal Justice, Marcos Antonio Rodrigues de Souza, who determined a great deal of these "facts" during his investigatory mission in mid-1858.

After the incidents at Ipanoré Rapids, Alexandre, his family, and a number of followers fled the Vaupés River in fear of a military reprisal. They sought to join Venancio around the Acque River below Maroa, probably going by trail through the woods to the Içana River. The Baniwa, however, turned the fugitives back, blocked their passage, resisting their migration and persuasion to join forces. De Souza was told that the Baniwa prevented their flight "so that they [the military] wouldn't devastate them once again, as they said".¹⁹

Alexandre's group then returned to the Vaupés to determine what their next move would be. By then, some Tukano and Tariana chiefs were reaching a point of serious questioning and doubt of Alexandre's position and authority. Alexandre had preached to them that "manioc and manioc bread from heaven" would come to them on a certain day if they remained true follo-

¹⁵ Marcos Antonio Rodrigues de Souza, "Auto de Perguntas feitas em 24/07/58 a Joaquim Antonio Gonçalves de Aguiar," in "Correspondência do Delegado da Polícia ao Presidente da Província, 1858-59," APA.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Marcos Antonio Rodrigues de Souza, "Relatório do Juiz Municipal e Delegado da Polícia, 1858," [hereafter cited as MARS, "Relatório"], in Arquivo Histórico Nacional (AHN), Rio de Janeiro, leaf 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 889.

¹⁹ Romualdo Subdelegado da Polícia de São Gabriel e Marabitanas, 12/04/58, in "Ofícios dos Subdelegados da Polícia, 1858-59," APA.

wers.²⁰ The day passed and nothing appeared. It was in April and the rainy season was beginning, a time when hunger on the Vaupés would be harsh. The people expected another long season of famine, they were tired, had had enough, and were not convinced of Alexandre's sanctity. Many left the movement and returned to their homes. One follower quarreled bitterly with Alexandre about the incident at Ipanoré calling Alexandre an "assassin" and not a saint. Rumours spread that Alexandre had this person killed and his body burnt.²¹

Alexandre was not undone by the loss of following, however. He began to preach a new message through which he justified the failure of his initial promises. The new message illustrates how his rhetoric became one of revolutionary transformation:

"Alexandre tried to escape collision [with the chief of Jiquirapé-cuma] by assuring him that his promises had not been fulfilled because God had taken the new measure of substituting them, whereby the Tupias would transform into whites and these into those by whom they would be governed, with the same power and wealth, in compensation for which the whites had governed them."²²

Alexandre's new ideology did focus on the relation between Western and Native societies as Romualdo had supposed, but precisely to overturn the political and economic relationships of inequality which were known and felt to exist. This ideology moved in a different direction from Kamiko's catastrophic end-of-the-world evangelism by predicting an inversion of the economic powers held by the merchants and the political powers held by the military and the government. Religious festivals were directed by native priests who had the authority to baptize and marry. This in itself gave people strength and self-determination in important matters. Through Alexandre, God had determi-

ned that people would gain total control and powers to determine the conditions of their lives in this world and not another. Instead of eliminating the Whites in the fires of São João, or by the threat of massacre, there would be trade off of places. This had righteous tone to it, because the Whites would learn how to suffer and how it felt to be ordered to serve and to work. No doubt this contributed to renewal of allegiance to the movement, for if God fulfilled these promises, there would be no worry of retribution from the military. Alexandre had also prophesied that gunpowder would fall from heaven,²³ thus, the people would be invulnerable.

Alexandre managed to keep together a group of about 40 followers until June of 1858. The dances continued as the group awaited the outcome of the second prophecy. Soon, difficulties again arose between Alexandre and his followers forcing him to relocate downriver, but by then, De Souza's investigatory commission was already on its way to the Upper Rio Negro. At the same time, rebellions had been reported on the Xié River. Briefly, the story is as follows:

In mid-April, 1858, Captain Firminio Xavier was informed by a soldier, Elisbão Melgueira of the military detachment at São Marcellino at the mouth of the Xié, that new dances were taking place at São Marcellino and Santa Anna, below the mouth of the Içana. The participants were dancing with crosses and were being led by another "new christ" and assistant "padre santo."²⁴ Xavier immediately went to investigate but by the time he arrived, the people of São Marcellino had dispersed. Elisbão informed Xavier that an Indian, Cypriano Lopes who was a shaman of some repute, had been involved in the dances and that several people who refused to participate in the dances had been fatally poisoned. Cypriano had supposedly killed a soldier of the detachment and two Indians.

Xavier ordered Elisbão to summon the residents of São Marcellino while he went downriver to Santa Anna on the Rio Negro. He claims that he walked into the village while the people were in the middle of a dance: "more than

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ MARS, "Relatório," Doc. 5.

²² *Ibid.*: leaf 64.

²³ MARS-Pres. Furtado, 03/07/58, in "Correspondência do Delegado da Polícia ao Presidente, 1858-59," APA.

²⁴ "Correspondência dos Ministros da Justiça, 1858," no. 63, cap. 2, in APN.

forty people, each one with a cross," led by a police guard, Domingos Antonio. Xavier took away the crosses, scolded the participants, ordered them to return to their homes and to quit such "idleness" (*vadição*) as they were engaged in.²⁵

Xavier was informed that in fact Bazílio Melgueira, a "desertor" from the military detachment at Marabitanas, had joined the dances at São Marcellino acted as "padre santo," and Cypriano Lopes was just disciple of the new messiah.

After the dances had dispersed, Bazílio and his followers reportedly went on their way up the Xié where they could continue their dances in peace. Xavier had reports that upwards of 150 people had joined together at the headwaters of Xié where, it was thought, they were joining forces with Kamiko, Alexandre, and all their followers.²⁶

By mid-May, Bazílio was reported to be in Venezuela with a number of people from the Xié. All of them been reported at the fort of San Carlos which had been virtually abandoned by the military a month before. Even though Bazílio was out of reach of the military, Xavier was convinced that upwards of 100 people were still meeting on the upper Xié and that the meetings had "converted into armed reunions" ready to resist any military force sent out after them.²⁷ A long time later, Xavier got hold of several witnesses who swore to this, one of them being the daughter of the "sorcerer" Cypriano Lopes. She testified that the "meetings" were held at Inamuim on the Xié River and that:

Many men and women not only of the village of São Marcellino, but also of São Felipe, occupied themselves in daily dances, with fermented drinks, dancing with crosses, having for a chief the Indian Claudio, who called himself Padre Santo, marrying and baptizing at his fine pleasure, and they had three shotguns, and many poisoned darts, to oppose themselves to whatever force sent out against them.²⁸

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ MARS, "Relatório," Doc. 5.

²⁸ MARS, "Relatório," "Auto de Perguntas."

Furthermore, the local magistrate at São Marcellino affirmed that the residents of São Marcellino had fled up the Xié where Claudio José was located and that Claudio had "for a long time been engaged in this idleness and was even on the Içana with Venancio Christu when Cadete Araújo was there".²⁹

The Government's Investigatory Commission

September, 1858, the provincial government intervened in the Upper Rio Negro region as a direct result of the "disturbances" on the major tributaries. To the government, it was not a question of a handful of rebels, and in light of the revolutions in Venezuela at the time, a great deal was at stake. It was not a question of foreign spies or a missionary, or speculators "playing on the credulity of ignorant Indians"; it was rather a question for the government that their authority in the region was about to be completely undetermined by the movements.

In May, 1858, several important articles appeared in the principal newspaper of Manaus, *Estrela do Amazonas*, about the messianic rebellions. Clearly, the affairs on the frontier were a public concern, and there was mounting pressure in the capital to capture and punish Venancio Kamiko, Alexandre, and Cypriano Lopes for their reputed "crimes". The President of the Province, José Furtado, instructed the Chief of Police and Municipal Justice, Marcos Rodrigues de Souza, to organize an expedition to the region where they would seek the help of the missionaries and try to persuade the Indians, without the use of force, to return to their homes. Above all, de Souza was instructed to use persuasion to make the Indians see their errors. Furtado advised, however that if this failed, military force could be used. De Souza would have thirteen military units (about 75 men) accompanying him up the Rio Negro, and if more forces were needed, he could call on the National Guard and all other military detachments on the Rio Negro.³⁰

After several delays, de Souza and the troops arrived in São Gabriel da Cachoeira in early July, where they formulated careful plans for proceeding

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Pres. Furtado-MARS, in MARS, "Relatório."

with the mission to the Vaupés.²⁸ Xavier's news that the movements on the Xié had become armed, however, forced de Souza to change his plans and proceed to the Xié while two other emissaries would go up the Vaupés to determine the state of affairs there.²⁹ On the Xié, de Souza was told by Warekena chief that everyone on the Xié had fled to the headwaters because they feared the military, for a rumour had spread that Xavier was coming to capture everyone and take them away. De Souza assured them that this was not so and persuaded the chief to go after his people and attempt to convince them to return.³⁰ He ordered Cypriano Lopes taken prisoner and then left for the Vaupés being convinced that he had left all "in complete tranquility" and that the "dancers of Christ were more worthy of condolence than punishment".³¹

While passing through São Marcellino, the commission heard that Alexandre and his followers had been on their way downriver on the Vaupés, but when news of the commission reached them, they panicked and went into hiding on the Içana. The Bariwa, however, told De Souza that Alexandre was not in fact on the Içana but had fled south of the Vaupés and was somewhere on the Tiquié River.

Back on the Vaupés, de Souza proceeded with caution, respect, and reserve. He found the people of one village engaged in a dance-festival and decided to leave them because the presence of soldiers would surely have been disastrous. While passing by Taraquá at the mouth of the Tiquié, the Indians immediately fled when they saw the soldiers. De Souza sent gifts and requested they return, promising a religious festival if they did.

The two emissaries of the commission who had preceded De Souza had managed to assemble "five chiefs and 150 of their people" for a meeting in a village above Ipanoré. Among the people were Alexandre's son Angelo and a disciple of Alexandre named Costano whom De Souza called Alexandre's "Captain of the Honor Guard". De Souza determined from them that

Alexandre had left the group entirely and had gone with his wife and younger son to the Tiquié. A Maku Indian had seen the group heading through the forest in a easterly direction towards São Joaquim and the Rio Negro, reportedly to a hideaway where Alexandre had gardens. De Souza sent a group of five people, including Alexandre's son Anagelo, to look for the fugitive messiah but when the group showed signs of rebellion, it was forced to return.

In the end, Alexandre and his family were never located. He remained in hiding for over a year-and-a-half and no-one knew exactly where. De Souza hypothesized that would either reappear on the Japurá River and there renew his activities, or "he would quiet down in his gardens and hope his crimes would be forgotten with time".³² In February, 1860, Alexandre emerged from hiding and was reported in São Gabriel where he asked to be baptized and made promises to the Director of Indians to "live from then on in peace and at his work".³³ He requested that had been allowed to live at Santa Ana on the Rio Negro, and as far as is known, the request was granted.

In De Souza's meeting with peoples of the Vaupés, he delivered the official message that it was a "crime against religion" to have accompanied Alexandre. It displeased the Governor "paying him evil for his good wishes". The government understood nevertheless that they had been "deluded, as the poor people that they were". They would not be punished this time, but the next time they would be.³⁴ If caught, Alexandre would be used as an example of the type of punishment the government could give. De Souza assured them that if in the future they felt they were suffering from persecution, they should seek the help of the local authorities and not refuge in the woods. With that, he ended his message and his mission on the Vaupés, but immediately returned downriver for news had reached him that there were new disturbances on the Xié River.

At the end of July/beginning of August, Xavier wrote that the people of São Marcellino expressed their resentment of Cypriano Lopes' imprisonment, and that one person had said:

²⁸ MARS, "Relatório," Docs. 3-4

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Doc. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*: leaves 64-5.

³³ "Correspondência dos Delegados da Polícia da Província do Amazonas, 1860," APA.

³⁴ MARS, "Relatório," leaf 37.

If the Governor wanted houses built, he should build them himself, because Your Excellency has deceived them with words and has taken away Cypriano.³⁸

Xavier further asserted that, with one exception, no Indians were coming to work at public service and no farinha was being sent to the fort.³⁹

De Souza went to Nossa Senhora da Guia where Cypriano had a house to determine the truth of Xavier's report, and found that instead of new disturbances, things were quiet, Cypriano's family and other residents were working on new houses, and people were surprised to find out why de Souza was there again. De Souza concluded there was reason to doubt there had been any new rebellions on the Xié and believed that Xavier had distorted the truth on this as on many other occasions. This was the view De Souza urged President Furtado to accept, and Furtado himself wrote in 1859 that there were some "doubts" about the Xié rebellions.⁴⁰

De Souza concluded the Commission's work in September, convinced that in the course of several months, a sort of truce had been restored between the government and the Indians of the Upper Rio Negro. At least, so it seemed; and it was perhaps reassuring to the public to know that several months later, Wanana (Tukanoan) Indians captured Caetano, Alexandre's disciple, because he was agitating again, and turned him in to the police.

According to a news report:

On December 24 [1858] a military express arrived from the Upper Rio Negro and it reports that part of our border enjoys tranquillity withal, an Indian by the name of Caetano, an emissary of the celebrated Alexandre, wandered about on the Vaupés, seducing its inhabitants to follow his sect; being taken prisoner by the chief of the village at Caruru Rapids, he was taken to the Subdelegate of São Gabriel who sent him

³⁸ *Ibid.*: Doc. 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Relatórios da Presidência da Província do Amazonas*, vol. III, 1859: 218.

by the same express for disposition by the chief of Police. This Caetano [...] threw himself in the river above Santa Isabel at midnight on the eight day of the voyage, bound by hand and foot as he was, and his corpse did not appear until the next day.⁴¹

Caetano's suicide in fact replicated the messianic belief in the famous Manao chief Ajricaba, known to the peoples of the Upper Rio Negro, who after his defeat in 1727 at the hands of the Portuguese, threw himself bound in chains into the Rio Negro rather than face the execution which awaited him in Pará [Sweet, 1974: 545].

Conclusion

From our reconstruction of the movements based on written sources, we have seen that Alexandre, like Kamiko, sought to assert power and control over Christianity while shaping it to meet the needs of the Indian people. Both messiahs rejected outside missionaries and assumed the role of priests, performing mass baptisms, marriages and confessions. These roles and practices, and the symbols they used, had a clear resonance in traditional shamanism and ritual. The cross, for example, at once symbolized ritual suffering and corresponded to the shaman's rattle used in curing rituals and dance festivals. The figures of God, Christ and the saints all have clear parallels in Indigenous mythology, supported by the folk beliefs of the local caboclo population. In making these links, the messiahs enhanced their own shamanic and ritual powers beyond the expected traditional roles.

Kamiko's ideology sought to end the exploitative relationships between Indians and Whites first by prophecies of world destruction and renewal, later through autonomy and avoidance of the Whites and total allegiance to his movement. Alexandre prophesied an inversion of the existing hierarchy of dominance and power such that the Whites would

⁴¹ *Estrela do Amazonas*, 12/25/58, no. 316, Manaus.

end up on the lowest rung. Both prophets recontextualized such goods and values as food, weapons, ritual and hierarchy by reconceptualizing these in terms of their relationship to the sources of creativity that produce them. Alexandre's ritual dances had the object of making manioc and gunpowder fall from heaven, of militantly resisting, and of ushering in the new hierarchy. There was less specific emphasis on gaining access to material goods (or cargo) as a way of acquiring European culture, than on wealth as part of the more all-encompassing question of power, including military strength and the authority to govern and to conduct their own religious ceremonies.

We suggest that Arawakan culture could more easily have accepted the ascendance of powerful messiahs than the Tukanoans. The tensions created by the growing power of the Tukanoan messiahs may have been one of the main reasons for the intense scepticism and opposition to the leaders from the start. Although Kamiko did face opposition, he was better able to govern it through the recognition of his shamanistic powers.

This difference between Arawakan and Tukanoan receptivity to the messiahs can be explained, I suggest, by the nature of ritual specialists and leadership in the two cultures. In seeking to eliminate dependence of the Indians on the Whites, Kamiko reinforced the pre-existing hierarchical ranking of Baniwa shamans demanding that full allegiance and tribute had been given to him. Being a shaman of already high status and rewarded in Baniwa culture, Kamiko sought to concentrate power as a way of consolidating the Baniwa struggle against the white military power structure.

In the Tukanoan scheme of hierarchically organized specialist roles, it would seem that Alexandre attempted to concentrate aspects of four out of the five main roles. As self-proclaimed shaman/priest, and imitator of Kamiko, he baptized, prophesied, and performed other priestly functions, asserting his direct connections with ancestral powers. As ritual dance leader, he led mass meetings of dancing and chanting, although no mention is made in the documents of his demanding payments in goods for his services. As priest, he married people, asserting control over affinal relations, although himself does not seem to have capitalized on the prestige or political economic power which could be gained through polygamous relations. He may also have been considered a war chief which good explain several details in the written sources: the Tukanoans's increasing

militance against the missionaries; the "armed" dances; and the fact that Caetano, Alexandre's disciple, was considered to be his "Captain of the Honor Guard." Alexandre's prophecies sought systematically to usurp the power of the Whites in political, military, religious and economic terms.

This concentration of powers was, perhaps, a novel experience for the Tukanoans of the 1850s. They may have seen it as necessary in light of the critical changes imposed on their society during the decade: large concentrations of people recently attracted to riverine settlements in newly-built clusters of houses under government appointed Directors of the Indians and missionaries and subject to their abuses. Such a concentration of power, on the other hand, created a contradiction. Ethnographers of Tukanoan society have suggested that the model of hierarchical ranking of specialist roles applies more to differentiation in internal relations of exogamous groups, while relations with outside groups should, in the Tukanoan view, be governed by egalitarianism. If the Tukanoan system of rank does not allow for a concentration of power in matters of external relations, then how could Alexandre's prophecy of governance over the Whites be fulfilled? How could Alexandre expect to maintain his leadership in the face of opposing leaders who doubted his claims? It would seem then that the dynamics of Tukanoan ranking worked against Alexandre's quest to be Kamiko's equal.

Alexandre Christu essentially created a new form of leadership while seeking to invert hierarchical relations with outsiders in order to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of Tukanoans. Ultimately, his experiment foundered on the ambiguities of the historical alliances Tukanoan leaders had previously made with the Whites and on the limitations of power in Tukanoan society.

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