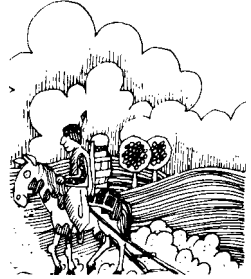


# CRIES OF ANGUISH:

## Oral History of a Minority People

by Lila Wistrand Robinson

In the United States we are acquainted with the white man's history book accounts of the opening of the West in the nineteenth century, but unfortunately we have very few accounts of these episodes from the Indian's point of view. Now, about one hundred years later, the Amazonian area of South America is experiencing a repeat of the same type of history. The tropical setting is somewhat different from the cold woodlands, plains, or desert areas of the United States, but the people and events are similar in many ways. First come the explorers, then a road into the area, then a great influx of settlers. The Indians either fight back and many are killed, or they are pushed back into the marginal lands of steep hills, swamps, or deserts. Their numbers are decimated by the lack of resistance to new diseases which enter the area. All of these changes are traumatic to every aspect of Indian social and economic life.



Accounts of more recent events of change are not easily understood without background knowledge of the total culture and its mythological basis. The oral lore of any tribal people includes a backdrop of myths and tales of origins, explanations, supernatural beings, and heroic exploits. For some tribes it is claimed that sacred tales have no special characteristics which make them any different from the tales about recent local happenings. The Cashibo, a Panoan tribe of the Central Peruvian jungle foothills, have grammatical 'gimmicks' to separate what has simply been heard from what has been experienced or seen with one's own eyes. The tale-teller uses the reportative modals for those which he has heard from someone else, and indicative modals for those actual historical accounts he has seen or experienced. Using the reportative make accounts no less real to him. In fact, to state that he has heard the tales from this grandfather and ancestors *add* credibility to the account far above simply stating it of himself. 'My grandfather told me these stories' is a refrain used repeatedly between bodies of narrative to add credibility.

In the Cashibo period which might be called the mythological is found belief in cargo cult ideas. It is from this basis that actions have taken place in the more recent history of the group. The Incas<sup>1</sup> were received well by the Cashibo forefathers. Asked to make things, they complied by producing many material items and by introducing various plants for crops. But then the Incas were mistreated and sent away. Some elderly Cashibo have stated that if they had not mistreated the Incas and sent them away, the Cashibo instead of the mestizo would be the majority group possessing many material goods today, rather than being a minority or 'underdog' group. After the Incas were sent away, the story is told as follows:

"After the Incas left, the ancestors said, 'Let's follow them! Let's get them to stay with us!' and went in pursuit. Since the Incas had left their cleared land and their houses, the people said, 'Let's go to their clearings and eat the fruit they left! Let's get their axes and cut the trees down for the fruit!'

"Our ancestors followed the Incas, finding the turtle shells they left as they went along eating. 'I went up a tree and saw them not far away. Let's catch up with them!' one said and they all agreed. They wanted to be able to make the things the Incas could make, and to give their daughters to the Incas as wives. But they couldn't catch up with them. They saw their smoke in the distance and could hear their boats, and found the turtle shells they left, but they could not catch up with them.

"They went on to the big river. There were no mountains there nor was it flat jungle. It was just water. They went into open sea where there were many waves, some so high that their large raft could not go on. The waves were as high as the ridgepole of a house. They were stopped, and never caught up with the Incas. On their return trip home they saw that many kinds of people had arrived in the land who hadn't been there when the Incas left. They were the jaguar people, spider monkey people, sun-cover enemies, and many others.

"We originally came from a land that our sons and daughters have never seen. There in that land there were no mountains like these, nor slab rock, nor rivers like the Aguaytia here. If it had not been for the big waves we would not be here. They stopped our ancestors, and so they came and planted here in the headwaters, even though they did

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1. Said to have born in a peanut sack, and therefore demi-god heroes. By some, considered as the actual members of the high civilization of the Andes by this name. Could be interpreted as Spaniards because of possessing firearms.



*A Cashibo Tribesman of Central Peru.*

not like it. They left the large river to come here. It was only here that there were not a lot of people like on all the other rivers. Other people had taken the other rivers first.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus we see that the people were being crowded into the headwaters in order to find virgin land for hunting and to escape the influx of other tribes. Another informant continues as follows:

“On the Ucayali, at the mouth of the Aguaytia River, our ancestors gathered and planted their peanuts. They grew in number, killing off all the tapir, monkeys, and peccary. From there they spread out from river to river, leaving the mouth of the Aguaytia after their children grew up. There were many other people coming in and setting up their cornerposts, building houses until they were thick like ashes.

“We, the later generations, have been quarrelsome and warring. I was the only one who didn’t want to fight. The people killed my mother and even made the men cry. My family wanted to go to the land of *guaba*-fruit, but instead they ended up on another river taken in by some enemy people. After their gardens finished bearing they came here where my father told me to come. The rest of my patriline went to the Palm Land area to expand and grow in number. They became numerous like a flock of birds, built their houses, and killed peccary and tapir. They then left the Palm Land area and went to the Pachitea River area where they grew in number. Leaving there, they came over here to the Aguaytia to live.”<sup>3</sup>

When a road was being opened by the Peruvian government to cut through Cashibo tribal territory, in the last years of the 1930’s, a Cashibo who was raised in the outside world, Simon Bolivar Odicio, was given the task of leading parties to pacify the dissident ones in various areas of the tribe. He used stacks of merchandise in order to

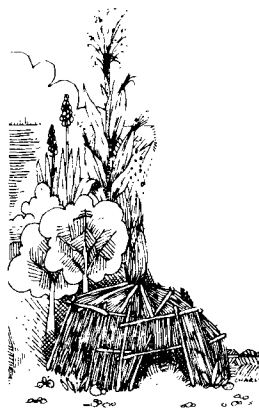
woo the non-Westernized Indians. Some Cashibo stood on the myths of the Incas, thinking that by accepting Westernization they might return to the happy days of material progress of their mythological demi-gods whom they should not have fought and driven away. Those who did not stand on the myths sometimes fought to their deaths, or retreated into the hinterlands. The tribe began to dwindle in number through wars and quarrels, then through the decimation of Western diseases. This was described by one man as follows:

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2. Transcribed from Tape 1, Side 2; informant Juan Dela, Pindayo, August 1959

3. Transcribed from Tape Recording 9, Side 1; Simou Bonzano, Pindayo, Aguaytia R.

“Because of their women our ancestors lived fighting all the time. There were a great number of people, and they built their houses lined up like firewood. But they warred and so we were divided into small groups living separately on three rivers (Aguaytia, San Alejandro, Sungaruyacu). When they were angry and warred with their bows and arrows, our ancestors were killed off. They all died and only I am left, like a tree left standing when all the rest of the forest is chopped away. They were deceived and then killed like a band of peccary. Their daughters and sisters were left lying naked and exposed.”<sup>4</sup>



After warring with enemy groups, the Cashibo kept many of the orphaned children of their dead enemies. But they kept them only to the age of ten or twelve years because after that there was fear of reprisal from the young adults. Even within the past ten years this practice has been carried out. It is based on oral history which says:

“In revenge for his parents an adopted war orphan dealt a bloody blow to his foster mother and shot his foster father with an arrow causing blood to cover his head. It was during the time of a fiesta when our ancestors had planted a great amount of sugar cane to make beer. They gathered together and the old one was cut on the head. ‘Our sister’s adopted child has made blood run on her head! He has shed her blood!’ they cried.”<sup>5</sup> Thus the practice of killing war orphans is perpetuated through the narration of this account of the harm they might do.

One of the consequences of forced acculturation was increased witchcraft and poisoning, with new practices learned from the neighboring Cocama, Shipibo-Conibo, and mestizos. It is described thus:

“Their leader taught the use of poison leaves and taught them how to fight. He said, ‘This is how they are doing in other places. This is how our relatives are learning to do.’ By exchanging female relatives with them for wives we could live happily. Then we wouldn’t have to worry about being bothered by snakes or stingrays sent to bite us by their bewitching.

‘We will live without the whites, just by ourselves. With our sons and our wives we will live without shouting angrily at each other,’ they

4. Transcribed and translated from Tape 2, Side 2; Isacama Eo, Pindayo, 1959.

5. *Ibid*

said. But even though we wanted to live peacefully the others fought and were angry and stupid. They didn't listen to what our ancestors had to say."<sup>6</sup>

The formal method of passing on oral tradition and histories was through the men's rites. With their discontinuation, keeping the information alive became a problem. It is described as follows:

"When they were uncivilized all our ancestors told their stories to their sons as they grew up. Then when the sons would become grey-haired they would tell them to their children. When all my grandfathers were grey-haired and bewhiskered, they taught the lore to the children. That was a long time ago, and things are not like that now. We are Westernized and there is so much sickness that our sons and sisters' sons don't even grow up and get grey-haired. They just die."<sup>7</sup>

In these examples from oral history we find arguments for a return to the days of yesteryear, complaints about the present situation, and airing of grievances by the older generations. Feeling that the mestizos and acculturated Indians had lied, deceived, attacked, killed, poisoned, and bewitched, the older generations are left with an empty lament. They find it difficult to adjust to the culture change, while the younger generations seem to be finding their place somehow in the Spanish-speaking Western culture. A short history written by an acculturated bilingual, Gregorio Estrella Odicio<sup>8</sup> does not have the flavor of a 'cry of anguish', but is rather an objective recounting, somewhat with pride, of the subjugation and acculturation of the various groups by his uncle Bolivar. He tells of Bolivar's honored part in advising the engineers concerning the central highway and bridge at Aguaytia, creation of schools, the consignment of a large tract of land as a Cashibo reservation, various trips to Lima to see the President of the country, and finally the death of Bolivar. The author's values have changed through the process of acculturation. Thus the oral lore in Cashibo is filled with myths and tales from the time of integration, followed by both laments and laudings from these days of change, depending on the generation of the narrator.

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6. Transcribed and translated from Tape 1, Side 2: Isacama Eo. Pindayo, 1959.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Gregorio Estrella Odicio, *Cacataibo (Cashibo) Unia Imainun Bolivarnen Uni Raeto. Coleccion literaria de los grupos idiomáticos de la Selva. Cashaibo (Cashibo) No. 1, Yarinacocha, Pucallpa, Peru: Centro Amazonico de Lenguas Autoctonas Peruanas, 1973.*