Beyond Resistance: A Comparative Study of Utopian Renewal in Amazonia

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Abstract. Recent studies of millenarian movements in tribal societies have tended to interpret them as expressions of resistance to colonial or neocolonial domination. Through a comparison of five case studies of indigenous millenarianism drawn from the history of lowland South America, this essay identifies aspects of utopian renewal that reflect internal political processes and contradictions independent of, and probably predating, native encounters with Europeans. Upon close inspection, the term resistance proves inadequate to the task of illuminating the dialectical processes by which native peoples define themselves in relation to other societies, indigenous and otherwise.

Thus the Tukuna told me that forty or fifty years ago the prophecies of a girl in Peruvian territory resulted in a gathering of Indians from both Peru and Brazil. One day Neobrazilians [non-Indian settlers] surrounded the assembly and attacked it with firearms, killed some Indians, thrashed the rest, and carried off the girl prophetess to an unknown fate.
—Curt Nimuendajú, The Tukuna

The experiments in social change that anthropologists classify as crisis cults, revitalization movements, or millenarian episodes have played a conspicuous role in the history of aboriginal South America.¹ Observers have long been struck by the singularity of millenarian movements, evident in their radical divergence from everyday practice and their fusion of such apparently opposed qualities as spirituality and materialism, egalitarianism and apotheosis. As a result, descriptions of millenarian episodes draw on a vocabulary of detonation ("explosion," "outburst," "eruption") that
marks them as dramatic breaks with a history otherwise assumed to be stable (Schwartz 1976: 7).

Contemporary inquiry into millenarian movements has shifted toward the recognition that each is shaped by deep cultural currents that transcend the particulars of a specific historical moment. In their analysis of a series of millenarian movements in the northwestern Amazon, for instance, Wright and Hill (1986) note both the movements' innovative features and their continuity with indigenous ritual practice. More specifically, Wright and Hill argue that millenarianism uses myth as an idiom for the expression of resistance to Western political domination. Their analysis exemplifies the importance that the concept of resistance has assumed in interpretations of utopian renewal put forward in the past decade.2

In the present essay I intend to develop some of the strengths of this approach while calling attention to its limitations and logical pitfalls. With Abu-Lughod (1990), I share the view that the term resistance can cloud the subtleties and contradictions of power when used unreflectively. Indeed, a case could be made that resistance is nothing more than the obverse of “acculturation,” a once-fashionable concept that we now regard as too blunt an instrument to dissect the nuances of intercultural exchange. In studies of Amazonian ethnobiography, resistance is usually invoked to label the struggle of Indians for autonomy in the face of state control. Nevertheless, indigenous societies are not without their own inner fields of conflict and points of internal resistance. Because millenarian movements advocate a “radical change in the distribution of power, status, and wealth” (Scott 1985: 333), they may threaten the indigenous status quo as much as they challenge the power of outsiders.

I pursue this line of inquiry through a comparative analysis of several millenarian movements chosen for the richness of their documentation and the degree to which they represent the diversity of indigenous responses at various places and historical moments. Comparative surveys are, of course, risky enterprises. To undertake them successfully one must weigh the desire to assess as much as possible against the problems that arise with an overambitious scope. By limiting my investigation to indigenous populations of the Amazon basin and adjacent lowland regions (henceforth referred to simply as “Amazonia” for economy of expression), I seek a balance of breadth and depth. Such a focus offers the additional advantage of filling a significant gap in the English-language literature, from which cross-cultural surveys of Amazonian crisis cults are conspicuously absent.3

The direction of my analysis is as follows. I first review recent developments in the study of New World, and especially Amazonian, prehistory that cast doubt on the assertion that millenarian movements can be attri-
uted solely to the crisis sparked by the arrival of Europeans. Drawing on the work of Hélène and Pierre Clastres, I review the case for a long-standing tension between hierarchical and egalitarian tendencies in Amazonian societies. These opposed tendencies may play themselves out in longue durée cycles of political consolidation punctuated by self-limiting episodes of millenarian and messianic enthusiasm. This is followed by summaries of five cases of utopian renewal from different parts of the region. I search them for common themes and explore the possibility that our view of them may have been distorted by the colonial lens, lending them an eventness that disguises underlying social processes and exaggerates elements that appear to constitute resistance to Western society.4

Amazonian Millenarian Movements
prior to Western Contact

Since the 1970s it has become a commonplace to identify millenarian movements as forms of social protest and reactions to the deterioration of native life almost universally experienced under European colonialism (see, for example, Adas 1979; Fields 1985; Stern 1987). Indeed, many scholars have identified the appearance of millenarian movements with the introduction of Christianity, a religion held to be uniquely prone to messianic, millenarian, and revolutionary dreams (Burridge 1979: 209; see also Burridge 1985; Worsley 1968). Yet, although few New World peoples seem to have shared the European idea that history is moving ineluctably toward a moment of ultimate transcendence, we now know that other historical visions can comfortably accommodate millenarian anticipation. In his reflections on the historical consciousness of native South Americans, Jonathan Hill (1988: 7) observes a pattern in which “history is understood in relation to a few ‘peaks,’ or critical periods of rapid change, rather than a smoothly flowing progression.” In some cases, these critical periods include social movements of a messianic or millenarian variety.5

Unfortunately, the paucity of written sources dating to precontact times limits our knowledge of possible instances of millenarianism prior to the arrival of Europeans. The few anecdotal cases that exist—for instance, the claim of Fry (1985) that there is evidence of revitalization movements among the Postclassic Maya—are projections of contemporary categories onto suggestive but ambiguous archaeological data.

Advances in Amazonian archaeology and ethnohistory have, however, dispelled the idea that the Conquest represented an isolated shock to the region’s Indians, whom scholars had long thought to exist in a state of
untrammeled sameness prior to contact with the West (see Gibbons 1990; Roosevelt 1987; Whitehead 1989). The archaeological record discloses the rise and fall of Amazonian social systems, the replacement of egalitarian societies by highly stratified ones marked by an uneven distribution of wealth and power—in short, the kinds of brusque changes that might have precipitated cultural crises long before the sixteenth century. These intra-Amazonian encounters were less calamitous than were later contacts with the Spanish and Portuguese, which often led to staggering mortality due to the introduction of new diseases, but they were surely traumatic enough to have produced internal crises in the affected societies. Amazonian populations must have been confronted from time to time with new and powerful religious ideologies emanating from Andean polities to the west or from emerging Amazonian chiefdoms closer to home. They would have had to respond to the challenge of these alternative symbol systems by modifying their own worldview to accommodate (and appropriate powerful elements of) new ritual patterns and political forms.

The best-documented studies of movements with precontact roots concern the Tupi-Guarani societies of eastern South America, peoples renowned for their millenarian inclinations. Métraux (1927: 21) notes that as early as 1549 three hundred Tupis from the Atlantic coast of Brazil arrived in Chachapoyas, in the Peruvian Andes, a decade after they had begun walking west in search of a “land of immortality and eternal rest”—more commonly referred to in Portuguese sources as the Terra Sem Mal, “Land without Evil.” Brazilian chronicles are littered with instances of other Tupi-Guarani groups undertaking similar migrations as recently as the early twentieth century. Fairly soon after the arrival of Europeans, however, Tupian movements incorporated elements of Christian symbolism. Pereira de Queiroz (1969) describes several Tupi-Guarani messianic movements in the late sixteenth century that identified native messiahs with Christian saints, and there is little doubt that later Tupian millenarism represented, at least in part, a strong reaction to colonial oppression (Shapiro 1987: 131). Balée (1984: 256) declares that seventeenth-century Tupian migrations westward were in essence a “massive exodus from the centers of human extinction” associated with Portuguese settlement.

The pre-Conquest origins of Tupi-Guarani millenarianism have provoked reflection on the indigenous social forces that sporadically prompted thousands of Indians to abandon their villages and follow charismatic leaders into the unknown. The most influential analyses of this phenomenon are found in two separate but interrelated monographs by Pierre Clastres (1987) and Hélène Clastres (1978). Although the work of Pierre
Clastres is probably more familiar to English-speaking readers, that of Hélène Clastres represents a more historically and ethnographically detailed analysis that proves useful for the purposes of the present essay.  

The argument of Hélène Clastres, reduced to its principal schematic elements, is that Tupi-Guaraní migrations were inspired not by ordinary shamans but by prophets called caraís or caraíbas, whom other Indians regarded as god-men. These prophets were wandering figures who lived on the perimeter of Tupi communities, both physically and in terms of prevailing social and political norms, which immediately before European conquest were characterized by marked social ranking and a complex village organization. As marginal men, caraís could visit the villages of enemies without fear of harm. When a prophet’s vision, presented in metaphorically charged language, moved people to renounce settled life for a journey to the Land without Evil, the prophet exercised political control that, at least for a time, surpassed that of local headmen. (This state of affairs led some European observers to label caraís as “provincial chiefs.”) Clastres (1978: 60) argues that the goal of these migrations was not (pace Wallace 1956) “to halt social disorganization but, on the contrary, to promote it” (my translation). Prophetic movements thus rejected social ranking and implicitly advocated the “abolition of all forms of power” (ibid.: 113). By leaving sedentary life behind, the Tupi abandoned the prevailing social structure in search of a place beyond secular space and time. Eventually the movements lost their momentum, the wisdom of specific prophets was thrown in doubt, and the social norms of sedentary life reasserted themselves.

There are several parts of this analysis to which I shall return in the following review of other instances of Amazonian millenarianism. Of particular interest are the outsider status of the prophet or messianic leader and the paradoxical way that the prophet uses a rhetoric of radical egalitarianism to establish greater hierarchy than existed before. The Tupi case also raises the possibility that episodes of utopian renewal are less “events” than instantiations of a cyclical process of political struggle internal to Amazonian societies.

Case Studies

Case 1: Asháninka, Central Peru, 1742–1965

The Asháninka (more widely known in the anthropological literature as Campa), an Arawakan people of Peru’s Upper Amazon, represent an example of what Wilson (1973: 327) calls a “spasmodic cult,” in which episodes of millenarian fervor are separated by long periods of quiescence.  

The first and best-known instance of millenarian enthusiasm among
Asháninkas began in 1742, when a highland Indian named Juan Santos Atahualpa convinced them, as well as neighboring Arawakan and Panoan peoples, to throw off the yoke of Spanish colonial rule and expel the Franciscan missionaries who were its most important local representatives. Asháninkas were contacted by Jesuit missionaries in 1595, but it was the Franciscans who, beginning in the 1630s, launched a series of missionary campaigns directed to Asháninka settlements along the Río Perené. Scholars differ in their assessments of the impact of missions on Indian life. Lehnertz (1974: 63, 390) reports a relatively small number of Asháninkas living in mission stations, whereas Zarzar (1989) and Tibesar (1952) argue for a higher Asháninka population in Franciscan settlements. There is no question, however, that the missions introduced Western epidemics into the native population, with considerable loss of life.

Prior to the arrival of Juan Santos Atahualpa in 1742, there had been several Asháninka uprisings sparked by conflicts between missionaries and the local headmen upon whom they depended. But the rebellion of Juan Santos was far more widespread and dangerous to Spanish interests. A Quechua Indian educated by priests, possibly in a Jesuit seminary, Juan Santos seems to have traveled to Europe and Africa. His utopian program called for the expulsion of the Spanish from Peru, restoration of the Inca empire with him as its head, and replacement of Spanish priests by Indian clerics, who would take charge of Christian practice in the new empire. With the help of Asháninkas and other rebels, including renegade blacks, highland Indian settlers, and neighboring Amazonian peoples, Juan Santos decisively defeated Spanish military forces in several encounters. Although there were no large-scale military engagements between Spaniards and rebels after 1752, native belligerence closed the central jungle area of Peru to settlers for nearly a century.

Because no Spanish records of life among Asháninkas during this period have surfaced, we know little about the impact of the movement on their politics and religion, nor do we know what they thought about the neo-Inca ideology of the messiah, which must have been as alien to them as the Christianity advanced by Franciscan missionaries. Scholars have been quick to see the roots of the movement in a pan-Andean belief in Inkarri (the Inca king, who will return to overthrow European colonists and establish a native utopia) and even in the apocalyptic millenarianism of the Franciscans. It seems more likely, however, that Asháninkas drew on millenarian roots in their own tradition, though these were no doubt modified by social contacts with the Andean Indians, Franciscans, and black slaves who also resided in mission settlements.10

The millenarian currents exploited by Juan Santos in the eighteenth
century stirred again in the nineteenth and twentieth. Explorers’ accounts from the 1890s suggest that Carlos Fitzcarrald, a legendary rubber baron, may have been regarded as the Son of the Sun (Itomi Pavá) by some Asháninkas. In the 1920s, a Seventh-Day Adventist missionary named F. A. Stahl inspired a large-scale crisis cult that anticipated the end of the world (Bodley 1972). Finally, oral histories collected in Satipo Province establish that in 1965 some Asháninkas regarded Guillermo Lobatón, regional commander of a leftist guerrilla organization called the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), as the Son of the Sun, a helpful spirit sent to earth to lead the Indians in militant appropriation of whites’ material wealth. The Peruvian government’s counterinsurgency campaign against Lobatón and his followers, which included the use of napalm against peasant and Indian villages, led to the deaths of scores of Asháninkas and virtually all of the guerrillas. The 1965 movement provoked opposition from within the Asháninka population itself, and some Asháninkas—in most cases people who were long-standing enemies of Lobatón’s native allies—assisted the counterinsurgency forces in tracking down the guerrillas (Brown and Fernández 1991).

Asháninka support for the MIR guerrillas alarmed the government and focused national attention on the plight of Indians in zones of intensive colonization. This concern undoubtedly contributed to the promulgation of a progressive Native Communities Law in the early 1970s. Today, however, Asháninkas are locked in an even more violent struggle with elements of two leftist guerrilla groups, the Shining Path and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (Benavides 1990; Gorriti 1990). It is not yet known whether this new unrest has millenarian undercurrents.

A common theme emerges from the episodes of Asháninka millenarianism about which information exists: each was sparked by the arrival of a charismatic outsider. Juan Santos was an educated highland Indian; Fitzcarrald was of mixed Andean and Irish ancestry; F. A. Stahl was an American; Guillermo Lobatón, the MIR’s local commander, was a black intellectual from the Peruvian coast. Somehow these outsiders succeeded in creating temporary alliances that transcended local kinship groups; in some cases, however, Asháninkas eventually turned on the messiah and contributed to his downfall. As Asháninkas themselves say about their prophet-leaders, “There is always someone who doubts.”

Case 2: Tukanoan and Arawakan Indians, Upper Rio Negro region, Venezuela-Colombia-Brazil, ca. 1857–84

The mid- to late nineteenth century was a turbulent period for the Tukanoan and Arawakan Indians of the Río Negro. Native communities and
their traditional institutions had been shattered by aggressive missionary campaigns, labor conscription, debt servitude, and epidemics. Into this unhappy circumstance stepped a visionary named Venancio Aniseto Kamiko. Hemming (1987: 321) identifies Venancio as a mestizo woodcutter; Wright and Hill (1986: 35) state that he was born of the Arawak-speaking Baniwa. Venancio’s guardian was a black preacher named Don Arnao or Arnaoud, a Christian evangelist to whom the Baniwa attributed shamanistic powers. After miraculously surviving a serious illness (apparently an attack of catatlepsy compounded by excessive alcohol consumption) in 1857, Venancio reported having a vision in which he was directed to inform Indian people that they must refuse to work for whites and that their debts would be forgiven if they made gifts of food to him (ibid.: 35, 37). Later, he took on a priestly role, organizing feasts and wedding ceremonies and eventually predicting the destruction of people, most notably whites, who refused to follow his teachings. Despite relentless suppression of the movement by Brazilian authorities, interest in Venancio’s message spread to the ríos Vaupés and Xic, where the Indians commenced dancing in expectation of a coming day of judgment.

Wright and Hill (ibid.; see also Hill and Wright 1988) note that Venancio’s influence drew on traditional Arawakan beliefs about fasting, the signs of a shamanistic calling, and on myths of world destruction and renewal. Stephen Hugh-Jones (1981: 34) detects traces of the Tukanoan Yuruparí (or Jurupari) cult in the movement, including an emphasis on shamanistic revelation and large-scale manioc beer feasts. Venancio’s teachings also incorporated elements of rural Christianity; indeed, according to Hemming (1987: 322), Venancio “assumed the title Christo and he appointed elderly men and women as his ministers, giving them the names of Christian saints.” Wright and Hill (1986: 44) see this use of Christian symbols as a “transformation of indigenous ritual activities into a form of ritual protest against colonial institutions.” Yet it is hard to see why this notion of “protest” would have been meaningful to the Indians, who had no reason to think that white authorities would be moved by an expression of native displeasure. Wright and Hill (ibid.: 37) seem closer to the mark when they note that the Christian content of the movement allowed the Indians “to conduct their own marriages and baptisms. . . . hence, they no longer had any use for Christian missionaries.”

Although Venancio managed to elude the government expeditions sent to capture him, his power waned by late 1858. His movement seems to have passed into relative obscurity, though Venancio himself lives on in native history as a figure who “redefin[ed] . . . the indigenous ancestor cult into a cult of historical opposition to external domination” (ibid.: 51).
Soon, new messianic movements that echoed the teachings of Venancio Christo arose in the same region. Three other “Christos,” named Alexandre, Anizetto, and Vicente, appeared between 1858 and 1885 on the Içana and Vaupés rivers. Vicente began teaching in 1880. He announced that he was the “Supreme Shaman” in charge of all Christian missionaries. According to Hugh-Jones (1981: 34; my translation), Vicente “predicted the elimination by force of all white people who mistreated Indians and proclaimed an inversion of the social order to one in which the Indians could be bosses and the whites their slaves.” Local authorities tried vigorously to suppress each of these movements, and there is little evidence that the experience had any long-term impact on the way the native participants dealt with whites in economic and political terms.

Case 3: Canela, Maranhão, Brazil, 1963

The Canela (also known as Ramkokamekra), a Gê-speaking people who inhabit a region of closed savannas in northeastern Brazil, underwent a messianic movement in 1963 that has been extensively documented by William H. Crocker (1967, 1989). The movement began when a pregnant woman named Kee-khwêi received prophetic messages from the child in her womb, whom she predicted would be born a girl. The child identified herself as the sister of Auké, a mythical hero, and announced that with her birth the roles of Indians and whites would be reversed. Indians would enjoy extraordinary material wealth, while whites would descend into poverty. As news of the prophecies spread among the Canela, some Indians began to rustle cattle from nearby ranchers, a move that Kee-khwêi eventually supported, arguing that cattle belonged to everyone. The Canela commenced a period of frantic dancing, alternating between indigenous dance styles and the dances of the Brazilian peasantry, on the assumption that “he who danced the most would be the richest when the great day came” (Crocker 1967: 73).

In a matter of weeks, the prophetess became the focus of a cult that supplanted the society’s traditional leadership, leading Crocker (1989: 19) to remark that “she had become a leader of great power . . . stronger than the traditional chiefs had been” while establishing “one united tribal community.” The Indians sold their shotguns, machetes, and metal cooking pots in order to buy trade clothing, makeup, jewelry, and cane alcohol for themselves and for Kee-khwêi. The prophetess attracted a group of fifty retainers drawn from among “high-status” young people (Crocker 1967: 72). She was carried between villages by her followers, seated in state in village plazas, and honored by visitors who would kiss her abdomen, the site of the spiritual being whom she promised to bring forth. Under her direction,
the community also experimented with changes in traditional patterns of sexual behavior, including the abolition of taboos on intercourse with some prohibited categories of kin.

The cult faced a crisis when Kee-khwēi delivered a stillborn male baby rather than the promised spirit-girl. The prophetess and her followers found a way to account for this unexpected event, and they continued to consolidate their influence. Crocker’s description of the cult characterizes this postbirth period as a shift toward folk Catholicism accompanied by intensifying assertions of Indian superiority over, and aggressiveness toward, Brazilian settlers. Eventually, ranchers whose cattle were being stolen attacked Canela settlements, leaving six Indians wounded and five dead.11 The Indian Protection Service moved the Canela to another location for their own safety; Kee-khwēi was discredited and the movement died.

Crocker’s original interpretation of the movement focuses on its unusual features: first, that the cult began when the Canela were enjoying unusual economic prosperity; second, that they had long been among the most conservative of Brazilian tribal groups, maintaining a positive self-image and a “traditional” worldview. More recently, Crocker (1989) has modified his assessment, presenting a more mixed view of the status of the Indians at the time of the movement. He notes, for instance, that the Indians were bewildered by the declining generosity of the Indian Protection Service in the months preceding Kee-khwēi’s vision. In broad terms, however, Crocker sees the movement as a response to a crisis of acculturation, during which the cult attempted to smash many traditional practices and effect a transformation to Brazilian custom.

Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (1973), reinterpreting Crocker’s work, asserts that the movement represented an act of mythic praxis paralleling the Canela myth of Auké, who was said to have originally given Brazilian settlers the wealth that the Canela coveted. (Melatti [1972] notes that the same myth had a central role in a different messianic movement among the closely related Krahó in the early 1950s.) Rather than mimic the culture of Brazilian settlers, Carneiro da Cunha says, the cult applied traditional Canela symbolic structures to the confrontation between Indian and settler attitudes toward reciprocity, sexual relations, and social hierarchy. Terence Turner (1988: 265) concludes that the driving force behind the Canela movement and others like it is the dream of transforming Western society “back into the life-giving native form . . . or else native society, through an opposite process of collective death and rebirth, may transform itself into the Western form.”
Case 4: Orden Cruzada, Peru and Brazil, 1971 to the Present

In the early 1970s, a visionary named José Francisco da Cruz (born José Nogueira in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais) began to proselytize in communities along the Amazon and its tributaries in Peru. His movement, which in Spanish is called the Orden Cruzada or the Hermandad de la Cruz, has attracted a significant following among the Tikuna (Tukuna) and Cocama peoples, and to a lesser extent among the Yagua. Sources within the movement insist that the Orden Cruzada has ten thousand followers in Peru and Brazil (Agüero 1985: 134). The reliability of this figure is uncertain, but even unsympathetic observers admit that the church’s native membership has experienced sustained growth.

The visions of da Cruz came at a time of cultural disorganization for the Tikuna and Cocama. Regan (1988: 134–35) notes that the Amazonian oil boom of the late 1960s had caused dislocations in the local economy and a precipitous decline in traditional agriculture; deforestation of Amazonian watersheds to the west produced a series of highly destructive floods in the native communities downriver.

The teachings of da Cruz emphasized the power of the Christian cross and the likelihood that world destruction was imminent. Until his death in 1982, da Cruz insisted that on the instructions of Jesus Christ he was instituting the “Third Universal Reform of Christianity” to help people prepare for the coming apocalypse, which will be survived only by members of the Orden Cruzada. The post-apocalypse world will be one of abundance and peace.

The theological and cosmological underpinnings of the Orden Cruzada bear little outward resemblance to their native Amazonian counterparts. Ritual life centers on veneration of the cross, the singing of Christian hymns, and Bible study. The “brothers and sisters” of the Orden Cruzada dress in white garments and, through a rejection of such practices as alcohol consumption and dancing, attempt to live a life free of the “prostitution” that prevails in the profane world. The life of Orden Cruzada communities, called villas, centers on a daily and monthly round of religious observances and prayer. Each villa fits into a larger politicoreligious hierarchy culminating in a Peruvian “patriarch,” whose seat is in the city of Iquitos. The “Mother Central Church” of the order is on the Río Juí in Brazil. The existing ethnographic sources do not make it entirely clear how the Peruvian communities relate to their leaders in Brazil, though apparently some funds tithed in Peru make their way to the Mother Central Church (Regan 1983, 2: 140).
Despite the explicitly Christian character of the movement, Regan (1988) sees in the cosmology of Orden Cruzada believers a direct link to the Tupian search for the Land without Evil. (The Cocama, many of whom have joined the movement, speak a Tupian language.) Apparently various groups of Orden Cruzada pilgrims have set off in search of what they call the Tierra Santa, “Holy Land,” a terrestrial paradise (ibid.: 132).

In his analysis of the Orden Cruzada movement among the Cocama, Oscar Agüero (1985) argues that, far from being acculturative in its effects, the cult is counter-acculturative. Villas are founded on the principle of isolation from the contaminating influence of the national society. The internal politics of each villa is relatively democratic, and many community economic activities follow traditional Cocama labor exchange practices. Orden Cruzada groups actively avoid engagement with merchants and wage labor recruiters—indeed, with all “gentiles.” The messianic and millenarian traditions of the Cocama and the Tikuna certainly find contemporary echoes in the movement. Cocama believers see themselves as occupying a sacred space and time that contrast with the profane space and time of the rest of Peru. All observers agree that the Orden Cruzada has had a major impact on the economy, social organization, settlement pattern, and cosmology of the native peoples who have embraced it. These changes appear to be of long duration, though Agüero argues that the movement is ultimately doomed to extinction because it has no political program in the conventional sense.

Case 5: Kapon and Pemón, Guyana-Venezuela-Brazil, Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present

In superbly documented studies, Colson (1971, 1985) and Thomas (1976) analyze the origins and spread of closely related religious movements called Hallelujah, Chochimu, and San Miguel among Carib-speaking peoples living in the area known as Circum-Roraima, a region straddling the shared borders of Guyana, Venezuela, and Brazil (see also Colson’s earlier work, Butt 1960). The Hallelujah movement was apparently inspired by the teachings of a Makusi prophet named Bichiwung (or Pichiwön), who visited England under the sponsorship of a British missionary. Upon his return to what was then British Guiana, Bichiwung began to preach of his personal visions, which included the revelation that white men were hiding God’s word from Indians. “So Bichiwung got Hallelujah from God then, and God also gave him a bottle of white medicine and words and songs and also a piece of paper which was the Indian Bible,” as the Indians explain it (ibid: 69). Bichiwung’s teachings, which had a strongly Christian character, were adopted and modified by other native prophets, some of whom
were drawn from the pool of traditional shamans. In many instances, the new prophets repudiated what were perceived as the negative aspects of shamanism (e.g., its association with sorcery) but maintained some of its key features, notably direct contact between prophets and God.\textsuperscript{14} The rituals of Hallelujah include modified forms of pre-Christian dancing and feasting and the performance of special chants. According to Colson (1985: 137), this new form of Christian belief “was passed on in the same way as indigenous knowledge, and so converted into a new set of concepts and associated practices.” Hallelujah prophet-leaders follow a Big Man model of personal prestige: they and their close kin “have to own extensive gardens and be energetic food providers in order to give extraordinary hospitality during frequent and long church festivals” (ibid.: 141).\textsuperscript{15}

A detailed discussion of the evolution of this complex, syncretistic movement is beyond the scope of the present essay. Suffice it to say that Hallelujah and its successors are strongly nativistic in character (emphasizing Indian hostility to the subordination of native peoples by non-Indians), highly selective in their use of Christian symbolism and concepts, and occasionally marked by a cargo cult–like fascination with the material wealth of Europeans. According to Colson, the relative isolation of the Indians during the movement’s gestation prevented its suppression by colonial authorities and missionaries, allowing it to achieve a cosmological and political stability rare in other indigenous New World millenarian movements. Hallelujah, she writes, “is at once a Christian religion in its basic details and an indigenous conceptual system . . . that began as an enthusiastic movement and . . . has now become an indigenous church” (ibid.: 142). The movement redefined and intensified exchange relations, according to Colson (ibid.: 104), thus effecting a “common accord between regional groups.” In other words, Hallelujah and its local variants helped to integrate formerly hostile ethnic units and strengthen their position vis-à-vis the dominant society.

Thematic Similarities and Differences

There are, of course, many points of comparison among these cases, ranging from their specific historical contexts to the subtleties of the cosmological vision enunciated by each. For the purposes of my analysis, however, I will focus on the general theme of resistance as it is played out in native responses to the ideological challenge of Christianity, the movements’ programs for the hierarchical reorganization of society, and the ways indigenous people conceptualized the future place of non-Indians in the postmillennial world.
Christianity

All the case studies include the integration of Christian symbols and concepts into a millenarian vision, a practice sometimes interpreted as a form of acculturation. Pierre Clastres (1987: 160–61), for instance, laments the creation of an “impoverishing syncretism where, under the mask of an always superficial Christianity, indigenous thought seeks only to postpone its own demise.” Yet he presents no evidence of how or why this “impoverishment” occurs. On the contrary, in Amazonian millenarian movements we see robust efforts to wrestle control of Christianity from whites while reshaping it to meet the spiritual needs of Indian peoples. Juan Santos Atahualpa advocated an indigenous clergy; the Orden Cruzada claims that its religious practice represents the third great reformation of the Catholic church; Venancio Christo took on a priestly role so that his followers would be free of meddling friars. Vigorous appropriation of Christianity is consistent with a view that ritual knowledge is something to be exchanged and shared—an attitude perhaps best illustrated by the wide circulation of indigenized Christianity among Carib-speakers in Guyana. This openness to exotic spiritual knowledge is so widely distributed in the New World that it probably existed long before contact with Europeans.

The indigenization of Christian concepts and symbols surely represents resistance to the missionary’s demand for theological exclusivity. Yet it is also the sincerest form of flattery. By appropriating Christianity, Amazonian peoples acknowledge the power of its authors. One might go so far as to say that the integration of Christian symbolism represents an implicit, if muted, critique of indigenous modes of explanation and ritual action; at the very least, it is an admission that native systems are not closed symbolic loops. Consider the two case studies of movements that have demonstrated long-term durability. Members of the Orden Cruzada of Peru and Brazil reject both the corruption of the dominant society and elements of native society that they find objectionable, including drunkenness and sorcery (Regan 1988: 136). The result is a religion that is far more Christian than Amazonian. The Hallelujah movement of Carib-speaking peoples represents a less drastic break with indigenous society than the Orden Cruzada, but it expresses similar uneasiness about the dark side of shamanism, namely, sorcery (cf. Brown 1988). In sum, participants in Amazonian millenarian movements demonstrate less “resistance” to Western society than the thousands of Indians who, without benefit of millenarian enthusiasm, proved remarkably unyielding to Christian missionary efforts (Pollock forthcoming).

The millenarian assimilation of Christianity has sometimes followed
paths laid down by indigenous religion or mythology, and it is not un-
usual for the leaders of such movements to be shamans, presumably the
members of the affected population most thoroughly versed in traditional
religious practice. In other instances, though (e.g., the movement sparked
by Venancio Christo in the Upper Rio Negro and the rebellion of Juan
Santos among the Asháninka), prophets or messiahs were marginal to
native society through birth or upbringing. They gained their following by
virtue of their ability to convey Christian ideas within a native idiom.
Outsider status seems to have enabled these prophets to bypass the politi-
cal constraints of existing social units and achieve a higher level of social
integration.

Social Ranking

Four of the five cases summarized above include attempts to institute forms
of social ranking that had little precedent in the societies where they oc-
curred. Both Venancio Christo and the Canela prophetess Kee-khwëi de-
manded food as tribute, and it is by no means clear that the redistribution
of this food was equitable. If we accept that tributary use of food is a
key element of chiefly societies (see, for example, Kirch 1984: 39), we are
inescapably drawn to the conclusion that both movements represented a
flirtation with chiefly politics. By joining forces with Juan Santos Ata-
hualpa, the Asháninka of Peru pledged themselves to an imperial political
model, though there is reason to doubt that they were truly committed to
this aspect of Juan Santos’s social program; later Asháninka messiahs seem
to have had a broader field of influence than ordinary political leaders,
although there is no evidence for the collection of tribute. The situation
of the Orden Cruzada is contradictory: the egalitarianism that reportedly
characterizes individual communities contrasts sharply with the hierarchi-
cal structure of the church organization that knits communities together
into one movement.

Emphasis on social ranking calls to mind the paradox noted by Hélène
Clastres in her analysis of Tupi-Guarani prophetic movements: that the
destruction of a prevailing social order correlates with the adoption (how-
ever transitory) of greater social distance between leader and follower. A
sharp tilt in the direction of a ranked society can, I believe, be seen as
an intensification of more subtle oscillations in organizing principles ob-
served in contemporary Amazonian societies. Jonathan Hill (1984) found
among the Wakuënaï of northwestern Amazonia two “modes of structur-
ing behavior,” an egalitarian mode associated with ordinary subsistence
activities and a hierarchical mode activated during ritual enterprises. Hill’s
observation is paralleled by Jean Jackson’s (1983: 212) work in the same
region. Waud Kracke’s (1978: 70–71) study of leadership among the Kagwahiv, a Tupi-speaking people of the Río Madeira in Brazil, notes “fundamental contradictions in Kagwahiv values and social structure” between two models of leadership, one egalitarian and conciliatory, the other self-aggrandizing and oriented to resource control.

Ritual often provides the context for a shift from an egalitarian to a hierarchical orientation, since it serves as a catalyst for reflection on degrees of ceremonial purity and hence of ranked distinctions (Jackson 1983: 103). Because participants in millenarian movements see themselves as entering into sacred space and time, they may quickly reshape their social world to follow a hierarchical model. In most cases, however, this hierarchy collapses with the intrusion of the profane world into the life of the participants. A notable exception is the case of the Orden Cruzada, which has sustained intercommunity hierarchy by balancing it with local egalitarianism.

Research on millenarianism in other world regions (e.g., Worsley 1968) associates crisis cults with nascent nationalism or pan-tribalism. When prophets draw followers from across ethnic boundaries, they set the stage for the creation of new and larger political units that are better able to confront the state (Pereira de Queiroz 1969: 242–43). Most postcontact millenarian movements in Amazonia, however, were suppressed before they could achieve higher levels of political integration. Even when the state did not completely interrupt the trajectory of utopian renewal, the precarious circumstances in which Indians found themselves seem to have inhibited whatever regional cohesion the movements promoted. Alliances established between the Asháninka and other tribes during the rebellion of Juan Santos, for instance, did not survive the stresses of jungle colonization in the nineteenth century. Of the case studies explored here, only the Hallelujah movement of Circum-Roraima has been able to forge stable links between formerly atomistic social units (Colson 1985).

The Direction of Indian-White Relations

The case studies demonstrate great variability in native views on the future of Indian-white relations, no doubt because of wide differences in colonial and postcolonial experience with outsiders. The Asháninka allies of Juan Santos Atahualpa sought the expulsion of whites from Peru. The Canela apparently expected to become whites. Members of the Orden Cruzada isolate themselves from the corrupting influence of white society in anticipation of a final day of reckoning.

All of the movements have anticipated a major shift in the status relations of Indians and whites, as when a messiah from the Río Vaupés an-
ounced that he was the leader of all white missionaries and that “Indians could be bosses and the whites their slaves” (Hugh-Jones 1981: 34). Amazonian peoples show less concern with trade goods and material things in general than their counterparts in Melanesia and other colonized parts of the world. Nevertheless, cargo cult tendencies are evident in some of the case studies (for instance, among the Canela movement and in the earliest phases of the Hallelujah religion) as well as elsewhere in the Amazonian ethnographic record (e.g., Vinhas de Queiroz 1963). In general, Amazonian Indians have been less interested in appropriating the ultimate source of all wealth than with ending the exploitative relations that forced them to work so hard to get modest amounts of the goods that whites had in abundance. This is most clearly expressed in the separateness sought by the Orden Cruzada, which isolates its followers from the impurity and exploitative tendencies of non-Indian “gentiles,” and by Venancio Christo’s denial of the validity of white debt claims against Indians. The nativistic renunciation of Western goods that Curt Nimuendajú saw among Guaraní pilgrims in 1912 has been remarkably rare. They attributed their failure to fly to the Land without Evil to their contamination by European clothing and food, which made them too heavy to take wing (Métraux 1941: 54).

The explicitly stated aim of reversing the dominance hierarchy of the colonial system in favor of the Indians is arguably the most powerful expression of resistance to outsiders in Amazonian millenarian movements. In their analysis of the Venancio Christo movement, Wright and Hill (1986: 51) argue that a major consequence of the movement was “a reorientation of social and economic relations in which the refusal to cooperate with the external, dominating order of the white man became elevated to the status of a sacred cosmological postulate.” Whether this sacred postulate did much to change native reality is uncertain, however. Hemming (1987) reports that the exploitation of the Indians of the Río Negro continued unabated from 1838, regardless of the teachings of Venancio and the native “Christos” who followed him; nor is it clear that former adherents to the movement were somehow better equipped to resist the advances of Western civilization than Indians who had never subscribed to Venancio’s message.

The circumstances of state control in the Amazon ensured that the situation of missionaries, labor recruiters, settlers, and government officials was often precarious. Colonists held exaggerated fears of the Indians’ inherent savagery (Taussig 1987), and agitation within native communities caused by millenarian movements was therefore likely to arouse a prompt and brutal response far out of proportion to the actual danger posed by the natives’ utopian dreams. Of the five case studies, only the
Asháninka (led by Juan Santos Atahualpa in 1742 and by the Castroite guerrilla leader Guillermo Lobatón in 1965) undertook outright rebellion. Others elaborated ideologies of avoidance, nativist self-vindication, or repudiation of debt that were more threatening to whites’ economic interests than to their physical safety. When violence broke out, it was nearly always initiated by state authorities attempting to apprehend a prophet-leader, suppress antisettler rhetoric, and “restore order.” As Scott (1985: 332) puts it, “Millennial and utopian thought typically make their appearance in the archives only when they take the form of sects or movements that pose a threat to the state.” There have doubtless been many episodes of utopian renewal that escaped the historical record because colonists found them unthreatening and therefore unworthy of note.

What impact did forcible suppression have on native narratives about these movements that survive today? Surely it intensified the image of the movements as explicit episodes of active resistance to Western society, at the same time obscuring those aspects of the movements that challenged traditional authority or advocated the abandonment of specific rituals. We will never learn of countless instances of cultural redefinition that may have expressed little overt resistance to outsiders but considerable criticism of indigenous society itself.

A well-documented example of this process, drawn from elsewhere in the New World, is the 1890 tragedy at Wounded Knee. The confrontation was prompted in part by the introduction of the Ghost Dance religion, a movement of spiritual renewal that included trance dancing and the expectation of imminent world transformation. Although Indians involved in the Ghost Dance expected that they would soon be delivered from the oppression of white society, there is little evidence that the movement posed any direct military threat to the white society of the frontier. Nevertheless, the dancing caused such alarm that American officials intervened to stop it, precipitating a massacre. This tragic event has transformed a movement originally driven by a desire for harmony and spiritual renewal into a symbol of Indian resistance to the genocidal hostility of white society (Kehoe 1989).

Conclusions

Drawing on case studies of indigenous Amazonian millenarianism, I have identified links between precontact and postcontact episodes of utopian renewal. Such points of continuity include tension between hierarchical and egalitarian models of leadership, periodic questioning of traditional rituals and political systems, and openness to the ritual knowledge of other
ethnic groups. These processes exemplify resistance to internal realities as well as to those imposed by Euro-American society. For even as indigenous millenarian movements ratify the hopes of native peoples, they represent a break with, and an implicit critique of, indigenous social forms and practices, if not always with their underlying structure.

In each of the case studies presented here, Indians reached out to powerful outsiders in search of new insights and conceptual categories. This openness to exotic knowledge is part of the highly nuanced, dialectical ballet by which Amazonian peoples incorporate and, at the same time, define themselves against the differences of others. In the colonial period, selective borrowing (what used to be called “acculturation”) became an even more necessary strategy for cultural survival. The militant appropriation of Christianity is a critique of the failure of indigenous models in the face of a vastly changed world, an assertion of subjecthood (as against the passivity promoted by missionaries), and a vital moment in a long-term, underlying cycle within which native peoples actively explore alternatives to their own structures of power.

The growth and consolidation of the Hallelujah religion of Circum-Roraima, which was never suppressed by the local authorities, exemplify the capacity of Amazonian millenarian movements to steer native societies through the rough waters of their own internal contradictions: tendencies toward hierarchy versus a fierce commitment to equality; the continuity of myth versus the need for change in response to new circumstances; ethnic boundary maintenance versus regional integration; resistance to new symbol systems versus their active assimilation. This capacity was fully realized in only a handful of cases in the recorded history of Amazonia. More often, the search for utopia drew a violent response from terrified colonists, and an indigenous social process was forcibly abridged.

Notes

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1 In this essay I use *millenarian movement* as a general cover term that includes such specific subtypes as messianic and nativistic movements. Since most Amazonian revitalization movements contain elements of each of these ideal types, little purpose is served by taxonomic hairsplitting. For reasons that will become clear in my analysis, the frequently used terms *crisis cult* (La Barre 1971) and *revitalization movement* (Wallace 1956) are problematic because they imply an eventness that may be better understood as part of a long-term process.

2 For essays exploring this issue in a South American context see Hill 1988 and Stern 1987.


4 Let me here acknowledge my debts to the work of Fogelson (1989) and Turner (1988), who in different ways address the problematic distinction between “event” and “process.”

5 Hill’s assertions are echoed in Nancy McDowell’s provocative analysis of Melanesian cargo cults. McDowell (1988: 124) asserts that the rapid social transformations associated with such movements may derive from local assumptions about change. For many Melanesian peoples, she says, “there is no gradual, cumulative, evolutionary change; change is always dramatic, total, and complete.”

6 This analysis of the Tupi-Guarani case draws on the following works: Clastres 1978; Clastres 1987; Díaz Martínez 1985; Métraux 1927, 1941; Pereira de Queiroz 1969; Shapiro 1987; Susnik 1975; Viveiros de Castro 1986; Wilson 1973. To save space, I cite individual works in the text only when making reference to specific arguments or passages.

7 For a brief analysis and comparison of these works and their implications for Tupian research, see Viveiros de Castro 1986: 103–5.

8 Pierre Clastres (1987: 218) echoes this observation when he observes that “the insurrectional act of the prophets against the chiefs conferred on the former, through a strange reversal of things, infinitely more power than was held by the latter.”


10 Some important sources on the Andean belief in Inkarri include Flores Galindo 1988; Ossio 1973; Stern 1987; Zarzar 1989. References to the Amazonian variations on this and similar themes include Fernández 1984, 1987; Roe 1988; Weiss 1986. Messianic currents in Franciscan thought are discussed in Phelan 1970 and Zarzar 1989.

11 These casualty figures, which differ slightly from those reported in Crocker 1967, were provided by Priscilla Rachun Linn (pers. com., 1990). She also reports that “numeros deaths took place after the relocation because the Canela found life in a woodland ecosystem intolerable.”

12 The principal sources for this case study are Agüero 1985 and Regan 1983, 1988;
to a lesser extent, I also draw upon Chaumeil 1981 and Seiler-Baldinger 1984. These sources focus on the situation of the Orden Cruzada in Peru. Unfortunately, a recent study of the Brazilian followers of Francisco da Cruz (Oro 1989) came to my attention too late to be included in this analysis.

13 Instances of Tikuna messianism dating to the 1940s are discussed in Nimuendaju 1952.

14 Thomas (1976) discusses indigenous ambivalence about traditional shamanism and the role it has had in the evolution of San Miguel, a modification of the Hallelujah religion that Thomas studied among the Pemon.

15 Thomas (1976: 5), however, notes that among the Pemon, “leaders of religious movements [presumably including Hallelujah] have had influence over a much larger geographic area than have the capitanes [political leaders or ‘chiefs’].”

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