

Blind Men and an Elephant: Exchange Systems and Sociopolitical Organizations in the Orinoco Basin and Neighboring Areas in Pre-Hispanic Times

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Introduction

One of the most fruitful hypotheses generated in recent years by the Venezuelan anthropological community has been the so-called *System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence*. From Morey's (1975) original formulation, the team lead by Arvelo-Jiménez has expanded this hypothesis, proposing that the system was representative of an old and extended "Amazonian culture matrix" characterized, among other elements, by political horizontality and ecological complementariness. This formulation has deep implications for the understanding of the aboriginal history in the Orinoco Basin and its adjacent regions; acknowledging this fact, several works have revised, expanded, or criticized diverse aspects from the initial proposal. Nowadays the debate continues regarding the nature, size, and organization of such system, and when, how, and why was integrated. An interesting aspect in this controversy has to do with the complexity and diversity of the political organizations that integrated the system and their consequences to understand its extension and structure: How the system(s) was(were) structured during the Pre-Hispanic epoch? What was the relation between the political organizations in the area and the system's size and complexity? In order to contribute to the solution of these questions, this chapter proposes a critical revision of the main inputs and discussions made to this hypothesis, paying particular attention to the sociopolitical organizations in the area.

The Regional Exchange Systems: Definitions and Controversies

Some time ago, several researchers had detected data from historical sources evidencing the existence of long-distance exchange networks, connecting regions very far to each other as the Colombian and Venezuelan Llanos, Orinoco, Guiana, and

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Trinidad (e.g., Acosta Saignes 1946; Salas 1971, pp. 55–57; Arellano 1982, p. 138). But it was not until 1975 when Morey and Morey systematized an abundant body of published data for the Colombian and Venezuelan Llanos region. This region was conceived as an integrated whole by societies with economic activities totally or partially specialized because of different ecological settings. According to this proposal, the connection between different environments by means of exchange networks played a critical role in the development of tribal specialization. This mutual dependency prevented the development of social inequalities; reciprocity was the norm instead. There were different kinds of social organization, but not well developed, hence the tribal social formations were predominant (Morey 1975, 1976; Morey and Morey 1975).

At the end of the 1970s, Arvelo-Jiménez and others expanded and deepened these hypotheses, resulting in the formulation of the *System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence* (Arvelo-Jiménez et al. 1989; Arvelo-Jiménez and Biord 1994). These researchers conceived this system as an integration level above the local or ethnic and as an analytical tool for interethnic relations; it was proposed that the system did not imply loss of local political autonomy nor the cultural diversity integrated by different ethnicities; and the Orinoquian ethnic groups were characterized as small, disperse, and politically decentralized. The mechanisms of interethnic articulation, including war, did not lead to the political supremacy of any ethnic group, serving instead to promote ecological complementariness, cultural diversity, and conflict management. The economy of these societies was characterized by simple reproduction of necessary existence conditions; therefore, the modest surplus generated was not directed toward accumulation or economic specialization but to reinforce political links between societies with a similar sociopolitical level. Additionally, the excessive importance given to the commercial aspects of the system was criticized.

... to characterize the multiple articulation mechanisms of Orinoquian societies as eminently commercial is a distortion which privileges and put out of context commerce itself. A revision made to common ethnographical data from these societies allowed us to discern inclusive cultural configurations... which indicates the true role and place of commercial relations within a Regional or Interethnic System. (Arvelo-Jiménez et al. 1989, p. 160)

Lastly, it was pointed out that the system was altered by biological, economical, and sociopolitical changes, which are characteristics of the implantation process of the colonial society, as well by the implantation of a new economic rationality that contradicted the indigenous own system.¹

A first attempt to question the extension and the decentralized character of the system was the analysis made by Zucchi and Gassón (2002), which started from a basic set of variables (magnitude, diversity, size, direction, symmetry, centralization, complexity, and chronology) that constitute the exchange systems' structural characteristics, giving elements that allowed to model the circuits, define its variation patterns through time and space, and facilitate the comparison (Plog 1977,

¹ This approach was used by several authors for the study of historical linguistics problems and for the analyses of varied scope exchange systems in the Llanos and Eastern Venezuela (e.g., Morales 1979, 1990; Morales and Arvelo-Jiménez 1981; Biord 1985; González 1986; Biord et al. 1989).

pp. 129–130). As Morey and Morey (1975) pointed out, even the earliest documents described a situation altered by the impact of the colonial society—although it adapted and took advantage of the indigenous exchange system, it generated deep changes in the circuits' extension, the participants' role, and the exchanged goods. It is possible that there was not just one exchange system but several of them that were integrated later as a result of the colonial situation.

The participation of groups in the exchange systems was not egalitarian in all cases, at least not during the contact epoch. The regional systems were frequently located around societies with integration levels above the autonomous village, even though the connection between systems happened in a more diffuse way. The data since the end of the sixteenth century to the republican epoch indicates important changes in the extension, content, complexity, and components of the exchange system, which may be summarized as follows:

- A trend, escalating toward centralization and expansion of the exchange network.
- Increasing changes in its content, implying the substitution of several aboriginal objects for products like food, raw materials, gold, and pearls, thus reflecting the needs and economic orientation of the early moments of the conquest. The exchange content changed soon toward the quest for slave workforce in exchange for European manufactured goods, specially iron artifacts, guns, and alcoholic beverages, hence reflecting one more time, the changes implanted by the colonial society's economy.
- Emergence of ethnic groups with greater political centralization and new military skills, which allowed controlling the exchange relations in vast sectors in the Orinoco River.
- An even more competitive and aggressive relation between ethnic groups for the control of European goods' sources, and therefore, an even more dependency for western goods² (Zucchi and Gassón 2002).

In 1991, Amodio continued studying the cultural consequences of exchange from written and archaeological sources, with special attention to the Caribbean area. According to Amodio, in northern South America, it is possible to differentiate several regions where indigenous populations integrate systems of structured interrelations, including conflict and war, and where goods exchange was the base for cultural interdependency.³

In order to examine the so-called Carib-Arawak system, a theoretical model was elaborated, which may be summarized as follows: during the pre-Hispanic epoch, some indigenous groups maintained articulated systems of interethnic relations that

² Kipp and Schortman (1989, p. 370) established that when exchange goods could be found at the market rather than through exchange between elites the chiefdoms' power relied increasingly on economic and political exploitation.

³ According to Amodio (1997, p. 57), these systems were as follows: (1) Carib-Arawak, which included Venezuela's eastern coast and Caribbean islands; (2) Middle-Orinoquian, connecting the coast islands system with Amazonian and Guyana's savannas systems; (3) Amazonian, integrated by the Upper Orinoco regions; (4) Guyana, which included groups from Gran Sabana, and basins of Branco and Essequibo rivers; and (5) Andean, integrated by groups from the piedmont and Lake Maracaibo's southern shore.

included all the cultural aspects and produced imposition and cultural appropriation processes, resulting in syncretic cultures and common cultural horizons. These systems had two essential functions: to regulate the flow of resources distribution and to contribute on the constitution of ethnic identities; in their interior, there was an interethnic division of labor. The biggest systems worked through related subsystems reproducing some structural characteristics of the macrosystem, while the majority of their particular characteristics were kept. The “power problem” was solved at different integration levels and several areas of society. At the tribal level, the problem regarding the cultural resources control was solved in an autonomous way, whereas at the intertribal level, it was done through mechanism such as alliances, wars, and exchanges. Preliminarily, it was argued that the domination problem was relative to the “success” of the cultural resources introduced by a group into the system and to the “force” developed by them in order to impose their decisions (Amodio 1991, p. 579). There were exchange or reciprocal influence microsystems and micro- and macrosystems controlled by a single group, either by autonomous production of new characteristics or by the influence of the implanted colonial society.

Amodio’s contribution is important because he proposed methodological tools to interpret the regional circuits’ characteristics, going beyond the description of their characteristics; besides, he proposed hypotheses that can be examined with archaeological and historical data about the cultural consequences from exchange between pre-Hispanic societies in the area. Thus, it was argued about the cultural consequences from contact between different societies that inhabited a single region as the formation process of common languages and multilingualism, similarities in pottery, and existence of pluriethnic families as a product of the connection between subsystems; this phenomena brought, at the same time, constant processes of ethnic reaffirmation (Amodio 1991, p. 606).

However, the understanding of how political inequality influenced these cultural processes and how the phenomena was affected by the generic way was discussed; a study on actors and specific mechanisms was more necessary than on terms like “dominion problem,” “cultural resources success,” “forces,” or “influences.” This study was carried out by Langebaek, who applied the world-system approach⁴ in order to describe the relations between Muisca societies from the eastern Andes and those that inhabited the eastern Llanos of Colombia during the sixteenth century (Langebaek 1991, 1992, 1995). Langebaek considered Muisca chiefdom as a “core” with a more productive economic system than that of the lowlands, which would be the “periphery” integrated into the Muisca economy (Fig. 1). This uneven commerce played an important role in the development of Muisca society. Center and periphery interact in such a way that one cannot be understood without the other. The asymmetrical exchange networks were based on the existence of these differences and, at the same time, their nourishment (Langebaek 1992, pp. 16, 214):

⁴ The world-system theory posits that systems should be seen as processes instead of structures and that their constitutive units can be conceived as formed and reformed by relations between them; it is characterized, furthermore, by its eminently geographic approach, the use of multiple levels of analysis, and its evolutive and multilineal vision (Peregrine 1996, pp. 5–6).

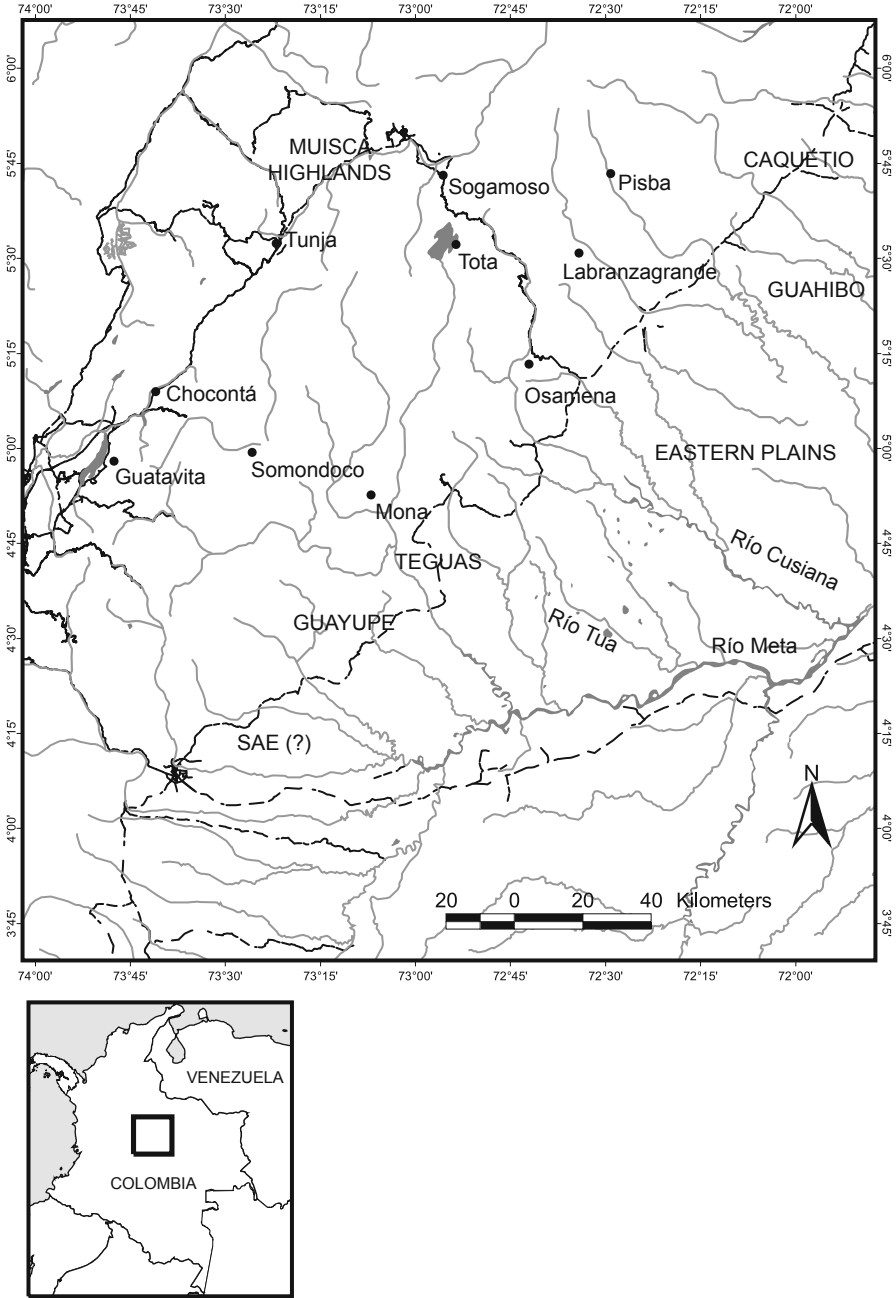


Fig. 1 Cundiboyacense high plateau and piedmont of the eastern Llanos of Colombia, with approximate location of Muisca highlands and Caquetio, Guahibo(?), Teguas, Guayupe, and Sae(?) groups. (After Langebaek 1991, p. 328)

The social interaction process played an important role on the development of labor division within the most complex societies. The Andean societies as cores (complex chiefdoms) and the periphery in the lowlands (local communities) interacted economically in such a way that the former produced elaborated objects that required the existence of specialists, while the latter provided raw materials. Developed chiefdoms and local communities in northern South America aspired to dominate diverse ecologies in order to gain continuous access to food resources. Long distance circulation was limited by the transport systems' deficiencies and by distance; for this reason the circulation of products only had true importance when distance between cores and peripheries was reduced, and when significant volumes of raw materials versus finished items went from one region to another in a regular basis. The development of complex chiefdoms based on semiculture was favored by the existence of a close periphery in two particular areas: Eastern Andes and Santa Marta's Sierra Nevada.

Although the proposed model was limited to the piedmont and llanos around the Cundiboyacense plateau, Langebaek extended it to understand the nature of social evolution in northern South America, agreeing with Arvelo-Jiménez's and others' arguments regarding the low complexity level of societies located at the Orinoco's lowlands. According to this argument, the focal point of the processes leading to economical and political complexity toward the end of the pre-Hispanic epoch moved from the lowlands to the highlands in northeastern Colombia, inhabited by ethnic groups with a remarkable level of political complexity, such as Muisca and Lache from eastern Andes and Kogui from Santa Marta's Sierra Nevada (Langebaek 1992, pp. 75–76). Although Langebaek acknowledged other researchers' opinions that indicate that lowlands from eastern Colombia and Venezuela were suitable for stable and numerous populations with a complexity level formerly denied, in his opinion, in 1992, the available data did not allow to go further (Langebaek 1992, pp. 84).

Shortly after, Whitehead and Vidal offered a different proposal. According to Whitehead (1994), between the Amazon and Orinoco rivers toward the year 1500 there were *Amerindian economic and political macrosystems* (also called multiethnic confederations or multiethnic chiefdoms), characterized by a notable sociocultural and political complexity that emerged thanks to the integration of different ethnic units. Following the same line of thought and on the basis of ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and oral tradition data, Vidal (1993, p. 36, 1999) restructured this proposal to document the history of Baré and other groups from the upper Orinoco and adjacent areas' ancestors. For Vidal, the indigenous populations were grouped together in intra- and interregional confederations that articulated populations from riverine and interfluvial areas. These social networks were sustained by complex religious systems (like Kuwé or Kuway religion and males secret societies), economic specialization, and the goods and wedding alliances exchange system (Vidal 1993, p. 34, 2000, pp. 655–656). Vidal identified and described the characteristics from the 11 main macrosystems during the contact epoch: Manoa, Gran Airico, Huyapari, Aruaki, Tapajoso, Caripuna, Conori, Macureguarai, Oniguayal, Machiparo, and Paricora. These macrosystems were distributed in neighboring regions that occupied a vast space located between the Orinoco and Amazon rivers (Fig. 2). Although its territory size could vary, it had an integration level above the village and the regional settlement pattern. These interregional patterns were the reflection of elaborated political structures in which the command could form a politic, military, or religious origin or

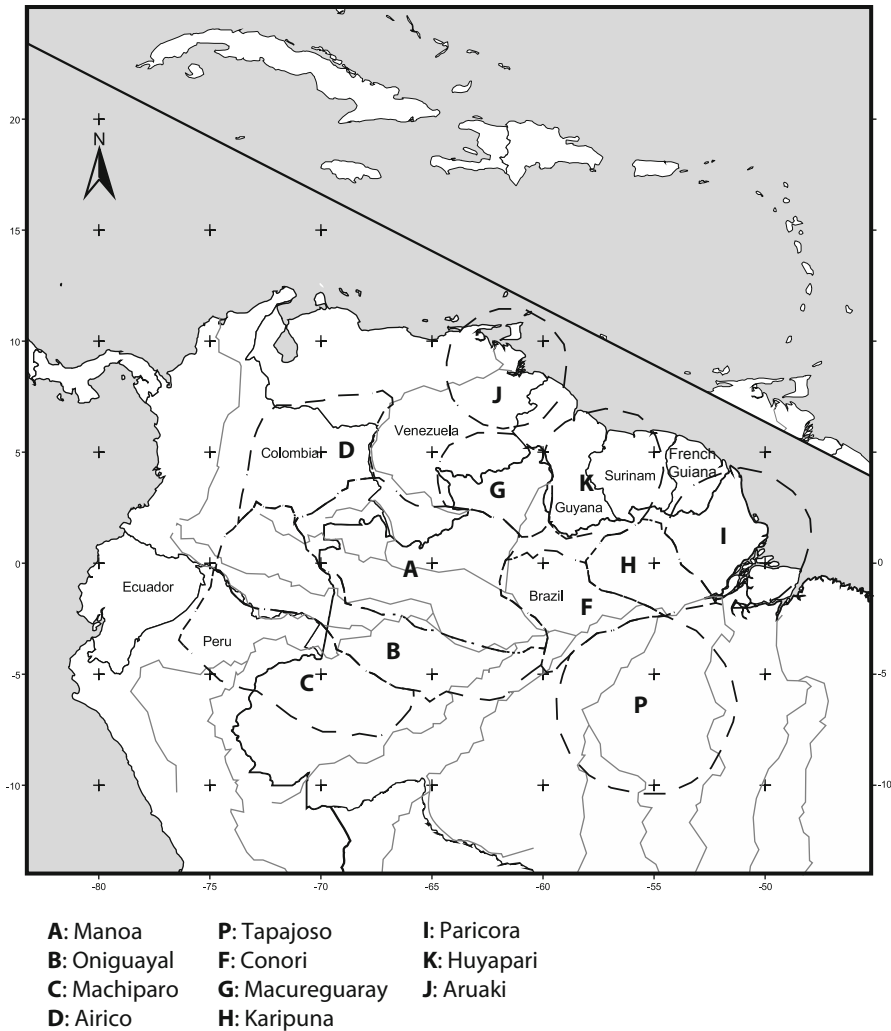


Fig. 2 Amerindian macrosystems: *A* Manoa, *B* Oniguayal, *C* Machiparo, *D* Airico, *P* Tapajoso, *F* Conori, *G* Macureguaray, *H* Karipuna, *I* Paricora, *K* Huyapari, *J* Aruaki. (After Vidal 1993, p. 115)

a combination of all of them. Furthermore, Vidal identified a series of cultural regularities common to these macrosystems: the existence of different ethnic units within the same sociopolitical system; the existence of inherited hierarchies with leaders with power over other populations and ethnic groups; the economic specialization and surplus production for exchange; the socioeconomic interdependence among riverine and terra firme groups; and the existence of clearly defined territories, with buffer zones and fortified border populations with warriors for surveillance and/or defense.

Vidal states that leadership and authority in these confederations is based in the control of labor for surplus production, building infrastructure, military incursions, and territorial expansion. It is possible that control of labor was related to terms like *makú*, *poito*, and *wajáriwa*, which dominant societies used for “servants” and “slaves” as well as for interfluvial groups (Vidal 1993, pp. 34–35; Whitehead 1994, p. 41). Another important aspect is the huge indigenous knowledge regarding different regions and groups. Large-scale political and commercial ties and alliances were common between aboriginal peoples in the lowlands. The relations between regions were frequently institutionalized by road networks (Vidal 1993, pp. 108–113).

Whitehead’s and Vidal’s model moves away from other proposals that emphasized small size, decentralization, and subsistence economy of lowland societies, supporting a reconstruction with emphasis in social and ethnic complexity and differentiation. Even though the proposal is important, because it corrects the simplified vision about the sociopolitical organization of local groups, it could represent an overcorrection. To verify the existence of these macrosystems does not seem like an easy task, because their dimensions look bigger than usually accepted for prestate complex societies.⁵ On maps elaborated by Vidal (2000, p. 645), we can see some “ceremonial centers” and “cities” that might have worked as regional capitals of complex political units and used as starting points (Fig. 3). The utility of archaeological models to interpret ethnohistorical data did not run away from Whitehead, who proposed that to predict political units from stone and earth structures and ritual and “urban” centers could contribute to the interpretation of historical material, allowing a higher resolution analysis level (Whitehead 1994, p. 47).

In 1996, I tried to apply, explicitly, the concept of chiefdom for the analysis of pre-Hispanic exchange in the Orinoco Basin; I pointed out that the majority of studies on the *regional exchange system* were not giving enough attention to the evolutionist approach because of the emphasis on ethnographic and ethnohistoric models, highlighting the continuity of political structures and aboriginal economic institutions, thus creating an extensive and antique image of the system (Gassón 1996, p. 135). After summarizing briefly a series of findings related to “exotic” or “commerce” objects in the Andes, Llanos, and middle Orinoco,⁶ I concluded that archaeological

⁵ With minimal internal differentiation of authority, any delegation in a chiefdom approaches total delegation, a situation ripe with potential for usurpation (Wright 1977, p. 381). Optimally, a chief should avoid delegating authority, which means that he has to manage his domain from the center (Spencer 2000, p. 375). This, in turn, implies that there is a spatial limit to the territory that a regional chief can effectively rule: I have suggested that in a preindustrial context, the optimal territory size for a single paramount chief’s domain would be one with a radius no larger than about one-half day of travel from the regional center (Spencer 1982, pp. 6–7, 1987, p. 375). As a rough estimate, for a territory of circular shape, and a walking speed of 5.6 km (3.5 miles) per hour over a 10-hour day, this would be a maximal domain with a diameter of 56 km (35 miles) and an area of 2,463 km² (962 square miles) (Spencer 1990, pp. 6–7).

⁶ For example, polished stone artifacts such as beads and pendants made of serpentinite, malachite, amphibolite, phyllite, and jasper have been found in several high-rank archaeological contexts at the primary regional center (site B12) and in one of the regional centers (B21) in the Gaván Region, in Barinas State. The sources of these minerals should be located outside the Llanos, in areas like the Venezuelan Andes, Maracaibo Lake Basin, and farther regions like south of Colombia, north of Ecuador, and the Caribbean (Spencer and Redmond 1992, pp. 153–154). At the primary regional

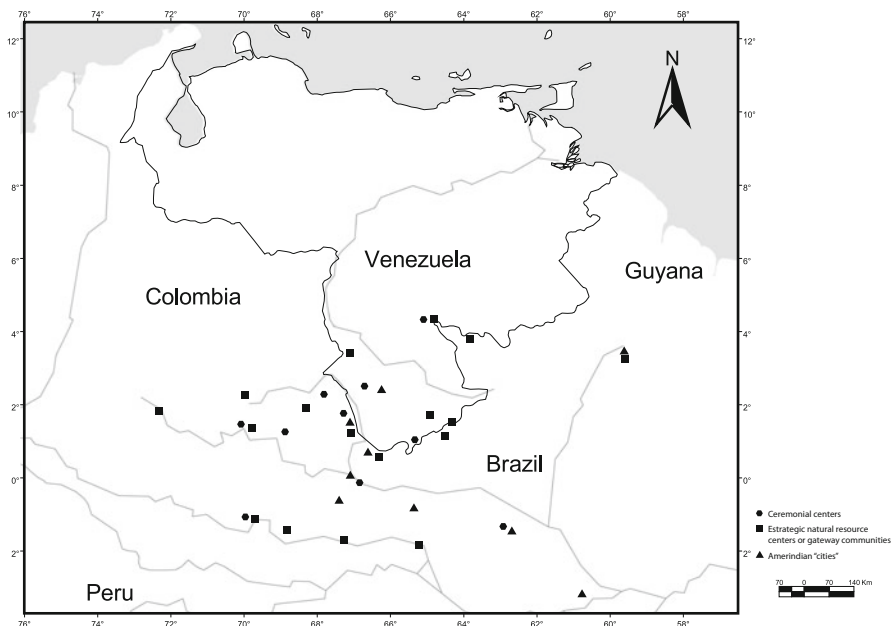


Fig. 3 Amerindian ceremonial centers, gateway communities, and cities. (After Vidal 1999)

objects identified as goods from the exchange, its small size, and constant relation with high rank contexts could indicate the existence of low-intensity “prestigious goods systems,” possibly controlled by sectors within the complex society elite.⁷ According to this proposition, the complementarity between groups would not be only ecological but also political–economic, based on exchange of prestige goods, done from hand to hand among outgoing entities and members of political elites. Although it is impossible to deny that a great variety of perishables or low archaeological visibility products, including basic goods and raw materials, circulated in local and regional networks coordinated by decentralized societies, the nature and provenience of prestige goods found within archaeological contexts suggest that it

center of El Cedral region, in the same area, a green stone pendant was found resembling a small amphibian or reptile (Gassón 1996, p. 587). Boomert (1987, p. 33, 37) identified these objects as one of the main prestige goods in circulation among groups from the tropical forest and the northeastern coast of South America because of their ritual meaning and symbolic associations, proposing their circulation in exchange systems like the *kula* rings in Melanesia in areas where the *quirípa* was circulating (cf. Malinowski 1975, pp. 95–96; Gassón 1999, p. 81).

⁷ The specific economic characteristics of a prestige-good system are dominated by the political advantage gained through exercising control over access to resources that can only be obtained through external trade. However, these are not the resources required for general material well-being or for the manufacture of tools and other utilitarian items. Instead emphasis is placed on controlling the acquisition of wealth objects needed in social transactions and the payment of social debts. Groups are linked to each other through the competitive exchange of wealth objects as gifts and feasting in continuous cycles of status rivalry (Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978, p. 76).

is not right to characterize the interregional exchange in all cases as decentralized (Gassón 1996, p. 145); as stated by Gnecco (1996, pp. 181–184) for the chiefdoms of southwestern Colombia, the exchange of prestige goods is an expression of societies articulated to the emergence and maintenance of the elite political power.

In order to illustrate how these systems and prestige goods were transformed since the colonial encounter, I analyzed the *quirípa*, a primitive exchange pattern widespread in the Orinoco River (Gassón 2000), which contributed to show the inherent limitations of a synchronic and relativist vision of Orinoquian economic systems and institutions. However, these ideas were limited by the relative scarcity of archaeological data and by using a unilinear approach of social evolution that emphasizes the presence of two basic social “types,” tribes and chiefdoms, simplifying possible variations among pre-Hispanic societies. I needed more specific and diachronic regional studies aimed to understand the origins, nature, and extension of the pre-Hispanic exchange systems, as well as regional studies aimed to understand the origins, nature, and variation of the pre-Hispanic complex societies.

In 1983, Spencer and Redmond designed an archaeological project to study how the interaction between the piedmont and the high Llanos in Barinas State influenced the social change in this region from a neoevolutionist approach. According to their arguments, complex societies of the chiefdom level emerged in the Gaván region between 500 and 600 AD. The conclusion is supported by the presence of a hierarchical settlement pattern, monumental architecture and engineering, a considerable increment in regional population, social differentiation in residences and burials, and complex social relations with other political units, including exchange and warfare; the latter activities were funded, partially, through the production of farming surpluses (Redmond and Spencer 1990; Spencer 1991; Spencer et al. 1994, p. 138–139). Posterior studies made on the neighboring region of El Cedral indicated the existence of, at least, another hierarchical political unit; in addition, surplus production in considerable amounts was identified, as well as the public consumption of food, as a mechanism used by the elite to attract reward followers, creating and consolidating critical social relations useful to survive in high-risk environments (Gassón 1998, p. 167, 2001, p. 200). Data from El Gaván suggests the presence of a small political unit, strongly hierarchical, and with a political economy based on direct production and redistribution in ceremonial feasting organized by the leaders to gain adepts (Redmond et al. 1999, p. 125; Gassón 2001, p. 201).

Redmond et al. (1999) suggested that political changes in the area had to do with, above all things, competition, commerce, and warfare between neighboring political units. This process is known as cycling chiefdoms, namely the repetitive emergence and collapse process of complex chiefdoms in a social landscape characterized by the presence of complex chiefdoms, simple chiefdoms, and other social formations with lesser integration levels (Anderson 1994, p. 323; Redmond et al. 1999, pp. 111–112). Recent data tends to corroborate the scenario of intense competition and growing and disappearance cycles of political units. Although site C11 (Lomitas Florideas) possess all the elements of an autonomous political unit, it is effectively connected to El Cedral (C1) by raised earthen causeways (Fig. 4), which point out the existence of institutionalized and permanent ties between these two political units (Rey 2003); moreover, the archaeological sites distribution at the regional level indicates a zone

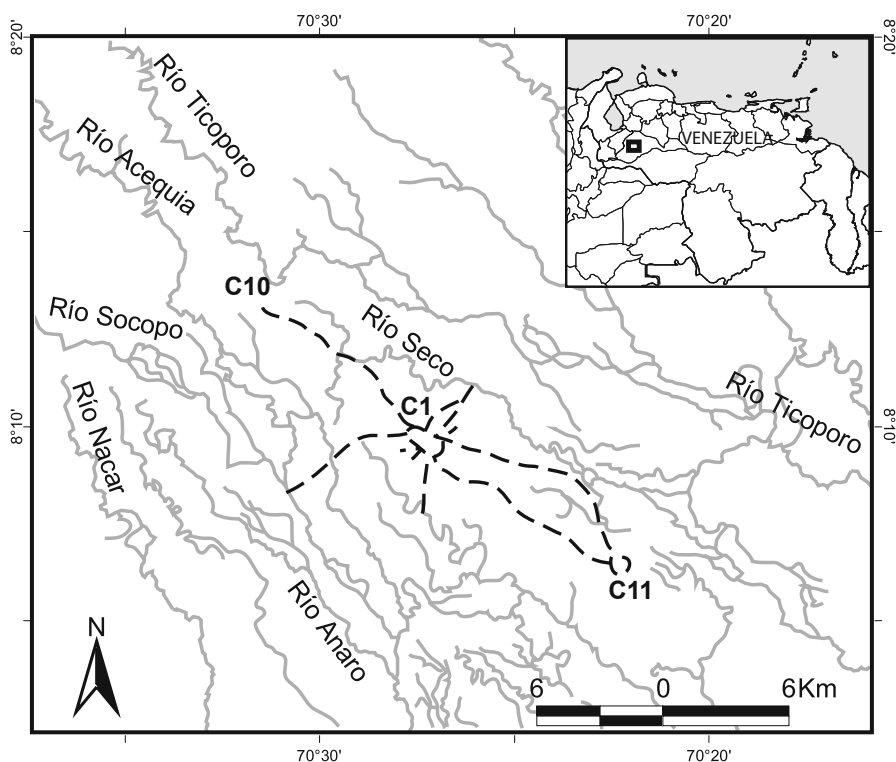


Fig. 4 El Cedral archaeological region showing the location of the primary regional centers of El Cedral (C1) and Lomas Florideas (C11), and the network of causeways. (After Rey 2003)

with no settlements between units. This could indicate the presence of a buffer zone or “no man’s land,” which could suggest an autonomous evolution of such units, until one of them joined or appended the other. A preliminary study on the pottery from these regional centers suggests the existence of two phases: one in which each center had a specific style and the other where a common style arose. This suggests a fusion process between Lomas Florideas and its neighbor El Cedral, supporting in a lesser scale Vidal’s proposal regarding the existence of integration levels beyond the regional settlement pattern level; however, the sociopolitical correlate of these interregional patterns are still unknown.

Archaeological research done so far about the complex societies in the western Venezuelan Llanos suggests that an important aspect of the economy was aimed to the production of farming surpluses to finance elite activities such as long distance exchange and warfare, contrary to conventional ideas emphasizing political autonomy, production for subsistence, and lack of hierarchy. The evidence indicates that the dynamics of sociopolitical evolution in the area was linked to competition for labor; this competition was carried out by different strategies like war, tribute and/or labor mobilization, and ceremonial feasting. Economic and political strategies used by complex societies in the area brought to existence variations in the mode of sociopolitical organization, including societies with emphasis on the production of resources

for distribution and others with emphasis on tribute mobilization. There are evidences of the existence of a superior level of integration above the autonomous political unit, although this is only a hypothesis. Nonetheless, all mentioned above alerts us about the necessity to better understand sociopolitical variation within complex societies.

On a higher geographical scale, Boomert (2000) made the first archaeological analysis of a macroregional exchange system. Boomert offers a general approach to the prehistoric cultural development of Trinidad and Tobago as part of the formation process of an interregional ceremonial exchange system that could be understood as an *aboriginal interaction sphere*⁸ that included the middle and lower Orinoco, Gulf of Paria, and Guyana's northwestern shores. The study proposes to understand the great Barrancoid influence on ceramic complexes from Saladoid communities in the middle Orinoco, Lesser Antilles, Guianas, and Venezuela's eastern shore, concluding that during the final part of the early Cedrosan subseries (Insular Saladoid), some Barrancoid's ceramic traits "filtered" [sic] from the lower Orinoco to Saladoid villages located to the east and north of South America and the Caribbean, with a process that may have started during the establishment of Los Barrancos (Barrancas Clásico) style/complex by 100 BC. The study refers to the nuclear part of the Barrancoid exchange system as the *lower Orinoco interaction sphere*. The location of Los Barrancos style/complex at the apex of the Orinoco delta offers excellent opportunities for interaction, exchange, and diffusion of the Barrancoid culture toward Orinoco's valley, eastern coast of Venezuela, Trinidad, and Guianas' seashore. The basic criterion to define the boundaries of the interaction sphere was the presence of Los Barrancos/Coporito pottery within Saladoid archaeological sites, besides other class of artifacts clearly of Barrancoid origin. In Tobago, this contact pottery usually consists of ceremonial pots, apparently used as funerary offerings, and other artifacts such as smoking pipes and censers. This suggests that "commerce" artifacts were appreciated by the Saladoid people both for their exotic qualities and for the symbolic messages they carry, perhaps connected to shamanic practices. The *lower Orinoco interaction sphere* must have been aimed to promote political alliances associated to kinship and ritual services; the exchange of matter, energy, and information in the form of myths, histories, songs, dances, news, and other forms of knowledge must have been key for the maintenance of the system (Boomert 2000, pp. 442–444). This study is important because it indicates that in northern South America, there were different interdependency systems in different periods of time, and some of them were not organized under hierarchical principles, meaning that they could have been constituted by societies with similar integration levels (autonomous farming villages and/or systems similar to the Pacific Ocean's "big men") that can be more comprehensible from a perspective with emphasis on the interaction between equivalent political units or *peer polity interaction*.⁹

⁸ According to Binford (1972, p. 204), an interaction sphere is defined as the "regular and cultural means to maintain and institutionalize the inter-social interaction."

⁹ According to Renfrew (1986, p. 1), the interaction between equivalent political units designates the complete scope of exchanges (including imitation and emulation, competition, war, and exchange

Historical data from the lower Orinoco shows a picture with more cultural complexity, interethnic relations, and social inequalities with a scope not so well understood so far. Heinen (1992, pp. 73–75) has documented with historical, ethno-historical, and place names data the existence of an important commercial artery from Trinidad, southeaster Orinoco's delta, and Sierra de Imataca to Guyana's highlands. Boomert (2000, p. 386) indicates that the geographical location of Los Barrancos complex is similar to that of Aruacay, a sixteenth century indigenous town that possibly acted as a community to access commerce resources or *gateway community*¹⁰ and that could have played an important role in the multiethnic interaction networks observed during the contact era. However, the cultural diversity landscape illustrated on historic documents contrasts with the simplified landscape offered by the late archaeology, which indicates the presence of two ceramic styles: Guayabitan (Araquinoid), equivalent to Apostadero or post-Classic Barrancas style, and the protohistoric Mayoid pottery. For this reason it is hard to say at what degree the archaeological characteristics observed in the *lower Orinoco interaction sphere* reflects its sociocultural characteristics (Boomert 2000, pp. 491–493).

Other authors lean toward a reconstruction of social organizations in the lower Orinoco, with emphasis on political complexity. According to Whitehead (1998, p. 155), at the beginning of the sixteenth century, there were several chieftaincies and, at least, three chiefdoms in the area (Yao, Orinoqueponi, and Tivetive) that could be considered as “typical” or even “maximum” chiefdoms surpassing 10,000 inhabitants. The political power derives from the control over long-distance commerce, in particular goods like gold artifacts and cotton, besides the control over sources of local materials and labor. The finding of a gold pectoral in Mazaruni River (Guyana) has been interpreted as the evidence of long-distance commerce from Colombia, but it could also support historic reports about production, commerce, and use of gold artifacts manufactured locally (Whitehead 1990, pp. 32–33). Recently Sanoja, Vargas, and collaborators have also indicated the possible existence of chiefdoms in the lower Orinoco, on the basis of a reinterpretation of historical and new archaeological data, and have suggested an intensive occupation of the lower Caroní by farmer groups belonging to two traditions: Barrancas and Cachamay. The Barrancas Tradition settlements were located at the right margin after 200 AD and its presence is interpreted as the result of Barrancoid expansion during the Classic period (Sanoja et al. 1994, pp. 26–27). The Cachamay Tradition sites were located at the left margin

of material goods and information), which is performed among autonomous political units (self-governed and politically independent), neighboring or close to each other in the same geographical area, or in some cases, in bigger areas.

¹⁰ “Gateway communities develop either as a response to increased trade or to the settling of sparsely populated areas. They generally are located along natural corridors of communication and at the critical passages between areas of high mineral, agricultural, or craft productivity; dense population; high demand or supply for scarce resources; and, at the interface of different technologies or levels of sociopolitical complexity. . . . The function of these settlements is to satisfy demand for commodities through trade and the location of these communities reduces transportation cost involved in their movement” (Hirth 1978, p. 37).

of Caroní River and emerged as a consequence of the fusion of human groups related with the Macapaima phase, Arauquinoid Tradition of middle Orinoco, and the Barrancas Tradition. Besides, the existence of large villages with pottery combining simplified designs from the phases and tradition mentioned above were observed. The villages from Cachamay phase could be related with late chiefdoms mentioned in the chronicles:

The regional archaeological studies we are conducting in the Middle and Lower Orinoco reveals important precisions regarding the political territorial character and historic dynamic of what could have been the so called Orinoquian chiefdoms. In one hand, the allegedly Morequito chiefdom which is structured, approximately, between 1000 and 1500 of current era, consisted in a possible association of large villages, culturally homogeneous, located next to flooding forest or varzea on both margins of Caroní River, including hunting camps on savannah and gallery forest areas, as well as semi-permanent fishers' villages in the river's islands. . . Regarding the alleged chiefdom of Uyapará or Orinoco, structured between 1000 BC and 1000 AD, its realms seems to have covered a core of large villages in the Lower Orinoco as Barrancas, Los Barrancos, and their possible sacred sites located in the river's islands, where the access from the Orinoco River to the Atlantic Ocean and viceversa was controlled, and the extraordinary ichthyological richness present in the shallow channels and swamps of the Orinoco Delta. (Sanoja and Vargas 1999, p. 202)

Not all specialists in the area agree with this argument. The image arising from the examination of early historical sources about the late social differentiation corresponds with that of political leaders with an unstable or temporal position with religious and ritualistic functions within an interregional system based on exchange and ritual celebrations between ethnic groups, including the Nepoyo, Chaima, Siawani, Karia, Warao, Verotiani, and Guaiqueru (Boomert 2000, p. 393; Heinen and García-Castro 2000, pp. 562, 573–574). These groups had only political organizations with temporal or limited power, thus suggesting that proposals with emphasis on powerful chiefdoms of ethnic federations might be exaggerated. Nevertheless, it is obvious that contemporary ethnography in the region is only the shadow of its pre-Hispanic past:

We do not subscribe to the somewhat excessive claims made by the Roosevelt and Whitehead schools regarding the size of particular villages or towns and of the populations in general living in Orinoquia in pre-Columbian and early, colonial times, but the isolated ethnic groups one finds today in the Guiana Highlands and the Orinoco Delta are a far cry from the complex trade patterns and the differentiated forms of social and political organization that was characteristic of aboriginal Orinoco River societies. (Heinen and García-Castro 2000, p. 561)

Conclusions

As in the well-known parable of the blind men and an elephant, we are dealing with structures and problems of such magnitude that exceeds the limits of our particular disciplines, hence having only partial and incomplete visions of them. Assuming the inherent risk of stepping on unknown ground, a summary of the current situation looks like this: first, it seems undisputed that during the pre-Hispanic past, there

were extensive exchange relations between societies in Orinoco; however, more than a regional interdependence macrosystem, the data points out toward the existence of different regional exchange systems and subsystems with its origins, composition, limits, and evolution before the colonial epoch not well known yet. It is too risky to export toward the past the divisions and propositions made with historical data from the end of the pre-Hispanic era.

Second, against the initial perception, decentralization does not seem to have been the rule in ancient sociopolitical organizations in the Orinoco, not even in the relations among them. By the contrary, the presence of social inequalities between ethnic groups in the area is notable, although they are expressed in several ways. Nonetheless, an approach aimed to understand the action and specific role of each ethnic group and social sector in the rise and development of these networks of social relations seems more adequate than trying to generalize about the nature of power and inequality in the area or trying to apply fixed social typologies in order to simplify the past. Specific exchange systems could have been organized under different principles, like the uneven exchange between groups with different levels of sociopolitical integration in regional “world systems,” the even exchange between groups politically independent and less hierarchical in vast areas, or the prestige goods exchange between complex society’s elites in vast but not well-defined areas. The constitution of macrosystems dominated by emerging ethnic groups and the transformation of certain economic institutions seem to be the products of the colonial situation.

Third, recent investigations have confirmed that large sociopolitical units occupied a considerable area in the lowlands of northeastern South America, which would coincide, *grosso modo*, with some interregional exchange systems proposed traditionally. However, the size of these proposed “macrosystems” does not fit very well to what we know about the size and organization of prestate complex societies, thus its exceptional condition should be explained or alternate hypotheses should be tested regarding the political character of its integration in order to understand its relations with the commercial networks. Recent archaeological evidences that could support the existence of settlement units above the regional unit level are too old and of lesser magnitude than the interregional “macrosystems.”

Finally, even though a temporal long-term approach has been useful to criticize the synchronic and relativist approach of studies with emphasis on ethnohistorical and ethnographical data, there are no reasons to give priority to archaeological data over historical data or vice versa. Here, I have advocate in favor of a perspective that takes in account diversity, complexity, and explicative priority of the historical process as a way to overcome the primordial or essentialist approach to social relations and political organizations in the area (Zent *n. d.*, p. 2). We cannot contrast the models discussed here without new data gathered through joint research programs, informed by a historical anthropology that is not afraid to step on unknown ground where, for some reason, elephant-size problems usually graze on.

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