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# Constitutive Cultural Diversity and the Barí

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**Resumen.** La diversidad constitutiva es un fenómeno frecuentemente observado entre poblaciones indígenas. Se refiere a la composición heterogénea de un grupo sociocultural, que, cuando se le examina desde afuera, parece tener una cultura uniforme; pero que, examinado con más atención, revela distinciones internas contemporáneas, basadas en variaciones intraculturales, históricamente que surgieron de la incorporación de elementos externos y no de la invención autóctona. Exploramos aquí las fuentes de diferenciación entre los Barí, todas basadas en las distintas experiencias históricas de los antepasados de los socios actuales de esta sociedad.

**Palabras clave.** Diversidad constitutiva, Barí, etnohistória, enfermedad.

Diversidad Cultural Constitutiva y los Barí

**Abstract**. Constituitive diversity is a phenomenon commonly observed in indigenous populations. The term refers to the heterogeneous composition of a sociocultural group that, when seen from the outside, appears to present a uniform culture; but which, on closer examination, reveals a continuing internal differentiation based on intra-cultural variation that arose historically from importation rather than autochthonous invention. We here explore various sources of internal differentiation among the Barí, all based in the differing historical experiences of the ancestors of current members of this society

**Key Words.** Constitutive diversity, Barí, ethnohistory, disease.

One persistent anthropological illusion is the idea of a "pure culture," manifested by a geographically and culturally isolated people who preserve an unadulterated ancient tradition of comprehensive internal consistency, uncontaminated by borrowings from the culture of any other society. This story is often accompanied by a parallel belief that the people in question are also biologically unmixed, a "pure race" unpolluted by genes from other populations. One can think of this dual fiction as the Green Mansions myth.

It is true that there are a few anthropological examples of peoples who experienced a substantial period of isolation. The north Greenland Eskimo may be the most famous. One might argue a case for the

aboriginal Tasmanians, taking the entire population of the island as a single cultural unit. And there are a few other candidates.

Nevertheless, by far the more common situation is for a society to have neighbors who differ in culture and gene frequencies, and for cultural traits of one stripe or another and individuals of one sort or another, to cross from one to the other. Examples are legion, and there are various ways that aspects of culture, considered to a first approximation as a set of rules for thinking and behaving, can move across ethnic boundaries. The movement of individuals from one society to the other is of course one major way in which components of one culture can be transmitted to another. A major motivation for this article was the observation, virtually imposed on Nalúa Silva by her years of ethnographic fieldwork, of the continuing relevance of these differences in origin for the contemporary workings of some aboriginal societies in Venezuela.

This topic allows for various kinds of explorations. The central object of study for current purposes is a small, kin based social group generally considered to constitute a single society with a tolerably uniform culture—a band or a tribe, in common usage. Usually, unless we are dealing with the north Greenland Eskimos, we find on closer examination that there are social distinctions within the single society (distinctions in addition to the inevitable ones of age and sex and prowess) and cultural distinctions among its members (again distinctions in addition to those associated with age and sex.)

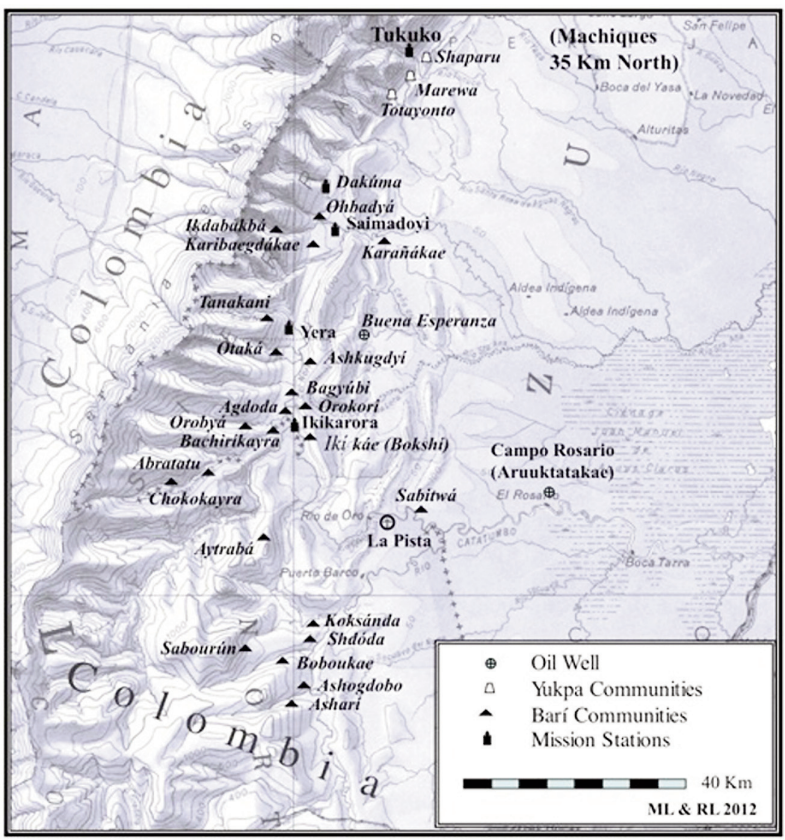
Where we are able to trace those distinctions to the entry of ideas and individuals from other societies, we have an example of the "constitutive diversity" that was the subject of the symposium of the LIV International Congress of Americanists at which the initial version of this article was presented. The idea behind the symposium was to move beyond the "pure culture" illusion and deal with the complexity of real societies and their internal differentiation, particularly where that differentiation stems from contact with neighbors rather than internal developments.

Another way of coming at this topic is to say that we are dealing here with intra-cultural variation that arose from importation rather than autochthonous invention. One of the most prominent kinds of importation is in-migration, the importation of people themselves.

There are a number of well known cases of Native American tribal groups who have long been recognized as amalgams of various previously existing peoples. In North America, the Cherokee are one such example; they were discussed in the symposium by Ted Gragson. The Seminole of Florida may be an even better known example.

In South America, in addition to the several peoples discussed at length in the symposium, yet another conspicuous example is provided by the lowland Quichua. They are often referred to as if they were one people, because they share a language and look similar, but their origins are in diverse linguistic groups of western Amazonia.

The example of constitutive diversity to be explored in this article is that of the Barí of Colombia and Venezuela. They were (and for the most part still are) lowland tropical forest manioc horticulturalists, speaking a Chibchan language, inhabiting the southwestern corner of the basin of the Lake of Maracaibo. They fished for most of their animal protein and followed a semi-sedentary residence pattern, cycling from one longhouse to another over the course of the year. At the time of first modern contact, 1960, they were divided into eight distinct territorial groups, four in Venezuela and four in Colombia, although one of the Colombian groups may have been in the process of subdividing (see Map. 1). The territorial groups maintained peaceful relations among them, but marriage outside one's territorial group was less common than internal marriage.




Map 1

Locations of the cited Barí longhouses in the text for the measles epidemic in 1960s and the Yukpa for the Hepatitis B–Delta epidemies in the 1970s-80s. Base map: Mapa Físico de Venezuela, Shell 1957. Caracas. The autors of the map are M. Lizarralde y R. Lizarralde 2011.

The lowland neotropical region in which the Barí still live was a mosaic of different peoples, languages, subsistence practices, and cultures when Alonso de Ojeda entered the Lake of Maracaibo in 1499 (Argüelles and Párraga 1579 [Arellano Moreno 1964: 205]; Martín 1534 [Gabaldón Márques 1962, II: 272]; Perez de Tolosa 1564 [Arellano Moreno 1964: 6-7]; Sánchez Sotomayor 157? [Breton 1921: 9-12]; Simón 1627 [Simón 1963 I and Simón 1963 II]). There were canoe-travelling fisher folk living in pile dwellings out over the Lake, dwellings so closely packed that the channels between them reminded Ojeda's fellow expedition member, Amerigo Vespucci, of the canals of Venice. There were also terrestrially oriented horticulturalists, such as the Barí, living back from the lake shore, growing maize and manioc. One early colonist noted at least eleven different languages among all these peoples. Both trade and warfare appear to have been ubiquitous.

Most of these western Maracaibo Basin peoples were driven to extinction within the first couple of centuries of Old World colonization-disease, slavery, wars of extinction, and simple despair erased them from the earth. The three best known peoples who survived are, from north to south, The Wayuu (aka Guajiro), the Yuko or Yukpa, and the Barí (The Yukpa and the Barí are commonly known as the Motilones mansos and the Motilones bravos, respectively) The Wayuu language is classified in the Arawakan family, the Yukpa language in the Carib family, and the Barí language, as mentioned earlier, in the Chibchan family.

It is germane in the present context to foreground an ethnographic observation on which all competent outsiders who have worked with the Barí agree-at first modern contact in 1960 they were about as egalitarian as it is possible for a human society to be. There was not the slightest hint of social class or any hereditary difference in resources or political authority. The "chiefship" that did exist was a matter of individual prestige growing from skill and something that might be described by the old fashioned term "nobility of character." It was without any mechanism of coercion. At any sign that a chief was beginning to give orders, the residents of his longhouse simply left, dissolving the political unit out from under him.

The Barí had a long history of hostility with surrounding peoples, probably extending back into pre-colonial times. They were the traditional enemies of the Yukpa in historic times, and relations between the two groups remain tense today. Barí hostilities against the Old World colonizers of their land are recorded from the early 17th century on and were interrupted only twice, once between 1772 and about 1818, when a successful missionization project was carried out by Capuchin monks; and more recently since 1960, when a peaceful contact was made by anthropologist Roberto Lizarralde (Lizarralde and Beckerman 1982).

The point here is that the Barí have mostly treated outsiders as enemies for the last 500 years-and probably for many centuries before that. They speak a language unrelated to that of any neighbor, they look different from the European and African derived peoples who now surround and vastly outnumber them, and they also look different from the neighboring Yukpa. As just mentioned, the traditional Barí had no significant internal differences in wealth or power. Nevertheless, even at first modern contact in 1960 the Barí demonstrated an internal heterogeneity that derived, as detailed below, at least in part from external sources. This heterogeneity was demonstrated immunologically (the Barí were ravaged by Old World infectious diseases in the early 1960s);

Part of this heterogeneity derived from Barí history. Capuchin monks came into contact with the Barí in 1772 and had their first mission station up and running by 1774 (Beckerman and Lizarralde 1982, Beckerman and Lizarralde in press). By 1799, the founding date of the last mission to the Barí, they had created a total of 13 missions, although not all of them were in active use at any one time. These missions were located in the northern part of the area inhabited by the Barí and populated by people residing there. Disease-measles in particular-and other threats regularly diminished the numbers of inhabitants at the missions; and the few censuses taken by the Capuchins suggest that reproduction at the mission stations was minimal. However, the mission populations were regularly replenished by the transfer of "unpacified" or "wild" Barí from the forest to the mission stations, recruited again mainly from the northern part of Barí territory. Some of these transfers were facilitated only by the persuasive powers of the Capuchins, and some were additionally aided by the persuasive powers of the firearms carried by the soldiers who often accompanied the monks. Even so, they never got them all. The very existence of the Barí today is due to the failure of the Capuchins to subdue all the forest living Barí.

The year 1813 saw three signal events in Barí history. First, three missions to the Barí were sacked by Simon Bolívar's forces during the war for independence. Second, but at about the same time, a royalist colonel formed a "Motilón brigade" to fight against Bolívar's army. It disintegrated in short order. In the aftermath of both occurrences, significant numbers of mission living Barí fled back to the rainforest. There, they may have received aid and comfort from "wild" Barí who had never lived at missions.

The third signal event was the promulgation of a decree from the King of Spain ordering his missionaries to cease administering their remaining Indian reductions, to put the Indians in charge of the settlements, and to distribute the land privately to the individual inhabitants under a law vaguely similar to the American Homestead Act. Although it took another

five years for the Capuchins finally to leave the last of their missions, this decree apparently put an end to the practice of removing Barí from the forest.

There is little known about Barí history between the departure of the Capuchins in the early nineteenth century and the re-emergence of the Barí in the local newspapers as ferocious "wild Indians" in the late nineteenth century, but we are on reliable ground to observe that there were two different sorts of populations ever after the closing of the missions. There were Barí who descended from people who had never lived at missions, in the southern part of their range, and there were Barí descended from mission escapees in the north. Given what we know about Barí territorial behavior and marriage patterns, it is likely that the two sorts of populations remained somewhat distinct. Barí in general prefer to reside and marry within the territorial group in which they were born. (Lizarralde and Lizarrralde 1991) There must have been some inter-territorial marriage, but it probably never reached levels sufficient to abolish the differences between the two sorts of populations.

What were those differences? First and most important, as pointed out first by Roberto Lizarralde, was the mission disease history. When measles reached the Barí in the 1960's, the Venezuelan groups in the north, presumably the descendants of the escaped mission Barí who had experienced measles at the old Capuchin missions in the late 1700's, suffered mortality in the neighborhood 20–30% (see Map 1). The groups in the south -the southernmost Venezuelan territory and all the Colombian territories- presumably the descendants of the "wild" Barí who were a virgin soil population, epidemiologically speaking, never previously exposed to measles, saw mortality of between 70% and 80%. Some of the difference may be attributable to prompter and better medical care in Venezuela, a richer and more medically advanced country, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that much of the difference was due to prior epidemiological experience and attendant microevolution.

Manuel Lizarralde has identified dialectical differences that appear to correspond to the distinction between descendants of mission escapees and the never-missionized Barí. For instance, the word he first learned for howler monkey was bora. He learned the language in Venezuela, among northern Barí, whose ancestors had lived at missions. Beckerman, working further south with Colombian Barí, learned the word kamash-kogdra for the same animal. M. Lizarralde has found several similar contrasts, as well as obvious Spanish loan words, among the Venezuelan Barí.

In addition to cultural diversity based on mission history, there are other internal differences within Barí society. For a long time, Barí occasionally kidnapped Yukpa girls in the course of the ongoing hostilities

between the two ethnic groups; they raised these girls and eventually they married Barí men. There is such a case recorded from the late 1700's, and Roberto Lizarralde and Beckerman found two cases in a genealogy they put together decades ago of people whose grandmothers had been Yukpa. They did not investigate the possibility of differential treatment of the offspring of these Yukpa kidnap victims, so we cannot comment on whether there was any social penalty for being of what would be called "mixed blood" in some Western societies. There was no obvious discrimination, but we do not know whether there were subtle slights.

Another importation clearly resulted in inherent penalties. One of the world's hot spots for Huntington's Disease (formerly called Huntington's Chorea) is the city of Maracaibo and its environs. This disease has manifested itself, at low prevalence, among the northern Barí, those closest to Maracaibo, for generations. As a genetic disease, it can only have entered through interbreeding. When that occurred, and whether it was consensual or violent, we do not know. However, we have observed that people with symptoms are, as expected, undesirable as wives and husbands. We have not investigated the matter in detail, but suspect that relatives of people manifesting the symptoms of Huntington's are or soon will also be stigmatized as undesirable mates.

A final aspect of intra-cultural variation we want to mention has to do, not precisely with outsiders entering Barí society, but simply with their proximity. Beckerman and Lizarralde (in press) found, in a study of Barí demography, that women living in the northernmost territory of the Venezuelan Barí had, in the middle decades of the 20$^{th}$ century, lower lifetime reproductive success that women living elsewhere in Venezuela. This territory was on the most active frontier of invasion of Barí land at that time. Violent attacks by employees of haciendas and oil companies certainly had something to do with this difference, as some women were killed during their reproductive years. But we suspect that simply the constant threat of such attacks may also have diminished their fecundity. If this situation had gone on for a sufficiently long period of time, women from this region might have acquired a reputation for low fertility, producing a variety of intracultural diversity created not by in-migration of other people, but simply by their proximity.

In sum, although the Barí do not, as far as we know, have a history of incorporating members of other cultures, except for the occasional kidnapped Yukpa girl, they nevertheless display an internal cultural and biological heterogeneity conditioned by their history of contact with their neighbors. This constituitive diversity forms a notable part of their heritage.

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