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Peoples and Cultures of the Amazon (ANTHRO 7680)

1. Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family:

Witoto

Witotoan, Proto-Huitoto-Ocaina, Early Huitoto, Proto-Minica-Murai

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

huu

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

(Peru, Columbia). Rivers, Putumayo, Karaparaná, Igaraparaná, and Caquetá. Resguardo Tikuna-Uitoto Km 6-11 and Leticia, Colombia. "The Caquetá-Putumayo region is located between 0.5° N and 2.5° S of latitude, and between 71° and 74° W of longitude" (Echeverri 1997, 53).

1.4 Brief history:

"The Caquetá-Putumayo region is the territory of the Uitoto, Ocaina, Nonuya, Bora, Miraña, Muinane and Andoque Indians. These groups were hinterland peoples who lived away from the main rivers. Luso-Brazilian slave traders and Spanish missionaries navigated the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers since the seventeenth century, on the borders of their territory. Historical records allow to establish that Indians from these groups were captured and traded to Brazil, mostly through other Indian groups, since the seventeenth century. The definite "conquest" of these Indians took place at the end of the nineteenth century with the establishment of rubber exploitations by Colombian and Peruvian rubber-gatherers. Rubber extraction increased at the beginning of the present century when the region became the main area of operations of the Rubber Amazon Company, or Casa Arana, a joint British-Peruvian firm which involved all these tribes (and others which disappeared) in the rubber extracting industry.

"In colonial times, the Caquetá-Putumayo area was known as the Province of Sucumbíos, the northernmost province of the Gobernación of Mainas in the Viceroyalty of Peru. This territory was in dispute among Ecuador, Peru and Colombia since their independence from Spain. In 1922, the Salomon-Lozano Treaty between Colombia and Peru recognized Colombian sovereignty over the territories north of the Putumayo river. In 1988, the Colombian government recognized indigenous ownership of the land when it declared the whole Caquetá-Putumayo area as an Indian *resguardo* (preserve).

"The Caquetá-Putumayo is part of the Colombian Amazon territories, although it is linked culturally and geographically to northern territories of the Peruvian and Ecuadorian Amazon. In a broader context, the region lies within the Northwest Amazon, one of the Amazon regions with the greatest biological and cultural diversity" (Echeverri 1997, 52-53).

The Witoto suffered "displacement and violent incorporation into a regional cash economy built on the extraction of labor, botanical commodities, and obligation" (McLachlan 2011, 158).

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

The Putumayo River and two tributaries, the navigable Karaparaná and the Igaraparaná, bisected by a dozen major rapids formed the homeland of the Witoto, Bora, and Andoke (Davis 1996, 227). The area remained largely unexplored until 1886, when rubber interests began entering the region.

The Catholic order of Capuchins operated a mission school in Chorrera, Columbia by the 1940s. They separated the girls and boys, "dressed in white smocks and school uniforms, parading to church twice and sometimes three times a day" (Davis 1996, 232).

"Catalan-Spanish Capuchin Fathers have arrived to Colombia since the 1890s. The Colombian government put them in charge of the christianization of the "savage" Indians, according to a Concord at the Colombian Government signed with the Holy See in 1887. The Capuchins established their base of operations in the Sibundoy valley, upper Putumayo. In the 1930s they extended their area of operations toward the Caquetá-Putumayo and have stayed there ever since.⁴

Capuchin Father Estanislao de Les Corts founded the "Orphanage" (later boarding school) of La Chorrera in 1933, soon after the end of the Colombo-Peruvian border conflict" [1932-33] (Echeverri 1997, 63).

"Two other boarding schools were established in San Rafael (Caraparaná river) in the 1960s, and in Araracuara (Caquetá river) in the 1970s. Most of the Indians have received basic education in these boarding schools" (Echeverri 1997, 64).

The 1970s and 1980s coca trade impacted Witoto society.

1.6 Ecology:

The Putumayo and Caquetá Rivers are whitewater rivers, flowing out of the Andes. The annual rainfall is approximately 3000 mm and the estimated mean annual temperature is 25-26°C. "The vegetation of the area is predominately rainforest of substantial height and high species diversity" (Eden and Andrade 1988, 81).

"The "rubber" extracted from the Caquetá-Putumayo was the one known as *siringa fraca* or *jebe débil*: "rubber of *Hevea* that tends to lose more weight than the true *siringa* and, for that reason, has less value in the market. The true *siringa*, which drew the best prices in the market, is extracted from *Hevea brasiliensis* and its variety *acreana*. *Jebe débil* is extracted from *Hevea guianensis*, its variety *lutea*, and from *Hevea benthamiana*, which grow in the Caquetá-Putumayo region. These *siringas* are different from *caucho* (black rubber), the lowest priced rubber, which is extracted from several species of *Castilloa* and require felling the trees to extract the latex" (Echeverri 1997, 86).

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

“1,000 in Peru (1995 SIL), decreasing. Very few monolinguals. 1,130 Huitoto in Peru (Crevels 2007). Population total all countries: 7,800” (Lewis et al. 2013).

“The middle Caquetá comprises 18 settlements, the Igaraparaná 34 settlements, and the Caraparaná and Putumayo 25 settlements. These settlements are organized in the form of *cabildos* (local councils). Only five settlements have a population of more than 200” (Echeverri 1997).

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

Bitter manioc (*Manihot esculenta*)

In the 1940s, Richard Evan Schultes collected “avacados, sweet potatoes, cashews, maize, beans, chocolate, unusual squashes, and a dozen local varieties of pineapple” from a Witoto garden in La Chorrera (Davis 1996, 230).

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

Hunting and fishing. “Some cattle raising has also been established around Araracuara [Columbia], providing beef for local consumption (Eden and Andrade 1988, 81).

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

Bow and arrow.

2.4 Food storage:

Farinha.

2.5 Sexual division of production:

“Bitter manioc is made ‘sweet’ by the expert labor of adult women, a capacity that is indexical of their status as well-made and knowing women.

“The transformation of raw manioc roots into the staple foods of ordinary and ritual sociality involves a fundamental value transformation which marks Uitoto women’s labor as a moral undertaking proper to human sociality (in contrast to the amoral socialities of nonhuman beings; cf. Londoño Sulkin 2005) and as the manifestation of the distinctive capacities congealed in women’s bodies” (McLachlan 2011, 166).

Men hunt.

2.6 Land tenure:

No information available.

2.7 Ceramics:

No information available.

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

No information available.

2.9 Food taboos:

Eating tapir is considered bad, especially for women (Whiffen 1915, 126).

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

No information available.

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

No information available.

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

No information available.

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

No information available.

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

No information available.

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

No information available.

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

Three years of nursing (Whiffen 1915, 155).

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

No information available.

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

No information available.

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

No information available.

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

No information available.

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

No information available.

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

No information available.

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

No information available.

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

Maloca, "a longhouse, traditionally occupied by the head of a patriline, several brothers, and their in-marrying wives" (McLachlan 2011, 174).

The Witoto are "divided into patrilineal, patrilocal, exogamous sibs, each occupying a communal dwelling in its own separate settlement" (Murdock 1936, 527).

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?

"The Witoto women believed that I was working more material magic, and feared should they suffer exposure to the camera that they would bear resultant offspring to whom the camera – or the photographer – would stand in paternal relation" (Whiffen 1915, 233).

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")

No information available.

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

No information available.

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

No information available.

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

No information available.

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

No information available.

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

No information available.

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

Whiffen reported that a Witoto child was thrown to wild dogs upon the death of its mother, and a Witoto infant was buried with dead mother because no one adopted the children (1915, 151).

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

No information available.

4.22 Evidence for couvades

Bitter foods, “bitter tasting medicines, and particularly bitter fish and herbs) are described as lethal to early pregnancy” (McLachlan 2011, 165).

After birth, father abstains from hunting until navel healed, does not touch his hunting weapons, and will not eat animal flesh (Whiffen 1915, 151-152).

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

No information available.

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

No information available.

4.24 Joking relationships?

No information available.

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations

Descent is Partilineal.

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

No information available.

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

No information available.

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

“After eight days [following birth] the child will be named by the medicine man and the assembled family” (Whiffen 1915, 153). “Boys are called as a rule by the names of animals or birds; girls are given the names of plants and flowers” (Whiffen 1915, 153). Eifoike is turkey-buzzard in Witoto, and Itoma means the sun (Whiffen 1915, 153).

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)

“Marriage alliances are also increasingly interethnic in groups which were, according to ethnological literature and people's own version, endogamic. Exchange of women in a means of paying “debts” (murders, etc.). Interethnic marriages are also mandatory for the smaller groups in order to avoid incest” (Echeverri 1997, 31).

“In a sample of marriages taken from five ethnic groups of the Caquetá and Igaraparaná rivers I found the following percentages of exogamic marriages (percent of men married to women from other ethnic groups): 30% for Uitoto, 48% for Bora, 68% for Andoque, 91% for Muinane, and 100% for Nonuya” (Echeverri 1997, 50).

“The rules of alliance can be summarized thus: (i) one should marry “far” and with “other people,” and (ii) the alliances should be diversified, that is, two brothers should not marry women from the same lineage but from different lineages” (Echeverri 1997, 80).

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?

No information available.

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

No information available.

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

No information available.

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

No information available.

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

Illness and death and destructive storms attributed to enemies (even if natural causes). Blood-feuds are carried out relentlessly (Whiffen 1915, 61).

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

“[T]he Boro, Resigero, and Okaina may not love each other, but they agree in their detestation of the Witoto” (Whiffen 1915, 60-61).

“In the Uitoto diaspora, the problem of alliance extends beyond exogamy to include relations with state, municipal, and NGO actors” (McLachlan 2011, 164)

4.18 Cannibalism?

While Whiffen, Robuchon, and the German Anthropologist Konrad Preuss do not mention rubber, they highlight Witoto cannibalism. Echeverri posits that formerly, captured enemies may have been ritualistically consumed.

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

No information available.

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

No information available.

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

There are (were) clans and status classes (“masters of the house” and “orphans”).

5.4 Post-marital residence:

No information available.

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

The indigenous groups of the Putumayo have been afforded a resguardo (reservation) by the Columbian Government.

5.6 Social interaction divisions? (age and sex):

No information available.

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

No information available.

5.8 Village and house organization:

On the middle Caquetá, the Andoke and Witoto form the main indigenous groups, and their “population is today dispersed along the river margins, mainly in small family units” (Eden and Andrade 1988, 84).

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens’ houses):

No information available.

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

Hammocks

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

“The Uitoto, Ocaina, Nonuya, Bora, Miraña, Muinane, and Andoque (all of them People of the Center) are grouped in named patrilinear and virilocal lineages or “clans.” There used to be more than one hundred such subdivisions, according to reports from the beginnings of this century. Pinell (1928, pp. 228-229) reported, for 1909, 136 Uitoto subdivisions, 17 Ocaina subdivisions, and 41 Bora subdivisions. According to information I have collected, there are currently 76 Uitoto clans, 6 Ocaina clans, 22 Bora clans, 5 Andoque clans, 5 Muinane clans, and 3 Nonuya clans (Echeverri 1997, 77).

5.12 Trade:

“[T]here are no recognized native trade routes or trade centres, to the best of my knowledge, nor are there any markets where the tribes of any language group may meet and exchange their wares. Even local markets are non-existent. Trade is individual. Articles of commerce are handed from the maker to the purchaser, from the owner to the buyer, from tribe to tribe” (Whiffen 1915, 61-62). Now there are flights from the Putumayo-Caquetá to Bogota, Columbia.

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

“The “masters of the house” are the members of a local patrilineage. The composition of such groups is established by a simple rule of residence: men reside with their parents, women reside with their husbands, that is, a rule of patrilocality for men and virilocality for women. The group of “masters” is thus composed of men related by paternal line (agnates) and their allied women (coming from other residential units), as well as their unmarried children.

The “orphans” are people who, without being in a relation of alliance with the group of masters, have come to live with it. They come from other residential units they had to leave due to the loss of their ceremonial chief or to the disintegration of the group caused by epidemics or war. They are servants and occupy a position of hierarchical inferiority in relation to the masters of the house. This group may also include eventual prisoners of war who, in former times, were ceremonially consumed” (Echeverri 1997, 78).

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6 Time allocation to RCR:

No information available.

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

There were shamans and there are modern healers.

6.2 Stimulants:

Coca – powdered leaves and ash. Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) is made into a syrup by mixing it with ashes of certain palms and salt from certain tree roots. The syrup is sweetened by storing it in the pods of cacao (Davis 1996, 231). “They called the drug ye-rrás, or honey, and recognized it as the mediator that had first brought the people together with the jaguar” (Davis 1996, 231). Chicha was fermented from the peach palm in the 1940s (Davis 1996, 230).

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

No information available.

6.4 Other rituals:

“When he says “to name an animal” it has to be understood that, when preparing and mixing tobacco paste, animals are not named by their proper names but in an indirect fashion, “because the animals listen and get scared away.” This is also so in the preparation of a dancing ritual, when tobacco paste is mixed and distributed to the people so that they catch game” (Echeverri 1997, 204).

“In a dance ritual, one residential unit (maloca) produces cultivated food and exchanges it for wild game caught by other residential units” (Echeverri 1997, 212).

6.5 Myths (Creation):

“In a collection of philosophical discourses translated and edited by Echeverri, the elder Hipolito Candre (Kinerai) provides a Uitoto account of the beginning of human life and sociality alongside key cultivars. In the first of these texts, Kinerai describes the ‘origin of our life’ in the condition of pregnancy. The Mother, when first pregnant, is made ill by the substances of conception (the ‘breath of tobacco’). The Father Buinaima enacts a curing spell that renders her discomfort into a healing capacity.

“Producing the substances of alliance and consubstantiality, the Mother then heals Buinaima, rendering his breath and thoughts sweet.

“The Mother and Father of the human world effectively make one another through the transformation of illness and agitation into sweetness and abundance in the form of plant foods. These reciprocal transformations then bring about the abundance of gardens and hunting. Breath takes form as people, plants, and animals, and as the abundance of a well-healed social world” (McLachlan 2011, 161-164).

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

“Sometimes at dawn the Witoto played the manguaré, two enormous log drums hanging side by side, suspended from the rafters of the long house and bound to the earth by rope ties. As large as a man and hollowed out with burning stones, each had a narrow opening that ran along the log, slightly off center. Striking the drum on either side of the hole resulted in different sounds. The drum with the thicker and more dense wood had deeper tones, whereas the smaller log had a higher pitch. Thus the drummer, standing between the manguaré, had four notes to choose from. Combining these in an ingenious manner and using prearranged codes, the Witoto were able to send complicated messages as far as ten miles across the forest” (Davis 1996, 231-232). The drumsticks were wood with “the heads bound in thick layers of wild rubber” (Davis 1996, 232).

Pan-pipes are used by the Witoto, made from cane pipes (Whiffen 1915, 211).

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

No information available.

6.8 Missionary effect:

Education and instruction in the Catholic faith served to acculturate the indigenous population, and many traditional ways were lost.

6.9 RCR revival:

No information available.

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

No information available.

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

According to Whiffen (1915) the Witoto do have a taboo against naming dead people.

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

No information available.

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

Bitter manioc was a gift from Sky God (Davis 1996, 231).

“A certain Witoto tribe have a tree that they regard as an object almost of veneration,” a palm with a forked stem, “the trunk dividing into two some few feet above the ground.

“[T]he Witoto looked upon this tree as a thing to be respected and prized, and if it were not meted proper treatment perchance to be definitely feared” (Whiffen 1915, 233).

“In Witoto Usiyamoi has the same meaning as God in ordinary parlance; Taife is the Devil, whereas Taifena is any bad spirit whatever. But, again, the Taife, the dread of these people, the all pervading evil genius, is named Apuehana, a word never pronounced above a whisper” (Whiffen 1915, 220).

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

“Robuchon mentions a custom among some Witoto tribes of covering the body with latex and then sprinkling it with black ashes. Hardenburg also mentions the use of a resinous matter which is daubed on by the Witoto (Whiffen 1915, 88).

7.2 Piercings:

The Witoto do not use the labret (Whiffen 1915, 86).

“Robuchon confirms my observation that the septum of the nose only is perforated by the Witoto in the upper Igara Parana districts, and that a goose feather is then worn. He also mentions the use of the labret, and the elongation of the lobe of the ear” (Whiffen 1915, 86).

7.3 Haircut:

No information available.

7.4 Scarification:

No information available.

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

A bracelet of iguana skin has certain “magical properties, and [it endows] the wearer with special strength and vigor” (Whiffen 1915, 82-83).

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

No information available.

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

“Both men and women among all these tribes wear ligatures, the men on the upper arm, just below the shoulder, the women on the leg, below the knee and again above the ankle” (Whiffen 1915, 83).

Witoto women wear nasal ornaments (Whiffen 1915, 86).

7.8 Missionary effect:

No information available.

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

No information available.

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

“Among the group of masters there is also a relation of hierarchy based on birth order. The father or elder son is the master of the group (*jofo naama* or *iyaima*) and the master of a “ceremonial career” (*rafue*)” (Echeverri 1997, 78).

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

No information available.

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

No information available.

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

9.1 It is considered a disgrace to have twins, and the second born will be left in the forest. If the newborn has a deformity, it will be held under water until drowned (Whiffen 1915, 150).

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