



Concerted Multiethnic Heritage within the System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence in the Lower Caura River Basin

Berta E. Pérez

Abstract. – The “System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence” (SORI) is a sociopolitical model developed to explain the existing multiethnic networks in the Orinoco River Basin during the colonial period. Although transformed from its original structure and reduced in size upon the colonial impact, the system maintained its horizontal (or nonhierarchical) political integration of interethnic articulations based on multiplex relations that followed the principles of kinship and reciprocity. Although the legacy of the SORI is disputed, this paper has two objectives: 1. to demonstrate the continuance of the SORI into the 21st century; and 2. to explain its perseverance. Both objectives are accomplished by examining the intangible reciprocal exchanges that occur between the Aripaëños, maroon descendants, and the neighboring communities in the Lower Caura River Basin, Venezuela. I posit that the SORI is a reference point among the locals in that it provides a context in which they cultivate their social ties and strengthen their social bonds by reaffirming shared intercultural and ethnic values. [*Venezuela, Aripaëños, SORI, Lower Caura River Basin, multiethnic relations, intangible reciprocal exchange*]

Berta E. Pérez, Ph.D. in Anthropology (University of Minnesota, USA); currently Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Center of Anthropology J. M. Cruxent, Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research (Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas – IVIC), Caracas. – Research interests within the field of symbolic and political anthropology include studies on ethnopolitical and cultural processes, political identities, intra- and interethnic relations, historical and cultural landscapes, and cultural resistance among Afro-Venezuelan communities and within the Caura region as a centrifugal research base, as well as the historical and sociocultural analysis of what constitutes the Venezuelan ethos. – Some of her publications are “Prospects of Mestizaje and Pluricultural Democracy. The Venezuelan Case of an Imagined and a Real Society” (with A. A. Perozo; *Anuario antropológico* 2003), and “Más allá de las huellas” (with M. Ugueto-Ponce and K. Estraño; 2009). – See also References Cited.

Introduction

In 1979 Nelly Arvelo-Jiménez, a renowned Venezuelan anthropologist, and her research team¹ offered a distinct and innovative interpretation of intertribal networks in the Orinoco River Basin during the colonial period. After a careful examination of previous research conducted in the region, they concluded that a vast multiethnic system of regional interdependence was in existence at the time of arrival of the Spanish colonizers. Originally coined by Arvelo-Jiménez as the “System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence” (SORI), it comprised a horizontal or nonhierarchical political integration of interethnic articulations based on multiplex relations that followed the principles of kinship and reciprocity. They argued that, as a result of colonial expansion into the territory, the system was reduced in size and transformed from its original structure and function by imposed mechanisms, such as change in settlement patterns and debt peonage, which eventually led to its possible disappearance.

The SORI, however, languishes as a theoretical-methodological contribution as some Venezuelan anthropologists² undertake it, as either being one

1 Arvelo-Jiménez (1983, 2001); Arvelo-Jiménez and Bjord Castillo (1994); Arvelo-Jiménez et al. (1989); Morales Méndez y Arvelo-Jiménez (1981).

2 Gassón (2000); Heinen (1992); Heinen and García-Castro (2000); Mansutti (1992); Vidal (1987, 1993, 2000); Vidal y Zucchi (1996).

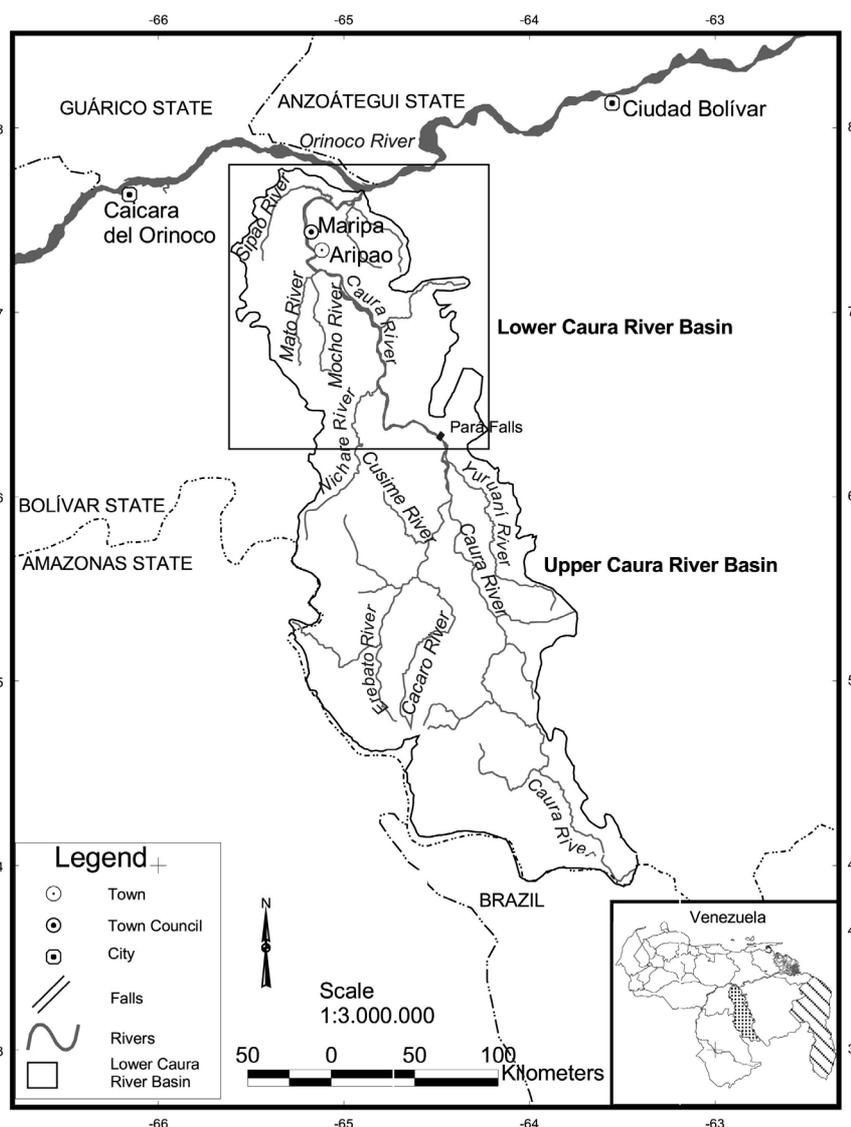


Fig. 1: Lower Caura River Basin.

more example of trade – i.e., an attribute often associated solely with the aim of indigenous regional networks, or representing a heuristic model that bears little evidence to support its existence or magnitude (Gassón 2007; Zucchi y Gassón 2002). But a discussion of their dissonance and rapprochement is not the aim of this article. Rather, the purpose here is to demonstrate that this multiethnic system did not cease to exist, in spite of the changes it suffered in its original composition, and to explain the reasons for its perseverance as a system today.

In previous studies, I utilized the SORI (for more details, see Pérez 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000a) as a sociopolitical model because it provided the framework from which: 1. to show how vital the insertion of Aripaeño forebears³ in an existing multiethnic system of regional interdependence was in securing

their physical and cultural survival, while carrying out their grand marronage⁴ through unfamiliar territories shortly after the 1750s; and 2. to explain why the Caura River Basin became their final destination after they had fled from the Dutch colonial plantations of Surinam and Demerara. For this analysis, however, the lens that I use in my pursuit to capture today's survival of some of the characteristics of the SORI focuses on the descendants or present-day Aripaeños and, in particular, on the sociocultural relationships they have established with other ethnic groups (e.g., Kari'ña and Ye'kuana – Carib-

3 They were runaway black slaves or maroons, belonging to the Dutch colonizers of the Dutch Guiana.

4 Gran marronage is defined as the permanent flight of black slaves from the colonial slavery system.

speaking peoples; Sanema – Yanoama-speaking people; Jiwi – Guahiboan-speaking people) and cultural segments (*llaneros*⁵ or plainspeople), with whom they share the area which they inhabit – i.e., the Lower Caura River Basin, which is also part of the Middle Orinoco River Basin of southern Venezuela (Fig. 1). But a simple demonstration of the continuance of this multiethnic system of regional interdependence into the 21st century is neither a satisfactory nor sufficient answer, even if its long historic-cultural trajectory were to yield scientific curiosity or amazement. What this type of analysis additionally demands is to go one step farther, that is, to explain its perseverance as a system by deciphering the hidden meanings that emerge, are expressed, and become symbolic representations of the actions and interactions of the actors involved in this multiethnic system of regional interdependence.⁶

One way to decipher the hidden meanings is by examining the principle of reciprocity. Reciprocity is one of the surviving characteristics of the SORI, and it has been selected as a topic of analysis for drawing in much of the essence of this multiethnic system of regional interdependence. In this sense, the principle of reciprocity underlying restricted (symmetrical and deferred) exchange of tangible and intangible goods and services becomes the focus for being the modality often expressed by the Aripaeños toward their neighbors and vice versa. Notwithstanding, the exchange or the ebb-and-flow of the “intangible” of goods and services, rather than the “tangibles,” is the center of this study. While not disqualifying the worth of tangible exchanges, the exchange of intangible goods and services has not been considered as a method of analysis in the scientific realm. The study of intangible prestations and counterprestations, thus, opens up a new spectrum in how to perceive interethnic relations through the creation of recurrent mechanisms, such as real and fictitious kinship alliances, mar-

riage alliances, political treaties, knowledge sharing, circulation of news, exchanges of strategic information, social collaboration in diverse activities, and the prestation of religious and economic services among others. These intangible reciprocal interactions, per se, become signifiers and, as signifiers, these emanate intangible meanings and worth. Although Arvelo-Jiménez (2001) did not take the intangible to its utmost expression or potential, because her emphasis was directed toward overriding the premise of trade exchange (or the exchange of solely tangible goods and services) as the sole factor that came into play in regional networks formed by indigenous peoples, I agree with her, when she posits that intangible exchanges have the characteristics of being filled with symbolic meaning and thus, should be equally considered as scientifically reliable. This is contrary to the emphasis given to the exchange of tangible goods and services as the traditional method of analysis, in which that which is exchanged has been transformed into a signifier of utility value in its concrete form (e.g., wealth) or symbolic form (e.g., status). In other words, the tangible goods and services are the material markers through which social relationships are substantiated and manifested. The tangible, as a symbolic vehicle, is the determining factor of giving meaning – a utilitarian meaning – to any relationship based on reciprocity. Without the tangible, there would be no meaning or worth.

Present-day Aripaeños, who currently live in the community of Aripao (lat. 7° 22' 00" N, long. -65° 05' 00" W), Sucre County, Bolívar State (Fig. 2), are not only a product of an earlier process of international conflicts based on the European competition for the expansion into, and conquest of political and economic spaces in the New World. Even today they are being influenced by this process, now known as globalization (Pérez 2002, 2003). Although they have gradually experienced sociocultural change, the Aripaeños have been able to preserve their maroon ethos, which has permitted them to produce, represent, and reproduce their own culture; thus, securing their own physical and cultural continuity (Pérez 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2003). One of the mechanisms through which the Aripaeños have maintained “localism” without becoming completely “depluralized” lies precisely in the historic-cultural continuity of their insertion and participation in the multiethnic system of regional interdependence.

The Aripaeños’ continuous and current participation in this multiethnic system of regional interdependence, allow them to develop and maintain “multiplex relationships” (Gluckman 1965) with

5 The *llanero* is particularly defined and identified by the practice of cattle ranching as the main economic activity; nevertheless, he can also be considered *indio genérico* as a result of suffering from radical ethnic transformation and which, in turn, has made him to be part of the *criollo* population.

6 This manuscript is the ethnographic version and a spin-off from the original one, where the theoretical bases are grounded and which will be sent for possible publication this year. Such particular manuscript will address the theoretical importance of examining reciprocal exchange of the intangibles within the SORI as it spurs through the actions and interactions of the people involved, messages (hidden meanings) of cultural control (everyday life) and power relations (dominance vs. resistance) over their shared cultural and natural resources (key words: reciprocity, SORI, intangible versus tangible reciprocity, hidden meanings, cultural control, power relations).

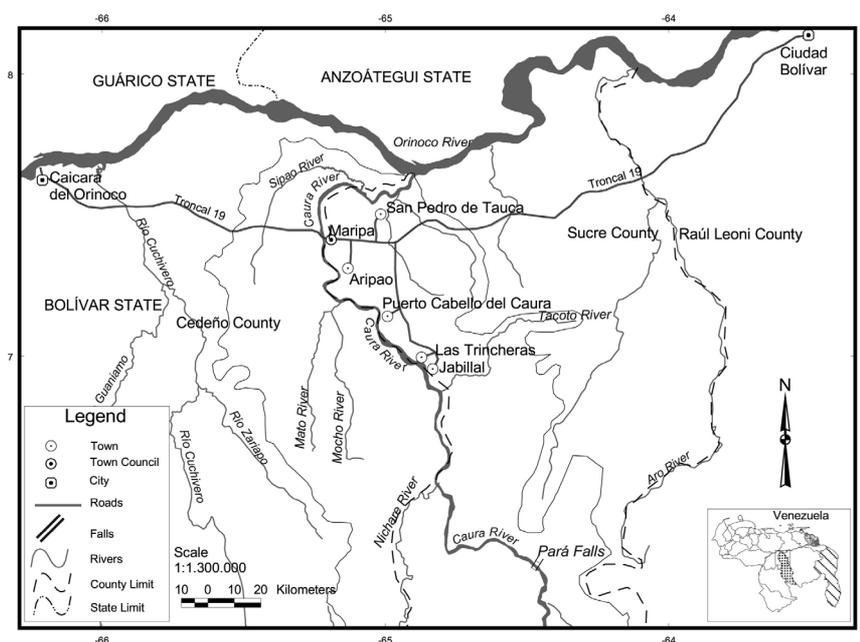


Fig. 2: Location of Aripao.

other ethnic groups and cultural segments, without jeopardizing either their own cultural autonomy, or their control over their own cultural resources. These interethnic relations, in turn, serve to bring about regional solidarity, especially in times of sociopolitical, economic, or religious stressors resulting from either ecological and/or cultural circumstances, or of the penetration and influence of actors from the metropolis – the effect of globalization. In sum, I claim that the system of regional interdependence allows each group to produce, represent, and reproduce its own culture and, at the same time, when the circumstances of external threat become evident, it allows them to conform and participate in a large political block that goes beyond the purely ethnic and cultural level.

For analytical purposes, this article has been divided into four sections: 1. a brief description of the theoretical-methodological model known as SORI; 2. a summary of the likely insertion and participation of Aripaëño forebears in the SORI shortly after the 1750s, with the intention to illustrate that the insertion of present-day Aripaëños into this multiethnic system is not an accident nor mere coincidence, but a continuation of their historic-cultural past; 3. a discussion of the reciprocal relationships formed between the Aripaëños and their neighboring ethnic and cultural groups within this multiethnic system of regional interdependence found in the Lower Caura River Basin; and 4. a disclosure of the hidden meanings contained within this multiethnic system of regional interdependence, as the concluding remarks. Interpreted as interrelated parts

of a whole, these sections represent an elaborated tapestry that, as it is being woven, a motif gradually appears, portraying and revealing the System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence. It has indeed undergone significant changes in structure, function, and size through time and space, yet its continuity is still maintained in as much as those characteristics or elements that are structurally and functionally crucial for its survival have been preserved by and on behalf of the actors involved.

The System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence (SORI) during the Colonial Period

In addition to the *kula* and potlatch, renowned classic case studies of gift exchange, there is another comparable example from the tropical lowlands of Venezuela: the System of the Orinoco Regional Interdependence. In her historical and structural reconstruction of this multiethnic system regional interdependence, Arvelo-Jiménez found sufficient grounds in ethnohistorical and archaeological studies,⁷ indicating intense trade prior to European contact in the Colombia-Venezuelan Plains and the Middle Orinoco Basin. In addition, she also identified a multiethnic system at work, albeit reduced or more localized into trade circuits, as revealed in contemporary (or mid-20th-century) ethnographic

7 E.g., Morey y Morey (1975); Zucchi y Tarble (1984); Tarble y Zucchi (1984).

studies⁸ – or what she currently coins as “little Kulas at work” (personal communication, Jan. 20, 1996). With the incorporation of subsequent ethnohistorical case studies (Morales Méndez 1979; Urbina Flores 1979), the subtleties of cultural continuity and change of indigenous societies became evident, leading Arvelo-Jiménez (2001: 6) to conclude that indigenous cultures were not “isolated islands,” and that the intra- and interrelations of these indigenous societies were based on reciprocity, embraced multiple relationships and interests beyond the commercial domain.⁹

Assembling the bits and pieces of information led her to the reconstruction of a holistic and integral view of a multiethnic system of regional interdependence across time (from an intense to a more reduced circuit of trade activity due to the gradual impact of European contact, conquest, and colonialism) and space (from a vast multiethnic system of regional interdependence composed of a continuous chain of trade that embraces the Colombia-Venezuelan Plains, Upper and Middle Orinoco, and inclusively, to the Antilles, to a more reduced or localized, multiethnic system). Following the presentation of this model in 1979, subsequent anthropological studies (Biord Castillo 1985; Pérez 2000a, 2000b) corroborated its existence into the 18th century. Furthermore, Arvelo-Jiménez (2001) discovered from her recent research on social movements among contemporary Venezuelan indigenous societies, specifically the Ye’kuana, that in contrast to indigenous peoples of the highlands of South America, the indigenous peoples of the tropical lowlands, specifically in Venezuela, follow a horizontal or nonhierarchical political integration, which revealed to her that traces of the SORI are still active today. This finding – the continuation and importance of reciprocity and kinship relations in a horizontal political system – renewed her expectations of the SORI in elucidating future studies about the internal dynamics of contemporary indigenous societies of the lowlands of South America. But from the integration of anthropological information collected up to 1979, Arvelo-Jiménez and her research team did establish the foundation for examining indigenous networks found in the Orinoco River Basin beyond the sole and only purpose of trade relations.

Hence, she describes the SORI from the time of contact up to the 18th century, which was her temporal focus, as a horizontal or nonhierarchical

political system that privileged the convergence of distinct ethnic indigenous groups through the conformation of social networks that did not jeopardize their own political and cultural autonomy. Such characteristics as horizontal conjugation and autonomy found within these interethnic articulations distilled a symmetrical relationship among the parts involved, thereby representing one type – intertribal symmetry – among the interethnic systems already described and explained by Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira (1977). These social networks were governed by the principles of kinship and reciprocal exchange. The goal of this multiethnic system did not necessarily entail the prestation and counterprestation of tangible goods and services for the sake of trade, but to produce, represent, and reproduce a conglomerate of social, economic, political, and religious networks and alliances among distinct ethnic groups. In this sense, there were not only tangible, but also intangible goods and services exchanged among indigenous peoples in order to establish and maintain articulate mechanisms, such as the ebb-and-flow of information, ritual services, marriage ties, political treaties, raids, and warfare in two ecosystems of the Orinoco Basin, the fluvial and interfluvial zones.

The structural and functional characteristics of the SORI brings to mind Mauss’ concept, “total social fact,” (1967: 76 f.) based on the magnitude of joints or composed segments of social relationships that come together to make a whole; and more in particular, to Max Gluckman’s concept of “multiplex relationships” (1965: 256). Arvelo-Jiménez correctly claims that it is within these multipurpose relations that other scholars most likely failed to see reciprocal exchange beyond the tangible goods. She argues that (2001: 8)

... the exchanges characterized as solely commercial by ethnographers and ethnohistorians were always accompanied by social exchanges, political treaties, prestation of religious and economic services, introduction, diffusion, and adoption of fashion, circulation of new and strategic information, etc. ... The intangibility and invisibility present in some of these multiplex relations make it difficult for these to be perceived by analysts who are culturally outsiders to this reality ... [or belong to the realm in which the tangible is a scientific fact to be interpreted].¹⁰

Accordingly, it is extremely important to understand that any particular prestation and counterprestation

8 Butt Colson (1973); Coppens (1971); Thomas (1972).

9 Arvelo-Jiménez urged the gathering of additional supporting archaeological evidence from the colonial and especially, precolonial period, in order to support or not the model of the SORI.

10 This quote has been translated by the author from Spanish to the English language. The statement within brackets has been added based on the author’s interpretation from the conversations sustained with Arvelo-Jiménez.

does not have to revolve around solely on an economic or commercial transaction, in which only the tangible plays the role. Reciprocity of intangible goods and services can occur simultaneously and independently from the tangible in these economic or commercial transactions. The intangible can also emerge as the transaction in a reciprocal relationship. It is thus pertinent at this point to reinstate what Gluckman (1965: 256) claimed to be the difference of multiplex relations between traditional and modern societies: Whereas multiplex relations are clearly cut, divided, and differentiated from each other among modern societies, these multipurpose relations are subtle or almost invisible to the human eye, even though being highly marked by “specific conventional modes of behavior and sometimes by ritual,” in traditional societies. To return to the previous argument, the intangible is not empty in symbolism or connotation. Like the tangible, the intangible contains and emanates meanings even though it cannot be physically observed. Yet, the meanings, which may or may not bear any direct correlation to the initial purpose from which that reciprocal exchange took place, are essential for the analyst to apprehend because these are, in fact, part of an integrated larger reality.

Aripaeño Forebears and Their Insertion in the SORI

The Aripaeño forebears were likely to be initially composed of ethnically diverse individuals.¹¹ During the Atlantic slave trade, African captives of the same ethnicity were often separated by European slave traders at the West African seaports in order to prevent a likely uprising as a result of sharing a common language or cultural ties. Thus, the ancestors of present-day Aripaeños were among those Africans who were uprooted from the distinct West and Central African societies and transported to the New World to be sold as slaves. As black slaves, Aripaeño forebears belonged to the Dutch colonial plantations of Suriname (López Borreguero 1875) and/or Demerara (Fernández 1995; Wickham y Crevaux 1988).

Based on clues gathered from several secondary sources,¹² Aripaeño ancestors were likely to have

fled, shortly after the 1750s, from the Dutch Guiana plantations into the Upper Caura River – a territory belonging to the Spanish Crown. According to present-day Aripaeños’ oral accounts and a novel based on certain historical facts (López-Borreguero 1875), their predecessors fled the Dutch Guiana plantations as a result of the pregnancy of a white Dutch woman by a black slave. She was the daughter of the owner of a Dutch colonial plantation and the black slave (her lover) was her father’s foreman. Because of the possible consequences from their actions, the couple decided to flee along with other black slaves. But during their grand marronage, the Dutch woman died after giving birth to a baby girl, who was later known as Pantera Negra (Black Panther). She became the ancestral and messianic figure of present-day Aripaeños (see Pérez 1997 and 1998, respectively).

Grand marronage did not necessarily assure a more benevolent environment to fugitive black slaves or maroons. Their physical and cultural survival depended on how well they responded to the new ecological and cultural surroundings. Aripaeño forebears apparently crossed the Essequibo River and penetrated the Brazilian Guiana until reaching the Upper Caura River, which they reached by traveling through the Ventuari and the Erebató Rivers. They made land and water connections within the interriverine zones throughout their long journey to freedom. Based on this information, it is likely that they used the following interfluvial route: Essequibo–Rupununi–Tacutu–Uraricoera–Ventuari–Erebató–Upper Caura (see Pérez 2000a). This interfluvial route took Aripaeño ancestors away from the territory directly controlled by the Kari’ña, a Carib-speaking people, who represented a threat to them from the alliances that the Kari’ña had formed with the Dutch in the war against the Spaniards (Morales Méndez 1979; Whitehead 1988). And yet, this interfluvial route (Coppens 1971; Thomas 1972) placed them right into a commercial or trading zone utilized by the Ye’kuana, a Carib-speaking people, who were, in turn, victimized by the Kari’ña.

As already mentioned by the author in a previous study (Pérez 2000a), the creation of interethnic networks and alliances were a reality. It is, thus, very likely that Aripaeño forebears not only received the support of indigenous peoples, such as the Ye’kuana, but also of other maroons hiding in the Guianas, such as in between the Rupununi and the Upper Branco Rivers (Ramos Pérez 1946). As it has been documented, fugitive black slaves articu-

Price (1973); Ramos Pérez (1946); Whitehead (1988); Wickham y Crevaux (1988).

11 Previous research on present-day Aripaeños entailed the historical reconstruction of their past. Because of its relevance to this article, the author has made a synthesis from her previous published works.

12 Acosta Saignes (1954); Chaffanjon (1986); Duchet (1975); González del Campo (1984); Humboldt (1991 [1941]); López-Borreguero (1875); Mandle (1973); Menezes (1979);

lated themselves into the social, economic, and political networks and alliances formed between Europeans and indigenous ethnic peoples.¹³ And as a scheme for their physical and cultural survival, maroons often made pacts, treaties, or alliances with indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, other maroons, and even European colonizers.¹⁴

It is within this context that Aripaeño forebears likely took advantage of an existing multiethnic system of regional interdependence, known as SORI. Their insertion and participation in such system most likely guaranteed their social, political, and economic survival through the establishment of horizontal or nonhierarchical interethnic relations within the interfluvial zones of the Guianas. That is, they likely created and established networks and alliances with some indigenous peoples and maroons, while others were considered temporarily their enemies. In fact, some Aripaeño men claim that while their ancestors feared or considered enemies some indigenous peoples (e.g., the Kari'ña), there were others (e.g., the Ye'kuana) with whom they established trade and even marriage alliances. Yet, the political outcomes or agreements made between the Aripaeño forebears and these distinct ethnic groups were based on shared common needs, interests, and enemies at a particular moment in time (see Pérez 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000a, 2002; also López Borreguero 1875). It is important to mention that the male (Aripaeño) forebears seemed to have taken (and as their descendants continue to do so today) the leadership role of their group's insertion and participation in the horizontal political system of reciprocal exchange, while the female (Aripaeña) forebears (and as their descendants continue to do so today) served as the keepers of their culture by exerting the control of what and when was to be exchanged. The different types of conjunctions and alliances formed by the Aripaeño maroons with the distinct indigenous peoples indicate their possible incorporation into the SORI and reiterate that this system transcended the sole purpose of trading goods.¹⁵

At the end of the 18th century, the Kari'ña were progressively losing their military power in the war with the Spaniards in the Lower and Middle Orinoco Basin, which affected, in turn, their control over

the Caura River Basin. Within this context, Aripaeño forebears apparently reached the Upper Caura River towards the end of that period. Their entry into the Caura region is believed to have been facilitated by the Ye'kuana, who had established networks and alliances with Spanish colonizers until 1776, when the Ye'kuana rebelled against the Spaniards by burning the military forts that they had built along the basin during the government of Centurion.¹⁶ Notwithstanding, the physical and cultural survival of Aripaeño maroons included an additional facet, which entailed their likelihood of having earned the status of "free slaves" or of "political exiles" upon their entry into the Caura region – which was then a territory under the ruling of the Spanish Crown. That is, the Spaniards who were at war with the Dutch, protected the Aripaeño forebears through the allotment of land (López Borreguero 1875; Wickham y Crevaux 1988). This land was known as San Luis de Guaraguarico,¹⁷ which became the very first settlement (or maroon community) to be established by the Aripaeños' predecessors and marked the beginning of a historic-cultural landscape symbolically demarcated by Pantera Negra (refer to Pérez 1997). This complex scenario of power struggles among the distinct actors involved, offered Aripaeño ancestors a new platform on which to build additional interethnic relations on behalf of their physical and cultural survival (López Borreguero 1875; Pérez 1997, 1998, 2002, 2003).

According to Kenneth Bilby, "[m]aroon communities were once spread across the slaveholding areas of the Western Hemisphere, but only a few have survived to the present" (1996: 120). An example of this is the community of Aripao, its people, and their collective memory of their forebears as maroons. I claim that the Aripaeños' ancestors were not only successful in responding to the new cultural and ecological environments that they encountered after fleeing the Dutch plantations, but also their survival as a group was aided by their entry into a zone that was in direct control of the Spaniards, to whom they did not owe any services as slaves. Those maroon societies that survived against

13 Acosta Saignes (1954); Duchet (1975); González del Campo (1984); Ramos Pérez (1946).

14 Bilby (1997); Price (1973); Whitten and Corr (1999).

15 The utilization of the SORI as a theoretical-methodological model has also offered the author a context from which to understand and explain two particular problems: "Indigenous/Afro-American relations" and the concept of "Afro-Indian." The author is currently doing research on these issues.

16 Civrieux (1970, 1980); González del Campo (1984); Jiménez y Perozo (1994).

17 Aripaeños' ancestors also founded other settlements within the Caura River Basin in search of better sources of water and/or in continuing their grand marronnage, such as Corocito, Pueblo Viejo de Puerto Cabello, Pueblo Viejo de Aripao, and Aripao. Although not relevant to this article, the author still needs to rectify through further research, the historical, cultural, and geographical relationship between San Luis de Guaraguarico and San Luis de Erebató as the first settlement of Aripaeños forebears (on this particular issue, refer to Pérez 2000a, n. d.; Zucchi n. d.).

the odds of forming their own new society, in addition to their continuous struggles against the colonial system of slavery as well as the ecological and cultural alien territories they had to encounter, gradually constructed, through historic-cultural processes of contacts, networks, and alliances, “new social orders and cultural identities out of multiple pasts” – or what is known as the process of ethno-genesis (Bilby 1996: 120). Hence, those maroon or independent communities that survived to the present day, such as Aripao, are not only socially, economically, and politically complex, but have also articulated themselves at the interethnic level to create and foment networks, treaties, and alliances.

Contemporary Interethnic and Cultural Relations in a System of Regional Interdependence

The present-day Aripaeños live in a colonial-style town,¹⁸ complete with asphalt streets, sidewalks, rural housing of concrete blocks and zinc roofs, a health service, an elementary school, a library, a parochial house, two small or family-oriented grocery stores, and a Catholic, Baptist, and Pentecostal church, among other structures and public services. The gradual introduction of materials utilized for the building of these modern structures and the incorporation of basic public services (e.g., electricity and water) was made possible after the 1960s with the construction of an asphalt road that connects Aripao with the main highway that runs east and west between Caicara de Orinoco and Ciudad Bolívar (Fig. 2). Since 2000 the Aripaeños have progressively had access to other items of modernity,¹⁹ such as cable television, more radio stations, and cellular phone service.

The introduction of these aforementioned elements of modernity has often been accompanied by subsidies and developing programs offered to the Aripaeños as part of governmental public policies.

Former Venezuelan governments, for example, offered industrialized foodstuff at a reduced cost and incentive programs to develop animal husbandry (small-scale swine, poultry, and fish-farming) and agriculture through the distribution of credits and seeds, with a governmental guarantee of crop purchasing (e.g., rice, corn, beans, and cashews). Under the administration of Hugo Chávez, President of the República Bolivariana de Venezuela, they continue to obtain economic help, but in the form of loans for the creation of cooperatives associated with any traditional or modern activity of their interest (e.g., fishing, sewing workshop, and public transportation). Nevertheless, there are still some Aripaeños who continue to be exclusively devoted to their traditional economic lifestyle. They practice subsistence activities such as fishing, hunting, small-scale slash-and-burn farming, small-scale cattle ranching as well as chicken and swine farming, and annual gathering of tonka beans (*Coumarouna odorata*) and Moriche palm fruits (*Mauritia flexuosa*). Others have become either government employees, such as teachers, nurses, public officers, policemen, and janitors, or small-scale entrepreneurs. Among the latter, some have not totally abandoned their traditional subsistence activities. Rather, they carry them out at their leisure time and at a very small-scale. Although the Aripaeños have felt the gradual impact of these modernizing global tendencies, they have appropriated and domesticated these external goods and services rather successfully and to their own benefit (e.g., the negotiation of fair prices for the selling of their local resources – fish, meat, tonka bean – within the market economy). And despite of the sociocultural changes lived and experienced, they still continue to be faithful to their traditional way of life – the horizontal and decentralized interethnic articulation and integration.

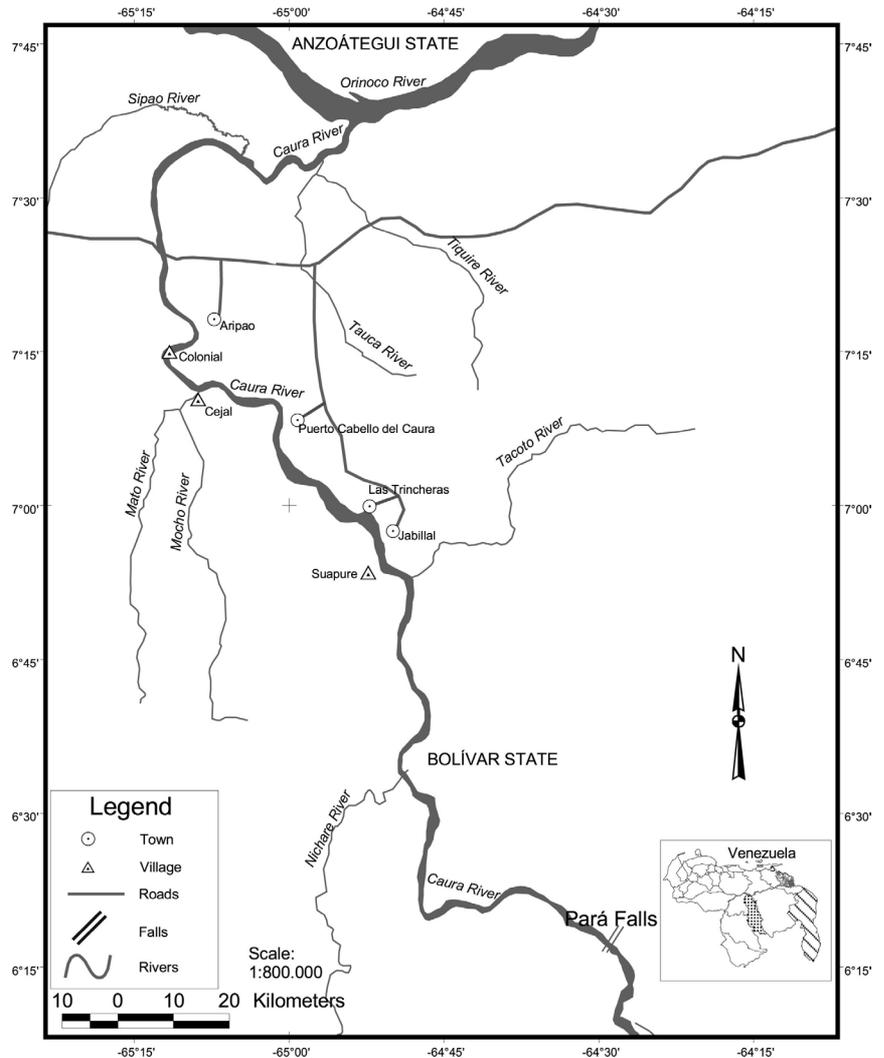
The communities incorporated for the study of the Aripaeños' participation in an already reduced, transformed, or modified SORI are those located in the Lower Caura River Basin. These are: Aripao, Puerto Cabello, Las Trincheras, and Jabillal, as well as other small settlements in the area occupied by indigenous peoples, such as Ye'kuana (Suapure and Cejal), Sanema (a sector of Puerto Cabello), and Jiwi (Colonial) – Fig. 3.²⁰ According to Arvelo-Jiménez and Bior Castillo, the essence of this political system of regional interdependence is “... the creation of recurrent mechanisms of conjunctions

18 Prior to the 1960s, the Aripaeños lived in houses traditionally made out of clay, straw, and hay (*bajareque*) and practiced a semisedentary lifestyle in accord to the yearly cycle of their traditional subsistence activities (e.g., hunting, fishing, recollecting, and slash-and-burn agriculture); sometimes as extended families, the majority of the Aripaeños, for instance, would leave their main settlement for three to five months into the hills in order to gather tonka beans (*Coumarouna odorata*) or to prepare the land for planting. A more sedentary life became a norm after they were gradually showered with elements of modernity.

19 To learn more about the process of globalization and the impact of modernity on the Caura River Basin, refer more specifically to Pérez (2002).

20 The total population of all these communities is estimated to be no more than 1,300 people. Aripao, alone, has a population of around 280 people. No official data is currently available.

Fig. 3: Interethnic Relations between Aripaeños and Neighboring Communities.



and alliances, that is, networks of social, economic, and religious prestations and counterprestations ...” (1994: 58). The selection and, thus, the exclusion of other small settlements, communities, and towns located more or less nearby, is anchored in the *continuous and systematic relationships* of regional interdependence which the Aripaeños have created and established with their neighboring groups. This does not, by any means, infer the lack of social, political, economic, and religious ties with the excluded small settlements, communities, and towns, but rather expresses *sporadic and casual relationships* established between the Aripaeños and the rest of their neighbors.

Examined under this spectrum, there are six important points that need further information and clarification. First, Aripao is not only the last settlement founded by the Aripaeños’ ancestors, but is also the only afrovenezuelan community in the

region (or the Caura River Basin).²¹ Second, Aripao, as a parish (the vertical or hierarchical political system of the established order), is not just the politico-administrative entity of those communities and settlements located to its south, but also directly depends on the County City Hall represented by Maripa, the capital of Sucre County. Third, Puerto Cabello, Las Trincheras, and Jabillal are mainly composed of *llaneros* (or plainspeople) who, after migrating from the Venezuelan plains (e.g., Guárico and Anzoátegui states) between the late 19th and early 20th century in search of better economic opportunities in the then ongoing intensive and exten-

21 El Callao is the other black community in Bolívar State. It was formed in the late 19th century by black miners brought into Venezuela from the British Antilles. They were lured into the area by gold mining concessionaires, which offered them more stable jobs and better pay (Morisse 1985; Fernández 1995).

sive exploitation of forest products, such as rubber and tonka beans, subsequently settled in the region. Fourth, there have been recent migrations, some permanent and others known as “circular migration,” of indigenous peoples (e.g., Ye’kuana, Sanema, Piapoco, Guajibo, and Jiwi), who have formed small enclaves in the area, either outside (e.g., Ye’kuana in Suapure) or inside of an already existing community (e.g., Sanema in Puerto Cabello). Fifth, Maripa, which is the capital and thus the politico-administrative entity of Sucre County, has been excluded from the multiethnic system of regional interdependence because its relationship with the rest of the communities is for the most part based on a market or commodity exchange and its interactions with that Other are more impersonal.²² And sixth, San Pedro del Tauca, a Kari’ña community, has also been excluded because its participation in the system of regional interdependence is rather casual and sporadic.

Hence, the recurrent mechanisms of conjunctions and alliances created between the Aripaeños and their neighboring groups become more visible when they engage in their respective locally-based subsistence activities. Even though dirt and asphalt roads connect the Aripaeños with most of the inhabitants of the neighboring communities, the Caura River and its affluents are the means and thus, the stage on which many Aripaeños maintain direct communication and reinforce their networks and alliances with indigenous peoples and *llaneros*. As explained below, these are actions that surpass the Aripaeños’ mere interests in the sole purpose of trading with other groups and of guaranteeing their own self-subsistence. An aripaeña elderly woman, for instance, claims:

Everything is one and the same region; everyone is one and the same people. The Aripaeños have formed family ties and *compadrazgo* relations with people from other communities within the region (RT, interview, July 13, 2000).

Although these recurrent mechanisms of conjunctions and alliances tend to overlap, I have organized them for analytical purposes, accordingly to what can be defined as networks of social, economic, and religious prestations and counterprestations. Within each of these rubrics, an emphasis is made on the exchange of the intangible rather than on what is materially tangible within these multiplex relations.

²² There is always an exception to the rule: Multipurposive relations between Maripa and the other communities involved in the SORI do exist among members of consanguineal, affinal, and/or *compadrazgo* ties.

These exchanges are symmetrical or nonhierarchical and occur within a framework of delayed or deferred exchange. Nothing immediate (whether intangible or tangible) is expected in return from any of these interactions.

The practice of exogamy can be considered a nonmaterial exchange within the social realm of the Aripaeños. Although the core of this matrifocal society is sustained by endogamous marriages and supported by four main columns that make up the last names of the founding families (i.e., Tomedes, Pérez, Cañas, and España), the Aripaeños also include and continue to practice interethnic marriages, just like their ancestors did for reasons of physical and cultural survival during their grand marronage (Pérez 2000a). But, why is there a continuity, today, of exogamous marriages? One reason would be to agglutinate cultural strength (e.g., shared histories and historicities, values, beliefs, experiences and sentiments, customs, traditions, etc.) through the formation of strong social bonds at the regional level without the loss of individual ethnicity. Ongoing kinship and marriage research among the Aripaeños reveals that there have been interethnic marriages, especially between the inhabitants belonging to the communities and settlements that continuously and systematically participate in the contemporary micro “System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence.” While an Aripaeño man, for instance, may meet his “future wife to be” during short-term visits to neighboring communities after returning from a hunting or fishing trip, an Aripaeña woman can also meet her “future husband to be” during the seasonal harvesting (February–May) of tonka beans – an extended family activity in the mountains for extended periods (from a couple of weeks to a month).²³ Some examples of interethnic marriages found in Aripao are: A Kari’ña man married to an Aripaeña woman; two *llanera* women from Jabillal marrying men from Aripao; three *llanero* men from Puerto Cabello forming marriage ties with Aripaeña women; two Ye’kuana women from Suapure marrying Aripaeño men; and a man from Aripao establishing marriage alliances with a Jiwi woman from Colonial. Rather than being seen as either an accident or a recent incident, these contemporary intermarriages are likely to be an outcome of their continuous interactions within the SORI.

These interethnic marriages not only expand the horizon of affine and consanguineous relationships beyond locality, but also bring about other types of

²³ In the past (late 19th and early 20th century), entire families would move into the mountains for the whole seasonal period of tonka bean gathering.

existing fictitious kinship, such as *compadrazgo* (or the relationship of godparenthood). Although *compadrazgo* is inherent to Catholicism and belongs to the analytical category of religion, it is important to mention it here for its analogous character in structure to the system of real kinship and the practice of exogamy. That is, Aripaños' selection of *padrinos* (or godparents) for their children (and who, in turn, would become *ahijados* or godchildren to the godparents) for baptism or confirmation, have been extended to other communities (and vice versa) based on the ties already established through exogamy or friendship; this does not deny the possibility of searching for godparents with a higher economic status or political influence as it has been originally and correctly claimed in anthropology. But, Aripaño families (e.g., Cañas, Pérez, Tomedes, and España) have created permanent bonds of mutual obligation and affection with families living in other communities, such as Puerto Cabello, Las Trincheras, and Jabillal, by establishing relationships through the system of *compadrazgo*, i.e., the relationship between *compadres*²⁴ or *comadres*²⁵ and the relationship between *padrino/madrina*²⁶ and *ahijado/ahijada*.²⁷ Moreover, it is important to mention that the terms *compadre* or *comadre* have been further transformed and utilized by the Aripaños to include those individuals living outside their community, but with whom they have established close social ties.²⁸

These social conjunctions and alliances brought about through interethnic marriage as well as through real and fictitious (*compadrazgo*) kinship, are restricted intangible exchanges that constitute strong interethnic solidarity based on mutual affection, obligations, and a system of communication. The very process of "giving, receiving, and returning" of a gift, expressed as the outcomes of these multiethnic and multiplex relations of regional interdependence, ensures the production, representation, and reproduction of these societies, without

the risk of losing their own ethnic identity. These interconnected relationships, be they consanguineous, affine, fictitious kinship, friendship, and/or partnership, constitute a system of networks, which offers a sense of security, protection, and moral support in times of physical and/or emotional stress or needs (such as in the case of illness, death, social injustice, or economic misfortune of an individual or a group) by maintaining each other well informed through the circulation of news, exchange of strategic information, and direct assistance, when necessary. The activity of hunting water turtles (*terecay* – *Podocnemis unifilis*) and their eggs, is but one example that illustrates the fraternal bonding that develops among the distinct participants of the Lower Caura Basin region. That is, the high pick of this activity, which is illegal because the species is considered endangered, concurs during the Easter holyday, which requires the temporary posting of national guards along the waterways for emergency assistance, protection, and security for a high volume of tourists. Being at odds between the presence of national guards and the official banning of hunting the endangered species, the locals form networks that employ distinct strategies or codes (e.g., the gathering of tips in hiding places, the sending of a messenger, the emitting of howling sounds, the sudden changes of speeds from the outboard motor); these codes serve to maintain each other continuously informed of any eventuality or action to take, such as keeping track of the whereabouts of the national guards, covering-up their catch, or hiding out.

When entering the economic realm, it becomes more difficult to ignore reciprocity at the level of tangible goods and services and even nowadays, to disregard the insertion of people into the market economy where the handling of currency and accumulation of capital is a reality. However, reciprocal exchange in which not all is exclusively tangible, and in which the market economy does not necessarily infringe, continues to occur between the Aripaños and their neighbors in the form of doing favors, knowledge sharing, and the circulation of strategic information.

Favors can include anything from temporarily providing a place to stay in one's home, fixing an outboard motor, offering a ride, delivering a verbal or written message, and pitching in with a daily chore, to giving a helping hand in the girdling, felling, and burning of brushes and trees to prepare an area adequate for cultivation. I have also witnessed fishermen, hunters, farmers, or gatherers sharing their knowledge in regards to what they consider of interest to their traditional activities. A group of

24 The term *compadres* in Spanish is used to refer to the existing relationship between the biological and spiritual parents of the child as well as to the relationship between the biological and spiritual father of the child; in the latter case, each one of them refers to each other as *compadre*.

25 The term *comadres* in Spanish is used to refer to the existing relationship between the biological and spiritual mother of the child; they refer to each other as *comadre*.

26 The term *padrino* and *madrina* stands for godfather and godmother, respectively; *padrinos* is the plural for godparents.

27 The term *ahijado* and *ahijada* stands for male godchild and female godchild, respectively.

28 The term *primo* and *prima* (male and female cousin, respectively) is also used between two individuals who have developed with each other close social ties; it is often used among the younger population.

fishermen, for instance, may instruct another group of fishermen about a particular bait that is being specifically preferred by a particular species of fish; a group of hunters may tell other hunters the whereabouts of herds of *báquiros* (*Dicotyles tajacu*) or mammals; an agriculturalist may warn other agriculturalists about an upcoming change of weather conditions or of any natural or human disturbances in gardening plots and crops; or a group of gatherers may inform other gatherers when to recollect tonka beans or Moriche palm fruits based on their visual estimate of what has already fallen onto the ground.

In addition, the circulation of strategic information may not only involve a particular sector or guild of the population, but it may also bring about the fusion of all communities. When the fishermen or gatherers consider that the prices offered by the buyers or intermediaries for their products are unfair or below the market price, they simply do not sell. Another example occurred in the mid-1990s when a particular organization offered each community, on separate grounds, to form a tonka beans cooperative. As is often the case, the communities of the SORI communicated with each other about the offer; nevertheless, the organization's intentions in terms of such partnership, benefits, and gains, and the role that each community would play at the intra- and interlevel, remained unclear for them. Thus, they simply and quickly rejected the offer. These examples reveal their capacity to organize themselves as a guild or as one large community against any unforeseen eventuality that could possibly hamper the continuity of their traditional subsistence activities – or a way of life anchored on a politically horizontal (or nonhierarchical) system of regional interdependence, unless they decide otherwise.

Although the tangible goods are not a reference point for this article, the economic realm still demands its appearance. The Aripaeños and their neighbors also reciprocate agricultural produce (e.g., cassava, yam, rice, corn, plantain, beans), game animals (e.g., *báquiros* or mammal, *terecay*, *morrocoy* – *Geochelone denticulata*, *baba* – *Caiman crocodilus*), fish, wild and yet domesticated animals (e.g., monkeys, parrots, macaws), raised animals (e.g., pig, chicken), homemade crafts (e.g., baskets, hammocks, necklaces), and clothing among others; or sometimes, they may simply exchange these items for market commodities (e.g., pasta, sugar, salt, coffee) or transportation services, either by land or water, to other communities. There are numerous examples of these reciprocal exchanges. But for matters of simplicity, the Aripaeños are known for giving, more or less in this order, clothing, transportation, market commodi-

ties, raised animals, wild birds, and some agricultural produce to their neighboring communities; and, in return, they receive agricultural produce, game animals, and fish from the people (or *llaneros*) of Puerto Cabello, Las Trincheras, and Jabillal; and agricultural produce, game animals, fish, wild birds, and homemade crafts from indigenous ethnic groups, such as Sanema of Puerto Cabello, and Ye'kuana from Suapure and Cejal. These kinds of items, exchanged between one group and another, can very well express and represent: 1. their proximity and closer contact to the external world or the modernizing global tendencies, such as in the case of the Aripaeños; 2. their sociocultural continuity as seen through a horizontal (or nonhierarchical) way of life and the practice of their subsistence activities, such as in the case of all actors – but perhaps, anchored more in others, such as the *llaneros* and the indigenous ethnic groups; and 3. their clinging onto what is theirs – or culture proper (or *cultura propia*, Bonfil Batalla 1989), such as in the case of the indigenous ethnic groups and their homemade crafts.

Furthermore, it is not the intention here to give an image that currency does not flow among and within the communities involved in the SORI. Although this is another issue to be considered in another opportunity, it is important to mention that they have incorporated currency into their horizontal system of exchange. One particular example is that of a Kari'ña man, living in Aripao, who needed money to bury his wife – an Aripaeña woman. Without ever making a mutual verbal or written agreement for repayment, some of the people he knew from Aripao and Puerto Cabello loaned him the money. The lenders never asked him to repay in tangible or intangible goods and/or services, but the debtor knew that he owed them. How did he repay? Whenever the lenders came to buy his fish, he simply said, “take the fish; it is yours.” Only they know what intangible and tangible goods and services are worth for exchange and when the cycle of exchange has closed only to be restarted in the future.

Religious prestations and counterprestations is another rubric. However, not everyone shares the same religious denomination; some are Catholics and others are Baptists, Pentecostals, or Jehovah's Witnesses. And although Aripao, as a parish, contains and facilitates the use of its religious physical structures or spaces for the believers to worship, their access to these installation does not necessarily guarantee the performance of formal services by the authority in charge, such as a priest, minister, or pastor. The presence of a Catholic priest, for instance, is practically minimal, in comparison to that

of a Pentecostal pastor. As a matter of fact, there are particular individual members of a church or cult who have either assumed the responsibility or have been specifically trained to take charge of religious activities and events in the absence of any religious authority. The giving of a Catholic mass, however, is an exception to this rule. But in the case of the Catholic religion, there are practitioners, mostly Aripaeña women, who have learned on their own the application of the sacred oils to those who are on deathbed. Another example is with the Pentecostal religious cult. When the pastor, who resided in Aripao, was transferred to another locality, he left an Aripaeña woman trained to act on his behalf in the participant communities until a new authority figure arrived. It is important to mention that these religious activities (masses or services) and events (or rites of passage) also conform the proper scenario from which its believers can exchange among each other their spiritually and worldly experiences, worries, inquiries, and concerns. Hence, each religious affiliation forms its own networks and alliances that cut across community boundaries through which to propagate the sacred word and through which to establish a system of religious prestations and counterprestations.

The difference in religious affiliations does not imply, however, that the practitioners draw rigid boundary lines among each other based on their own religious beliefs and tendencies. They do not prevent each other, for instance, from attending and even cooperating in religious rituals that are others than their own, especially when these involve their own consanguineous, affine, or fictitious kins, friends, or allies across any of the communities. An example is the celebration of such Catholic sacraments as baptisms or confirmations.

The death of a member of any community also cuts across any boundaries of religious difference, prompting intercommunal closeness and religious prestations and counterprestations. One particular case was the death of a Baptist Aripaeño man who lived in Puerto Cabello. His body was brought into Aripao early in the morning and waked at his sister's house – a Baptist Aripaeña woman married to a Baptist Kari'ña man. During his wake, the following activities occurred: 1. Both men from Aripao and Puerto Cabello chose an available space and dug a hole for his burial in the cemetery of Aripao, which can also be utilized by members of the other communities that are political-administratively linked to the Parish; 2. the Catholic church's bell was rung at an interval of every two peals of the bell for a short period of time announcing the death and the wake of the man; 3. people not only began

to gather at the dead man's sister's house, but also brought food with them to contribute with everyone; and 4. the Baptist church opened its doors for service to the people of Aripao and other communities to pay respect to the dead man and his family. When the wake culminated in the late afternoon, the coffin was lifted by a total of eight men from Aripao, Puerto Cabello, and Jabillal, and carried out of the house to the cemetery on foot, but not without first passing the coffin by the front door of the Baptist church to pay the last respect. Meanwhile, the Catholic church's bell rung, once again, but at an interval of one peal of the bell at a time until the coffin reached the cemetery.

After the burial, the people went back to the dead man's sister's house to show their solidarity until dawn. But among the ongoing interactions of that evening, I was told of a particular one that occurred between two men, who had already reciprocated with each other in other opportunities (e.g., through favors or exchanging commodity items for agricultural produce). A Pentecostal Kari'ña man from San Pedro de Tauca, living in Puerto Cabello, expressed to me how he resolved that evening of the wake, what he potentially perceived as a possible conflict of agricultural land usage with a Catholic Aripaeño man. Three years before the wake, he had taken over an apparently abandoned piece of land in Puerto Cabello that was supposedly under the care of and future use by the Aripaeño man. During their friendly discussion over the issue, the Aripaeño man simply said to the Kari'ña man, "I know you took the land. But consider it yours as you are making it productive. I don't have the time to make it valuable, as you can see, in that I have let it go unproductively for many years." A few days later, this story was also corroborated by the Aripaeño man.

This particular example shows that the mechanisms of conjunctions and alliances, formed among members of a religious affiliation, do not necessarily constrain or segregate those who do not belong to the same membership. These mechanisms of articulation actually allow, in spite of the difference in affiliation, the spiritual and worldly integration of people across the different communities; and especially more so, in times of physical or emotional strains and needs of an individual or a group. And just like other examples already mentioned in this article, it reinforces that any particular issue (e.g., socioeconomic or political matters), whether representing potential conflict or not, can be discussed or even resolved in other distinct contexts or settings (e.g., religious). Furthermore, it also helps to elucidate the manner in which multiethnic and multiplex relationships work; that is, people interact with the

same set of fellows at different levels and in different contexts in order to achieve distinct objectives through the reciprocity of intangible (and tangible) goods and services.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate the existence of a once vast autochthonous indigenous System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence (SORI), and to explain the reasons for its perseverance as a system today. This scenario has been corroborated in the Lower Caura River Basin through the analysis of the sociocultural relationships that present-day Aripaëños have established with other ethnic groups (Kari'ña, Ye'kuana, Jiwi, and Sanema) and cultural segments (*llaneros*) of neighboring communities (Suapure, Cejal, Colonial, Puerto Cabello, Trinchera, and Jabillal). Although culturally different, these ethnic groups which coincided and conglomerated to coexist in the region under distinct historical circumstances, share a common lifestyle that orbits around their own traditional subsistence activities (e.g., fishing, hunting, slash-and-burn agriculture, small-scale cattle ranching as well as swine and chicken farming, and the gathering of forest products). Throughout two and half centuries, at the very least, of interethnic interactions, they have developed enough common interests from which to create, maintain, and cultivate recurrent mechanisms of conjunctions and alliances. These conjunctions and alliances are, in turn, comprised, articulated, and guided by a set of shared implicit cultural rules, whereby their existing multiplex relationships become finely inserted and articulated within a system of regional interdependence.

The intention of a particular ethnic group to dominate or impose its own particular interests on other ethnic groups does not come into play in this particular multiethnic system of regional interdependence. Rather, it is based on a symmetrical articulation of the different actors involved from which to form social, political, economic, and religious networks and alliances. These are not necessarily fixed nor meant to be unbroken, and in which the principles of kinship (real and fictitious) and reciprocal exchange are at work. While some groups have established more sporadic and casual multiplex relationships with their neighbors, others have done it in a more continuous and systematic way. But these social, political, economic, and religious conjunctions and alliances brought about through interethnic marriage, real or fictitious forms of kinship, reciprocal and deferred exchange of favors as well

as of news and strategic information, and religious prestations and counterprestations of goods and services, among others, have led towards the creation and maintenance of regional cohesion and solidarity among communities and small settlements located in the Lower Caura River Basin.

The regional cohesion and solidarity, that the SORI emanates as a whole, is not absolutely and only anchored on the exchange of tangible goods and services; the intangible ones also play an important role in that these are the very lifeblood of the system. That is to say that there is always an ebb-and-flow of intangibles goods and services exchanged that can be accompanied by tangible ones or not. But the tangible goods and services are never exchanged without the company of intangible ones; there is always a literal and/or symbolic message exchanged, in whichever form (verbal or nonverbal), behind the scene. But most important, it is the exchange of intangibles goods and services that bring about the platform of regional cohesion and solidarity in times of internal strains or needs and especially more so, when circumstances of external threat become evident.

In their everyday life, the social (brought about through interethnic marriages as well as through real and fictitious kinship), economic (expressed in the form of favors, knowledge sharing, and the circulation of strategic information), and religious (manifested through the performance and assistance of services and rituals, regardless of religious affiliation) conjunctions and alliances formed, are based on mutual affection, trust, obligations, and a system of communication. These basic premises offer the Aripaëños and their neighbors a sense of security, protection, and moral and spiritual support. In other words, they are constantly cultivating their social ties and strengthening their social bonds. This bestows them with a foundation from which to agglutinate intercultural and ethnic strength based upon shared histories and historicities, beliefs and values, experiences and sentiments, customs and traditions.

Within this traditional scenario, it is important to mention that the forces of globalization have not yet had a continuous and tremendous impact in the Lower Caura River Basin. Rather, these have been erratic and sporadic due partly to interrelated global and local sociopolitical and economic circumstances (for details, see Pérez 2002). Nevertheless, this process of globalization implicates human relationships of domination and resistance; that is, a contrapuntal movement between hegemonic/homogeneous and antihegemonic/heterogeneous forces. Yet, the people of the Lower Caura River Basin have become an ethnographic case study in which cultural

distinctiveness and empowerment continues to prevail contrary to the dominant forces of implementing cultural *indifference* and *disempowerment*. One example is the existence and perseverance of this multiethnic system of regional interdependence, which is a reference point among localities and becomes expressed in such particular events as: their conjoined refusal to sell the harvested tonka beans or the fish caught at an unfair price set by intermediaries; their mutual rejection to an outside nongovernmental organization that proposed the creation of a joined tonka bean cooperative; and their joint resistance to the intervening role played by the national guards while carrying out their own traditional subsistence activities – for details of Aripaños' local control within a global reality, refer to Pérez (2002). How have the people from the Lower Caura River Basin counteracted or resisted, while leaving room for negotiations and conflict resolutions with the acting dominant group(s)?

The answer to this question is based in their insertion and participation in the SORI. That is, it allows them, as active local actors, to conform a temporary large political block or unit that goes beyond the purely ethnic and cultural level; that is, the majority or all of the diverse ethnic and cultural groups come together, when the opportunity merits in defending a common interest or objective that is being threatened by an external force. It is through these conjoined interactions at the level of autonomous political decisions during the process of conflict, negotiations, and conflict resolution, which permit and make viable their cultural reproduction, representation, and production in times of strains and needs or in situations of outside threats.

Hence, the system of reciprocal exchange has not been annihilated by the globalizing tendencies. Although reduced, modified, or transformed from its traditional origins (for further information, see Godelier 1998), it continues to play an important role in keeping multiethnic cohesion and solidarity from within, in order to take charge of internal strains and needs as well as of external threats. Similar to the *kula* and the potlatch, the SORI is another form of expression of a current reality that integrates the principles of kinship and reciprocity.

This does not infer, by any means, the existence of a harmonious state. Conflicts do exist within the system as well as in its encounters with the outside world. Yet, I posit that part of these ethnic groups' physical and cultural survival and continuity have often depended on their insertion and participation in the multiethnic system of regional interdependence. In this sense, the SORI offers them an scenario in which to put at work recurrent mechanisms

of conjunctions and alliances from which to secure all or most of the facets of their lives – the reproduction, production, and representation of their culture proper, respectively, and as a whole.

But this careful examination of reciprocal exchange at the level of a contemporary politically horizontal (or nonhierarchical) and decentralized system of regional interdependence in the Lower Caura River Basin, leaves without question that the past (e.g., since the colonial encounter at the very least) and the present are not necessarily disconnected. The present reflects the past and the past becomes an imprint of the present or a textbook from which to learn. As long as it is understood that the SORI has not ceased to exist, then the idea of it being a utopia (Gasson 2007) is not longer feasible.

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