

COMUNICAÇÕES

THE HISTORY AND RELIGION OF THE BANIWA PEOPLES OF THE UPPER RIO NEGRO VALLEY (*)

SUMMARY

The subject of this thesis is the millenarian movements and rebellions among a Native American tribe of the Northwest Amazon region in Brazil and Venezuela. The principal sources for the description and interpretation of the movements are a long-range historical narrative and a comprehensive analysis of a central myth. The thesis is developed in five parts of which the second and third contain the principal arguments.

Part Two is a long-range history of the Baniwa people beginning in the late 17th century in a tributary in the Upper Rio Negro Valley, where the author conducted fieldwork in 1976-7. This ethnography provides an introduction to social, economic and political organization, but major attention is devoted to religious organizations and ideologies among traditional, catholic and protestant evangelical communities.

Part Two is a long-range history of the Baniwa people beginning in the late 17th century and ending in the early 20th century. The history is based on archival research, oral histories, ethnographic and linguistic evidence. One of its principal tasks

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is to correlate an oral history with events reported in the written documents from the late 18th through the mid-19th century.

In the 18th century, Portuguese and Spanish colonists introduced slavery, relocation programs, and epidemic diseases to the peoples of the Rio Negro Valley. Few Baniwa survived this period but, as their oral history states, the survivors recreated the basis of their society. In the mid-19th century, government colonization programs again imposed oppressive conditions on the Indian peoples. Military officials implemented programs of forced labor, and merchants exploited Indians in resource extraction. As the situation deteriorated, indigenous messiahs emerged and organized ritual reunions in which they preached the overturning of the social, economic and political orders. Oral histories describe how the Baniwa then engaged in rebellion; rather than being forced to serve the military, Baniwa chose independently to determine their political, economic and religious organization.

In the late 19th century, the rubber boom reached the upper Rio Negro and the Baniwa were once more forced into extractive labor. Debt-bondage, exploitation, and diseases threatened their physical and cultural survival. Predictably, messiahs and millenarian movements emerged but were quickly suppressed by merchants, missionaries, and military. Missionaries added to the disruption by campaigning against traditional religious practiques and symbols. The messianic ideology in this time united the beliefs of peasant and Indian religions. Both peasants and Indians, after all, were involved in a common struggle to survive the rubber boom and merchant exploitation.

Parts Three and Five are systematic ethnographic presentations and interpretations of Baniwa mythology and cosmology. Part three undertakes a comprehensive interpretation of the central myth of the culture-hero *Kuai*. This myth explains the following: the creation and transmission of socio-cultural norms from first ancestors to descendants; the beginning of sicknesses and misfortune, and cures by shamans; creative processes in life-passage, particularly initiations; and the creative, generative relationships among spirit, animal and human domains in the cosmos. The interpretation of the myth focusses on uses of religious language to convey meaning.

The myth interpretation is then related directly to the millenarian movements; especially the catastrophic imagery found in both, shaman's practices and beliefs and initiation themes. The movements are partly explained by historical conditions of contact, socio-economic conditions of oppression and exploitation, and suffering from hunger and epidemic diseases. Millenarian beliefs are elaborated on the basis of pre-existing mythologies, but are adapted to the necessities of new social situations. New ideas, originating from christianity, or elaborated by the Indians themselves, become attached to the myths, changing them when necessary.

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