

ADIWA!
**PIAROA PHILOSOPHIES OF POWER, VIOLENCE, INGESTION,
 EXCRETION, BLOOD AND BEAUTY¹**

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For Amazonian peoples we have the question of just what is the relation of Power to Polity and Society? – How do these ideas of Polity and Power compare with Western paradigms and expectations? Unfortunately we find that there can be no relationship. As Rivière suggested more than a decade ago, Anthropology has decided that there is no comparison possible: looking at such concepts through Western paradigms, anthropologists have found, it seems, that peoples like those in the Amazon just don't have them—no Power, no Society, and no accomplishment of something that could be called a Polity.² Anthropologists were left noticing all those things that Amazonian peoples lacked, that were absent. Contrastingly, more recent Rich Ethnography has disclosed very important examples of Amazonian peoples' treatment of all these things—Power, Society and Polity.

Piaroa ideas on these topics, I must say, are certainly much more interesting and sophisticated than those we find embedded in Western institutions. Western paradigms have built steadily on theories of The State ever since the mid-1800s. In the West, Society is believed to be possible only if Hierarchy and Violence are shot right through The State at every level. There is the need for Institutions of Violence, for the use of Violence to create the needed Social Order, its Political Economy and so on and so on. The understanding is that Witless Violence is unavoidable in the making of Society. Violence exists at the heart of this State Order, then, but it is Violence of a very special kind. Now, if we look carefully we will find that an idea of Violence is at the core of Amazonian Society too. But we will also find a dramatic difference between the two with regard to just how to go about creating

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a good, or human, Society, or Polity. Violence is needed in both cases when it comes to attaining Society and polity. But the understanding of the *Substance* of this Violence is very, very different. And the distinctions between the two on this issue of Violence are crucial, because the resulting *Uses of Violence* are drastically distinct.

AMAZONIAN PEOPLES ARE SEEN AS LACKING IN POWER!

To understand all this, anthropology is obliged to create very different means of exploration. Just what is the understanding of the Uses of Violence that Amazonians comprehend as leading toward a decent society? Are Amerindian peoples really low on Power, Society and Polity? Of course not.

Even so, when it comes to the Amazon, Society is understood as the creation of Individuals—not Institutions, and not Hierarchies. And here we need a new sociology that takes account of the relation of Aesthetics and the Beautiful to Power and the idea that Beauty is Power. What, then, is this Politics and Aesthetics of Power in Amazonian ways of thinking? Think for a moment of how the Cashinahua work hard to mold the bodies of babies—they want beautiful babies, who are strong. Here we have a fundamental idea—creating and molding bodies leads toward acquiring the Power to create Society. This molding *is* Power and it is also an Aesthetic activity toward using Power. In the same way, cooking Real Food—this too is Real Power, real because it goes toward creating Society. These activities hint at a much more general philosophy of Realizing Virtues—because Real Power is the Aesthetic capacity to live safely and creatively together.

Help with achieving this safe co-dwelling is part of the beautiful and the sublime activity of the Present Day gods—the main one being a woman, Cheheru. It is she who gives humans the means for creating Society according to capacities she achieved in the Mythic Time. Her constant concern is to cleanse all the Violent Powers used in this Mythic Time by the male gods—she has the ability to cleanse those mighty Myth Time Powers of their deep Poisons; their Killing Poisons. In this Past—Creation Time—creativity was too toxic to be of help toward gaining a ‘human life’, a ‘true society’—quite the opposite. At that time, there were Powers at work too powerful to Tame. The Gods of that time, Wahari and Kuemoi, went crazy from too much

Poison that they had let loose. So, Cheheru cleanses the Powers of Myth Times, and bit by bit she gives these to the Piaroa in their Present Time. The Power of Blood is in this way made safer. From Cheheru, the Power of Society—especially the Power of Women to create strong babies—is founded in the need for a good life. To use the Power of Society, in turn, means becoming Human, not Mad, not an Animal. To become human is key because animals have no ‘life of thoughts’ in Present Time. The male gods of Creation Time could not achieve all this, but Cheheru did.

MAKING NEW KINDS OF COMPARISON—WITH ANCIENT GREECE, FOR EXAMPLE

To enter into these alternative philosophies of Violence, Aesthetics and Polity, we need to appreciate and compare different kinds of Virtue-centred societies. We must also understand the differences and similarities of distinct Amazonian societies in their understandings of how you achieve a ‘human sort of life’. As we see, a ‘human life’ is neither Mad nor Violent. Hence the question is always how to prevent the explosion of madness and violence—because this is the kind of life Amazonians are trying to lead; a Beautiful Life together in a world where, nonetheless, Poisons are everywhere. Crucially Shamanic Power, which is vital in taming these Poisons, must itself be controlled; and it is particularly the role of women to ensure responsible use of Shamanic Power.

There are indeed many kinds of Power; Power of Laughter and Wit, for example. And there is also extreme variation in the understanding of relations between Polity, Power and Society that has not been fully comprehended by anthropologists. A comparison with Greek City States, each being very different from the next in its comprehension of Power and Virtue, may offer a way to think about this kind of diversity in Amazonian contexts. Is the emphasis placed on Wit, or is it on Might in the making of a certain kind of Society, for example? Ultimately, the Greeks chose to put more weight on the power of Might than on the power of Wit and Laughter in their virtue-centred philosophy; with consequences that continue to this day in Western thought—this is the Zeussian cosmology, but what underlies it?

We must realise, then, that Society in Amazonia is a process created and maintained by individuals. Here, how Power is gained and deployed is crucial; this ‘how’ affects the relations of women and men, women and women. At this point we notice the role of the female chorus, as in ancient Greece—the duty of women to monitor the use and misuse of power and avert difficulties in the creation of a ‘human sort of life’—one that is neither Mad, nor Violent—but one that is Fertile, Productive.

POWER IS ACQUIRED THROUGH CLEANSING POISONS

For Piaroa, there is a vital need for responsibility when using the ubiquitous Poisons left behind by the male gods of Past Time—these Poisons must be cleansed constantly because they are the source of life and fertility—poisons give power; crucially they give the power to have babies and indeed to engage in any generative activity. Underneath all these poisons humans thus find the abilities for taking on tasks. Poisons have agency—one smells and one desires to create more good smells, to find good odours, to absorb these Beautiful and Good Tastes that surround one and thereby to create good and Sensible Powers. People are hence surrounded in everyday life by the beautiful, cleansed and knowledgeable creations of others. Their blowguns, their traps, combs, hammocks, plants, children, laughter and speaking, chanting—all this is inhaled and absorbed through the active work of the senses and circulated throughout the body by the Blood. From all these things and the sensing of them comes the ‘life of thoughts’—the aesthetic capacity for Piaroa knowledge, the ability to get human thoughts to ‘stand up’; *tak’wakomene*.

Belaunde notes how in the Amazon men and women are equal in the Dangers they present—men and women cause danger to others because of the toxic substances that exit from their orifices, and so there is the need to cleanse the poisons involved constantly—including poisons of thought and body.³ All bodily orifices are fertile just as much as they are a cause of danger. For Piaroa, the shaman, due to his nightly travels, is especially dangerous—he has excess Power. He can use his powers, especially the medicines he brings, on behalf of the community; but he is also apt to go ‘crazy’ due to these dangerous journeys into other worlds and his contact with other toxic entities and agencies. It is

then the task of women, for example the wife of the shaman or chorus of women, to keep things calm and healthy.

SELF-FERTILIZING ORIFICES

Vagina, the most powerful orifice, combines Blood, Creativity and Fertility. It is due to this fact that the Tongue, for males, must be bled. The shaman teaches young men who want to be shamans that they must pierce their tongues once per year. This is a cleansing that simultaneously fertilizes male capacities. When, in this way, by this sharp piercing his tongue, the shaman ‘menstruates’, he is shedding the Poisons that Kuemoi left behind from the Past Time.

These male activities, of course, emulate female capabilities. By menstruating, hence cleansing, women have the power to create babies; likewise through bleeding their tongues men acquire similar Safe, Fertile Capacities. All orifices are fertile—Armpits—sweating is cleansing—Arse—expelling bodily poisons, this is cleansing. All these are purgative and Self-Fertilizing activities that allow humans to transform and use Power effectively. Failure to cleanse leads to sickness and craziness. Cleansing by the Piaroa allows a Mastering of the good potentials of these Poisons that are everywhere from Mythic Time; the Powers involved can then be used safely.

When the shaman gives a male patient and himself hallucinogens to imbibe or inhale these smells and tastes travel through the body cleaning the blood, regenerating male capacities, hence putting his maleness once again on a par with female capacities. This makes it safe for him to make a ‘human life’ for himself. All moral capacities and knowledge are mastered and regenerated through bodily ingestion and excretion. knowledge un-mastered in this way makes you Crazy and Sick. These are crucial elements of an Amazonian Politics and Aesthetics.

VIOLENCE OF POWER AND *SENSUS COMMUNIS*

All these practices of cleansing enable Piaroa to live an individual life—that is to say, a ‘human life’ which is also a life of freedom, safety, intimacy and informality. Each is responsible for themselves but it is their use of self-responsibility that enables them to live ‘a beautiful life together’—something that is, of course, difficult to achieve. This is their *sensus communis*—the aesthetic of living together as individuals.

An individual life is a cleansed and fertile life. Thoughts must control the senses because the Sensual is intertwined with the Power of Thought for the Piaroa. Women and men are equal, though men have to work harder than women to lead a safe human life because they cannot menstruate—the shaman must teach them to do so.

Thus, Passions must be tamed because the aim is a Beautiful Community created through the successful taking in and throwing out of Poisons, thereby the achievement of Mastery of Knowledge. It is for this reason that cooking, the Culinary Arts, are so important not only socially, but politically in taming Poisons, controlling Violence. For example, when women prepare food, the shaman artfully divides up and distributes portions for the children, to have for themselves and to present to each adult. The women's cooking is in this way transformative of the beautiful 'human life' coming into being.

All Uses of Power are understood as entwined with Desire for Power. But here, the opposite of a 'human life' is the uncleansed Violence of Power—most dangerously the instrumental use of the earth's resources to conquer people and hence the rise of the Tyrant. It is because of these philosophies, that The State in Amazonian society cannot be understood through our standard sociological and cultural notions of how the Violence operates, and is operated upon, in the creation of Power, Polity and Society.

For example, these standard notions do not allow us to understand the Wit of the shaman, his slapstick humour and the importance of his sense of humour in guiding a 'human life'. Humour and Laughter make it possible to control the Passions—laughing together, not killing each other. The shaman is a poet and clown. He is a master of joking, teasing, burlesque and play on words. Inside him, and all Piaroa, are the 'Beautiful Beads of Knowledge'. These beads that are also worn on the outside on ritual occasions, and amongst these, the shaman's are the largest beads made of jaguar teeth; these beads must be beautifully made. *Adiwa!*—'beautiful', 'cleansed', 'perfectly done'—aesthetics are of the essence in continuously achieving community. Every morning all in the community must *drink the words of the shaman* who has been busy all night chanting stories as he travels to the homes of the celestial gods. Imbibing these chants will allow everyone to carry out tasks of hunting and cooking safely.

SHAMAN AS CHIEF AESTHETICIAN WHEN IT COMES TO THE RIDDLE OF POWER

So, in this way, the shaman is the chief Aesthetician of the community. And his wife is the Mistress of the Gardens—she is responsible for women’s gardening, making sure the gardens are Beautiful and Useful. Power, though, belongs to the individual; no one can order another. When the shaman invites another community to a great feast he always asks his wife if she is healthy—‘do you feel strong enough?’—that is to say, powerful enough, to organise all the garden work and the cooking involved: because, in all these activities, things must be done in a Beautiful way to be effective. In cases such as those we have discussed, when the shaman menstruates, or in the organisation of the culinary arts by the shaman’s wife, the individual, male or female, is made powerfully Fertile, acquiring Strength—and this Generativity is also the basis for the Aesthetics of Social Life and the Mastery of Knowledge involved.

So, finally we can go back to Greece where there is also an Aesthetics of Power. We may note the restraining influence of women in some settings, the power of women whose Chorus restrains the Hubris and Might of male actors. Ultimately, though, the aesthetics of Might predominates—Zeus’s power. Western politics is Zeussian—the Power of Might and Witless Violence is shot through all of its Institutions and the philosophy intrinsic to them. Certainly, Piaroa Men and women are understood as equally powerful in everyday life—and equally dangerous. But, by comparison, the *sensus communis* of Piaroa Polity works through responsible use of the Power of Wit and Laughter. How to escape the Western grand paradigms and hence the assumption that Amerindians lack society and polity? The question has constantly recurred—why do they lack what we have, our Political Ideas; why do we lack what they seem to have? Clastres, for example, has not solved the crucial ‘riddle of power’. It is well, as he has done, to argue that Amazonian societies work to expel the Violence of Power. Now, we need to deepen our conversations on the Substance of this Violence. We must continue to rethink the Amazonian Riddle.

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¹ This paper presents notes for a congress organized by Prof. Elke Mader at the Institute of Cultural Analysis, Vienna in 2012. It was put together in its current form with the editorial assistance of HW.

² Cf. Rival, L.M. and N. Whitehead (eds.) 2001. *The Amerindianization of Society in the Work of Peter Rivière*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Belaunde, L. 2001. *Viviendo Bien. Género y Fertilidad entre los Airo-Pai de la Amazonía Peruana*. Lima, Perú: Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica.