

# The Tukano Indians and Advancing "Civilisation"

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## THE EASTERN TUKANO TRIBES

### THE COUNTRY

One of the most important affluents of the right bank of the upper Rio Negro is the Caiari or Uaupés river. Its sources are in Colombia but the middle and upper courses are in the Brazilian state of Amazon. The direction of the river is west to east, between longitudes 67 degrees and 72 degrees west and latitudes 0 degree and 1 degree North. The Caiari's principal tributaries on the right bank are the Papuri and Tiquié, and on the left bank the Querari.

Near Jauareté, in the middle course of the river, two forest trails lead in a northerly direction to the upper Aiari river, a right bank tributary of the upper Içana. Other forest paths link Jauareté with the Tiquié river and the Tiquié with the Traira river. The Traira is a left bank tributary of the upper Japura river.

The whole country is covered with dense tropical forest. There are some low "island" hills near Bela Vista, near Taraqua, and near Jauareté (Serra dos Porcos). There are more hills between the Uaupés and Tiquié but they are not recorded on any maps. Between Taraqua and Jauareté the Uaupés forms various rapids, the most dangerous of which is the Ipanoré. The Cachoeira, Papuri and Tiquié rivers also have rapids, such as the high Cacuru falls.

The climate is hot and humid and the flora and fauna resemble those of the Rio Negro.

### THE TRIBES

#### THE "TRUE" TUKANO GROUP<sup>1</sup>

*Tucanos or Dachsea*—This is the principal tribe of the whole group. Their original common-houses (*malocas*) are sited on the Uaupés river at Agutiroca, Taracuá, Capuari-Igarapé, and Mapa; at Urubu-Lago on the Papuri river; and on the Tiquié river at Santa Isabel do Tucano, Cabari-Igarapé, Pari-Cachoeira, and Jabuti cataract.

<sup>1</sup> This is partly from my own observations. The tribal divisions are drawn from Cestmir Loukotka, *Classification of South American Indian Languages*, Los Angeles, 1968, pp. 182 and 186, and information on common-houses from Dom Pedro Massa, *De Tupan a Cristo*, Rio de Janeiro, pp. 53-63.

*Tuyuka*: Their country is the upper course of the Tiquié river and their main common-houses are to be found at Pino-coaliro, Umari-Igarapé, Periquita falls and Cabari.

*Uanana*: Their common-houses can be found on the banks of the Uaupés above Jauareté-Cachoeira.

*Pira-Tapuya*: Their original villages are on the Papuri river. At present there is a colony in Bela Vista on the lower Uaupés. Anthropologically they differ from the other Tukano tribes, being more narrow-skulled.<sup>2</sup>

*Arapaço*: They are to be found in small settlements on the middle course of the Uaupés between Taraqua and Jauareté. They are interesting because of their light skin and for the fact that they have completely lost their own language—the Arapaços now speak only Tukano.<sup>3</sup>

*Carapanás*: Because the bulk of these tribes are in Colombia there is only one small settlement on the upper Umari-Igarapé between the Tiquié and Papuri rivers.

*Bará*—A small tribe with two common-houses at the course of the Tiquié in Colombia.

#### CORETU GROUP

*Miriti-Tapuya*—Today they are settled on the middle Tiquié in the villages of Sao Tomaz and Iariti. They are a tall people.

#### DESANA GROUP

*Desána* (Sons of Thunder)—Their common-houses have always been situated on the Tiquié and Uaupés rivers—chiefly at Sao Luiz and Sao Jao—and on the lower Uaupés at Trovao (Thunder). They are famous for their beautiful basket work.

#### CUBEO GROUP

*Cubéo*—A tribe with many subdivisions, most of them on the Querari river in Colombia.

In Ipanoré, Urubuquara and Jauareté on the middle Uaupés there is the Tariana tribe who belong to the Aruakian language family. They may have emigrated from the Aiari river, their language being close to that of the Baniva of the Içana. The Tukano tribes treat them as equals and because of inter-marriage with Tukana women they have almost completely lost their own language.

<sup>2</sup> Alcnilio Bruzzi Alves da Silva, *A Civilização Indígena do Uaupés*. In connection with the Arapaços' "loss" of their language it is interesting to note that the Bulgars, formed originally from Huns and Uigures (both perhaps of Turkish affiliation) completely lost their own language and now speak a Slavic tongue.

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 2.

## LIVING CONDITIONS

All these tribes are primitive agriculturalists who follow a cut-and-burn routine, moving to a new patch of ground and repeating the process when the soil loses its fertility. Their main cultivation instrument is the hoe. Next to agriculture, fishing is an important source of food. They are excellent navigators and handle their canoes, which they carve out of the trunk of a tree, with great skill. Only slightly less important in their life style is hunting. This occupation is left mainly to the Makú Indians, aboriginal people who live deep in the forests. They appear to be in some kind of vassalage to the Tukano tribes and provide them with game. They also often help them in the preparation of plantations. The main crops on these plantations are manioc, bananas, pineapples, sugar cane and tobacco.

## SUBDIVISIONS

The Tukano tribes are subdivided into many hierarchial groups which have been studied closely by Alves da Silva and identified as gens: they are patrilineal and patrilocal. Women have to marry outside their own tribe and because of this many families are bilingual, speaking the language of both parents. Many of the Tukanos have oblique mongolical eyes and the children have the blue mongolic spot.

## RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

It is very doubtful if the tribes believed in a supreme deity called *Uake* as missionaries would lead us to think. Missionaries used the word *uake* for God but really it means bone—a thing which does not corrupt.<sup>4</sup> The Tukanos use sacred flutes (*posaunas*) in their ceremonies. The *posaunas* are connected with a culture-hero *Washti* and must not be seen by women and children. The Tukanos talk about bush ghosts or *Boraro* and their festivals (*Dabucuri*) have the character of a thanksgiving, often lasting for some days.

## HISTORICAL NOTES

The origins of the eastern Tukanos may be traced to the myths of the Great Snake. These say that the Tukanos have been migrating down the River Amazon and up the Black river, finally settling on the Caiari and middle Jupurá rivers.<sup>5</sup> There appears to be a good deal of evidence to support this tradition. Today there are still living some of the western Tukanos who

<sup>4</sup> Communicated to me by Father Eduardo Lagori.

<sup>5</sup> Communicated to me by Father Casimir Beksta.

originally had their homelands on the Napo river and the upper courses of the Iça and Japurá rivers, all affluents of the upper Amazon. Therefore it is quite possible that a large selection of the once solid block of Tukano tribes broke away and migrated down the Napo and Japurá, reaching the Negro and finally settling on the Uaupés and Japurá. In this connection there are interesting references about the Makú. The Makú were the aboriginal population of the area and were defeated by the Tukanos. The Tukanos, however, claim that they brought the Makú with them on their migration. It seems likely that the Tukanos did not want it known that there was a population in the area before their own arrival. The reason for the Tukano migration can only be hypothesised. Perhaps there had been internal fighting between tribes or perhaps they wanted to escape Inca or Spanish domination.

When the Spanish Commission for Frontier Demarcation entered the upper Rio Negro from Venezuela in 1759 they reported meeting a tribe named Manativitano with a chief named Cucui, but nothing about Indians who could be identified with the Tukanos. In about 1784 the Portuguese colonel Gama Lobo d'Almada had entered the Uapés river. Even before that, in 1761, Carmelite missionaries had founded the village of Santa Isabel on the middle Rio Negro. The people of this village were Indians from the Uaupés river, almost certainly Tukano. They were not distinguished by tribal names but were called Indians from the Uaupés or simply "Uaupés."<sup>6</sup>

The tradition of this migration has remained alive among the Tukanos. When in 1948 Father Luis Pasinelli was transferred from Taraqua to Santa Isabel many Tukano families went with him, claiming that they would reconquer the country which in olden times had been theirs. After d'Almada, Carmelite missionaries seem to have founded at least one mission on the great rapids at Ipanoré on the middle Uaupés, and at Sao Joaquim, a little above the mouth of the river. The last Carmelite missionary, Frei José dos Santos Inocentes, sometimes visited the Uaupés between 1832 and 1853<sup>7</sup> and on one of them met the English naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, a contemporary of Darwin and Bates. Wallace's accounts about his visit provide a useful source of reference to the Tukanos.<sup>8</sup> From 1852 to 1853

<sup>6</sup> A. C. F. Reis, *Limites e Demarcações na Amazonia Brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro, p. 104; Dom Pedro Massa, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Frei José dos Santos Inocentes, *Chronicles of Baptism in the Archives of the Prelature of Rio Negro*, Sao Gabriel da Cachoeira, 1833-1852, Vol. I.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Russel Wallace, *A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*, London, 1853.

the Capucin missionary Frei Gregorio José Maria de Bene was working there. His narratives and maps in the Archives of the State of Amazon in Manaus and the Chronicles of Baptism in the Archives of the Prelature of Rio Negro-Sao Gabriel are precious documents regarding the Tukano tribes. He refers to the tribes of Anana, Arapassu, Jaranassú, Irariana, Juruá, Makú, Piratapuia and Tukano.<sup>9</sup> He was responsible for the foundation or restoration of 23 mission villages. He was forced to leave because of ill-health and in the vacuum left on the Uaupés river there sprang up to the so-called “Messianic movements.” Some Indians, mostly medicine-men (shamans) proclaimed themselves to be Christ, giving leading followers names like Saint Mary and so on. These movements were suppressed by Brazilian troops because the government feared the Indians would conspire with the Colombians. In 1882 the missionary work was continued with the arrival of the Franciscans Frei Venancio Zilochi, F. M. Camioni, F. J. Coppi and F. S. Lutz.<sup>10</sup> They were able to restore 11 missions and the people liked them. The popularity of these four missionaries was still evident in 1907 when D. Frederico Costa visited the Uaupés. Many people remembered these missionaries and asked for others to be sent. Unfortunately the progress of this missionary work was suddenly halted. Although it is forbidden for women and children to see the sacred musical instruments of the *Washti* ritual one of the Franciscans showed the instruments in church to all the people. This action gave rise to the so-called “revolt of Jurupary” and all the missionaries were forced to leave immediately.

There follows one of the darkest chapters of Tukano history. In Bela Vista on the lower Uaupés there established themselves a family named Albuquerque from north-eastern Brazil. With the help of forced Indian labour they constructed in the wilderness a palace-like castle whose ruins can still be seen today. One member of the family, the *Manduca* or Old One, managed to be appointed “Director of Indians” and began to reduce these people to the standing of serfs. During parties for his friends which he gave frequently he often shot down Indians merely to prove how able a gunman he was. He had no respect for the Indians, he abused their women and whole families were forced to work in areas on the Rio Negro suitable for rubber production. Many of the Indians perished from disease or home-sickness. It was while in this state of serfdom that the Uaupés were found

<sup>9</sup> Frei Gregorio José Maria de Bene, Vols. 2-9.

<sup>10</sup> Livro I dos Baptismos e matrimonios dos Indios do Rio Uaupés: 1. Parte, 1881-1885, Sao Gabriel Archives; Segundo Livro dos Baptismos des Indios do Rio Uaupés, 1882, p. 274, St Gabriel Archives.

by the German ethnologist Thedor Koch Grünberg who wrote the first scientific work about these tribes.<sup>11</sup> Similar observations were made by Bishop Frederico Costa who visited the Uaupés in 1907.<sup>12</sup> In Taraqua Indians said to him: "Help us or these men will kill us all." The Manduca's tyrannical rule lasted 15 years when he was poisoned by the Indians. His family declined and the survivors today are simple people, no different from the half-breed *caboclos* of the Rio Negro.

In 1914 the first Salesian missions appeared on the Rio Negro. For 50 years these missions flourished with three centres in Tukano country—at Taracua, at Jauareté and Pari-Cachoeira, and on the Tiquié river. The missions built large board schools, introduced professional teaching in agriculture, arts and crafts. Good results have been obtained in carpentry and basketry because these were the natural gifts of the Tukano tribes. Salesian sisters taught the girls how to sew and make blankets and other artefacts ornamented with geometric designs taken from traditional Tukano motifs.

All Tukanos today profess the Roman Catholic faith, although secretly many of the old beliefs still prevail. Christian feasts like Christmas, Easter and Pentecost are celebrated with great solemnity in the mission centres, attracting on these occasions gatherings of more than 1,000 people.

Missions also distributed food to the people because every mission had a herd of cattle.

In some ways the Salesians followed the methods of the old Jesuits who had adopted parts of their system from the Inca Empire. The Indians seem inclined to much pomp and solemn ceremony with much music and singing.

The years from 1920 to 1967 were a period during which the people flourished under a benevolent paternal system isolated from the rest of the world. Unfortunately their way of life was immediately put at risk when threatened with contact from the outside world.

## CONFRONTATION WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

As we have seen outside contacts with the Indians date back to the eighteenth century. But these have been only sporadic episodes which did not change their cultural and national integrity. Even though the people readily accepted Roman Catholicism the "conversion" was made without a deep and profound conviction.

<sup>11</sup> Theodor Koch-Grünberg, "Zwei Jahre unter den Indianern," *Reisen in Nordwestbrasilien*, 1903-1905, Berlin, Vol. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Dom Frederico Costa, *Carta Pastoral*, Fortaleza, 1909.

The only people the Indians had had real contact with was the Salesians. There is no doubt that the Salesians and Mary Help of Christian sisters taught the Portuguese language in the three boarding schools. Most children already spoke two languages—those of the father and mother—and now they were taught a third. The Salesians, unlike the Jesuits, felt themselves to be the representatives of Western, better still, Latin, civilisation and not a few of them considered the Indian languages as primitive. There were only a few, but noticeable, exceptions: Fathers Marchesi and Giacone. The latter, being an able ethnologist, wrote four grammars and dictionaries as well as a catechism and a schoolbook in the Tukano language. Two Bavarian missionaries, Father Maltan and Sister Caterine, have a good knowledge of this language. Both are over 75 years of age. They still teach women and children in Tukano and even speak better Tukano than Portuguese. The monumental unfinished work on the Tukano by Professor Alcinilio Bruzzi Alves da Silva will give a detailed account of the Tukano Indians. It is a strictly scientific work and already runs to three volumes. Father Eduardo Lagori, who also has a good knowledge of Tukano, has fought for 40 years for the advancement of the Tukano people—but, as he calls it, advancement in their own sphere. He has translated large parts of the Bible and the Mass and celebrates the Mass and reads the Bible in Tukano. The Tukano like him and they have adopted him as a member of their tribe with all due ceremony. Despite this most Salesian missionaries—except Father Maltan—as well as the Xaverian Fathers on the Colombian side of the Papuri river are opposed to him. Still more he finds opposition from other tribes. The Tukano language has been favoured by the Salesians who are able to speak the language and this causes dissatisfaction among the other tribes. They have asked Father Lagori to say Mass in their languages but he was unable to learn enough of the languages to do so.

Children have been treated very well in the mission schools where they generally experience a higher standard of living than in their own families. When they leave the schools the children return to their villages with new ideas and costumes not easily understood or accepted by the old generation. This has resulted in the destruction of the old common-houses and the erection of many, but small, settlements along the rivers.

The Indians already had their own simple form of agriculture. They knew something about keeping the ground fertilised by providing humus and this provided an ideal ground for plantations of bananas, sugar cane and pineapples. But the expansion of agriculture so much desired by the Salesians has not been achieved. The Indians will only plant what they need for their

own food and for exchanging with the missions for things like hoes, bush knives, axes and clothes which they cannot produce themselves.

All three mission centres have airfields built by the missionaries with Indian help. They are visited regularly by aircraft of the Brazilian Air Force (F.A.B.) This has proved very beneficial and the combination F.A.B.-missions-Indians is working well.

Unfortunately not all outside influences are beneficial. In Manaus, 1,500 kilometers from Tukano country, the Salesian sisters have two big colleges. Tukano girls have often been sent to these houses to help with the cooking and washing. Even though the sisters are very careful to help the girls they are receptive to new impressions and ideas which are changing their outlook as a consequence. This change in outlook is now going so far that the girls deny their own background and call themselves "Brazilians" rather than Tukano. Fathers Eduardo and Martin have pointed out that these girls have difficulty in finding a husband when they return home because the people do not think they are very nice girls.

Naturally there are many positive elements in the Tukano's changing world. The daughter of the chief of Urubuquara treated her paralysed mother for more than a year with all the care and love of a good child and afterwards looked after her father in the same way.<sup>13</sup>

When the late bishop, Dom Pedro Massa, opened a pedagogical school in Santa Isabel in 1963 for young girls to be trained as native teachers there were also enrolled some girls from the Tukano tribes. They easily reached graduation and afterwards taught in the boarding schools, living with the sisters. They are good teachers because of their ability to communicate with pupils of their own people. Unfortunately the teacher school was only for girls. These received an education superior to other children and then found themselves isolated from their own people. They, too, were unable to find a husband of the same educational level. Through living with white and *caboclos* girls they adopted such customs as painting their lips and nails and dressing in mini-skirts and slacks.

One girl who has set a good example is Madalena, daughter of the chief of the Desano village Sao Jao on the middle Tiquié. Assisted by the authority which her father's position

<sup>13</sup> Another girl who set a fine example was Ignatia. Orphaned as a child she received her education from the sisters. She worked well, cooking, making dresses and blankets, and gardening. Later she married a good carpenter, Carlos Nery, of the Piratapuya tribe, being herself a Tukano. Sadly, she and her first baby died in childbirth in 1963.



carries and with material help from the mission, she is running her own little bush school.

The movement of these people is having a dangerous effect on the conservation of their culture. Some are going north to Colombia and others down the Rio Negro, settling at and around Santa Isabel. They are isolated from their own tribal organisation and traditions, absorb elements of *caboclos* culture and finally intermarry with non-Indians. Father Schneider, who speaks three Indian languages and at 73 is still working and visiting villages, knows of only one case of a white woman marrying a Tukano man. The daughter of this union looks like a white girl. Generally, however, it is white and *caboclos* men who marry Indian women.

Other Indians living on some of the tributaries of the Rio Negro, such as the Curicuriari, Marié and lower Cauaboris, are isolated not only from their own people but also from the *caboclos*. Often they have deserted their own home villages because of internal conflicts.

In a sad condition are 100 or so Indians who have moved to Manaus. Because they do not have a culture to hold on to their morale is dropping rapidly. One of these Indians, who had been my own pupil in Pari-Cachoeira in 1960, had become an able mechanic on an aeroplane of the Cruzeiro do Sul company, flying to Georgetown, Guyana. Unfortunately his inexperience led him into smuggling and he had to leave his work. He spent two years in reduced circumstances before he was restored to his own job. Another took to stealing and drink. That he did not decline completely is due to Father Beksta who engaged him to assist in a study of the Tukano language. A result of these studies is a very good Tukano translation of the Gospel of St Mark. Another Indian, Frutuoso, is an able assistant of Father Ingenieur Herzberg in the Manaus meteorological station. Unfortunately, he has not married and, sometimes, likes to drink.

Dom Joseph Domitrovitsch, the late bishop-coadjutor and founder of the mission of Pari Cachoeira, has always been a champion of the Tukano. He discouraged emigration, giving the people the opportunity of acquiring necessary goods by exchanging their own products in the mission centres. He was always careful to respect their traditions, such as banning marriage within their own tribe, and rejected the offer of ambitious politicians to give them voting rights. He held the view that it was enough if so many tribes were living together in peace. He felt that an electoral system would only destroy their monarchical forms of chieftainship and introduce political feuds which would provide no benefits and be even dangerous for the people.

Unfortunately things changed after the resignation of Dom

Pedro Massa in 1966. New and unsuitable ideas originating from interpretations of Vatican Council II were entering the scene. Thus, in many villages new chiefs have been elected without consideration of the legitimate heirs to these offices. Old monarchical traditions have been broken down in favour of a dubious "democracy." Many Indians became electors despite the fact that they did not understand the white man's way of life.

Solemn celebrations during a feast at one mission have been abolished. Reaction followed swiftly: the Indians reverted to their old ways of holding their own feasts at which they drank *caxiri*, an alcoholic drink prepared from the juice of manioc and sugar cane.<sup>14</sup>

The arrival of transcontinental highway workers from outside the Rio Negro brought difficult new problems. The difficulties will become even more wide-ranging if the work of R.A.D.A.M., a research project for mineral resources, proves positive. The State Service of Indian Affairs (F.U.N.A.I.), set up only two years ago, has little experience and shows little interest in the Indians. Among its functions is the rapid and final integration of the Indians. Another is the creation of Indian parks where Indians would be reduced to little more than a tourist attraction—like animals in a zoological garden. The representatives of Catholic and Protestant missions—united on this subject—are in favour of the gradual incorporation of the Indian in the "Great Brazilian family." No common stand was reached at a conference in Manaus in April 1975.

It is deplorable that there has been no proposal for promoting Indians as a people in their own right. Jesuits have done this in Paraguay and Rio Grande do Sul with excellent success. They have treated Indians as people different from Whites, giving them advantages in their own sphere. When, after the extinction of the Spanish Hapsburgs, liberal reformers like Pombal and Aranda began to destroy these peoples, they were going the same way as those who today want to destroy the Bantu homelands in South Africa. The Chief error is to see only individuals in a country and destroy ethnic groups as a living unity. The proposal of Dr Gayre of Gayre<sup>15</sup> for settling the Rhodesian problem could be an excellent framework for settling the Indian problem in Brazil.

<sup>14</sup> One exception is the Taraqua mission where Brother Thomas Hanley, with help from the United Kingdom, Ireland and the U.S.A., is holding the mission together and maintaining traditional standards.

<sup>15</sup> R. Gayre of Gayre, "The Dilemma of Inter-racial Relations," *THE MANKIND QUARTERLY*, Vol. VI, No. 4, April-June 1966, pp. 183-201.