

CARIB SOUL MATTERS—SINCE FOCK

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NIELS Fock's *Waiwai: Religion and Society of an Amazonian Tribe* (1963), together with Jens Yde's *Material culture of the Waiwái* (1965), form a veritable mine of ethnographic riches on these Carib-speaking people living in the Upper Essequibo region of Guyana in the 1950s. Both traditional ethnographies in the very best sense of the word, when they appeared they did so in what was an ethnographic desert. One only has to look at the bibliographies in these two volumes to appreciate just how little of a genuinely anthropological nature had been written on Guiana at that time.¹ Furthermore, much of the information in these volumes has been confirmed and extended by later writers. This paper concentrates on one such topic, well described by Fock, viz. the human soul. The aim is to review what Fock has to say about the Waiwai soul and then consider how it fits with what has been reported from other Carib-speaking peoples of the region.

First, however, some precautionary words are in order. The word 'soul' is being used here as shorthand for a complex concept which defies definition even

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1. By Guiana I am referring to the geographical area that includes parts of Brazil, Venezuela, Guyana, Surinam, and French Guiana. A similar situation may be noted among the Tukanoan-speakers of the north-west Amazon, where Goldman's *The Cubeo* (also published in 1963) marked the dawn of that area's involvement in modern anthropological literature.

within the English-speaking world. Other possible terms that could have been used include 'life', 'life-force', 'essence', 'spirit' and so on. None of them is any better or worse than any other: they all misrepresent the vernacular concepts in some way. The second point is that I am restricting consideration to the human soul, whereas the same soul is often seen as being common to all animate beings, and even the definition of what constitutes an animate being needs to be examined in each case. In other words, this article deals with only a small aspect of what is a very large subject and in so doing is inevitably distorting.

The Waiwai word for soul is *ekati*, which also means 'shadow', 'picture', 'vital force'. The chief locus of the soul is in the heart, but it is disseminated throughout the body and is also divisible and spreads, fluid-like, on to things with which it comes into contact. Fock also reports that the degree of fixity of the soul in an individual varies, and using this criterion, he recognizes three types of person: shamans, babies and ordinary people. In life, except in dreams, the ordinary person's soul is fixed to the individual, and its loss means sickness or death. The shaman, on the other hand, is in control of his soul and is able voluntarily to despatch it to visit other cosmic regions. In contrast with both of these, the soul of a young child is not fixed but detaches itself involuntarily and wanders freely. It is during this period of the child's life that the parents submit to couvade restrictions, which, in part, are concerned with the construction of the person by securing the soul to the body (see Rivière 1974). It might also be noted that until initiation at around the age of thirteen, a boy or girl is addressed as *okopuchi*, literally 'little corpse', a usage that also suggests the rather tentative relationship between the individual and his soul (Fock 1963: 14–16, 151–2).

The Waiwai also recognise the existence of an eye-soul, but information on it is vague and Fock does not say whether there is a distinct term for it. It is described as being 'the small person one always sees in the others' eye'. Curiously, and unlike the *ekati*, the eye-soul 'is not regarded as an absolute necessity for the individual' even though its departure appears to be a sign of death (ibid.: 19–20).

Fock was unable to obtain definite information about where the soul of the newborn child comes from, although it is there at birth and there is some evidence that it comes into being at conception. Fock's main informant claimed that a boy's soul came from his father and a girl's from her mother (ibid.: 17).

The name, for which no native term is provided, is given to an infant soon after birth and is usually that of a deceased grandparent or great-grandparent. As well as this family name, the infant also receives a spirit name which is obtained by a shaman from the sky-spirit, Moon. Fock does not examine the relationship of the name to the individual or the degree to which it forms an integral part of the person, though he states that names have a 'psychic' quality (ibid.: 16–17, 140–1).

At death the *ekati* leaves the body and becomes the *ekatinho*, literally 'former soul'. The full term is *ekatinho-kworokjam* or soul-spirit. There are two kinds of *kworokjam*, but it is only this form that is of interest for present purposes. It

resides as an invisible spirit near the grave of the deceased, although it can manifest itself in animal form. On the other hand, at death the eye-soul goes to the sky, where, after being made subject to torments, it has an eternal happy life (ibid.: 18–20).

Although Fock does not draw attention to it, there is an interesting if rough correlation between the modes of disposing of a corpse and the types of people distinguished by the degree of fixity of the soul.² A shaman, with a voluntarily unfixed soul, is buried, perhaps with a soul ladder ascending from the grave; an ordinary person, with a fixed soul, is cremated; a child, with an involuntarily unfixed soul, is cremated, but the bones are gathered under an inverted pot.³ These three different practices also appear to be linked to ideas about the fate of the soul. The *ekatinho*, the former soul of an ordinary person, resides permanently at the place of cremation, although it is free to wander either as an invisible spirit or in the form of an animal. It is feared as being malicious and vengeful towards people. On the other hand, the soul of a dead shaman proceeds together with his familiars to the sky, 'where all are thought to be happy and friendly'. What is unclear is why the unburnt bones of a child are given a secondary burial, nor are we told what happens to a child's soul on death. Even so, the differences in mortuary rites seem to reflect Waiwai notions about the varying relationship between body and soul according to different sorts of person (ibid.: 161–7).

From this summary account of Fock's detailed description of Waiwai ideas and practices, the intention is now to look at other ethnographies from the region, all post-Fock, and see how far the Waiwai material coincides with them. A start will be made with the Waiwai's eastern neighbours, the Trio.⁴

Among the Trio the person is composed of body (*pun*), soul (*amore*) and name (*eka*). As with the Waiwai, the Trio use the same word for soul and shadow. The Trio soul can best be described as a morally neutral concept, something akin to our notion of consciousness in its sense of the totality of thoughts and feelings which constitute a person's conscious being. It is more than this in so far as there are degrees of consciousness that are associated with status, prowess, and knowledge.

The soul is thought to permeate the body with special concentrations at the heart and pulses as well as at the joints, particularly the knees and ankles. Attempts to discover whether these are different aspects of a single soul or multiple souls produced a very variable response. However—and although the same word is used for it—there is the clear recognition of a distinct eye-soul that is an essential ingredient of life and is extinguished on death. This contrasts with

2. The material has to be forced slightly to obtain the correlation, and the situation is obscured by variation and external influences. Even so there is something here, and as will be seen below, a similar example occurs elsewhere in the region.

3. It is interesting to note that when Farabee visited the Waiwai in 1913, the unburnt remains of ordinary Waiwai were being gathered together and placed in a pot (Farabee 1924: 171–2).

4. The Trio material was collected by the present author.

Fock's claim that among the Waiwai it is not an 'absolute necessity for the individual' in life, but it fits with some other cases that I will turn to shortly, in which the eye-soul is explicitly equated with what may be translated as 'life'. On the question of when the soul enters an infant, there was further disagreement. Some said that babies receive their soul through the fontanelle at birth, whereas others claimed that they were born with their eye-soul but had no other soul until four or five years old. There is some idea that, as with the Waiwai, the source of the soul is sex-linked, a boy deriving it from his father, a girl from her mother.⁵ The soul of the newborn child is small and not secured to the body and there is a great danger that, unless the correct ritual procedures, that is the *couvade*, are observed by the parents, the soul will stray away from the infant. Part of the explanation for this is the consubstantiality that is thought to exist between the parents and the child, so that the activities of the former affect the latter's well-being. But the idea is more general; for consubstantiality is also thought to exist between husband and wife and in varying degrees among other kin. What is shared is soul or essence, so that those with whom you are consubstantial are affected by your actions and you by theirs. In other words, a person's soul is not entirely discrete.

As the Trio child grows up the soul becomes increasingly fixed to the body, but even in adulthood it is never totally fixed. The soul leaves the body during dreams and this is understood as normal. In fact the vernacular term for dreaming literally means 'to provide oneself with a soul'. What is not normal is when the soul is absent from the body under other conditions, above all during sickness. I do not have space to consider Trio aetiology in depth, but, as with most other people in the region, causes lie in the invisible world and it is there that one has to look to understand events in the visible world. They are the result of human activation of spirits or direct spirit intervention or a combination of both. One diagnosis of sickness is soul-loss, and here the dividing line between sickness and death becomes blurred—the state of someone dead or unconscious in a coma is described by the same word, *wakenai*. This term literally translates as 'not being', and the answer to the question 'what is not being?' is the soul. This reflects the perceived association between the states of sickness and death, as they are both conditions under which the soul and the body are in a tenuous relationship. Good health, on the other hand, is manifest in a secure, firm relationship between body and soul—the hardness of the person (see Rivière 1969: 262–3).

Death provides a privileged moment in which to understand the soul as it is when the person is, so to speak, unassembled. I will deal with the Trio's eschatological beliefs quite briefly. At death the mortal body is disposed of, traditionally buried in the floor of the house, which is abandoned. What is not so certain is what happens to the soul or souls (now become *amorempë* or 'former soul'). From the contradictory statements I obtained, it would appear that part of the soul hangs

5. For a more complex and decidedly patrilineal theory of conception provided by one Trio shaman, see Rivière 1969: 62–3.

around the survivors for a time and tries to lure them away, whereas the eye-soul departs on a hazardous journey through the sky to the *amore entuhtao* on the eastern horizon, where sky and water meet. The term *entu* means 'owner', 'source', 'root' or 'origin', and *-htao* is a postposition meaning 'in'. The descriptions I obtained of this place are less than clear, but it appears to be like a lake of soul matter, a soul reservoir. At death the soul merges back into the lake and becomes indistinguishable as an entity. It seems to be like pouring a cup of water into a bucket of water. At birth a cup of water is scooped out, so that whereas any newborn may have a few particles of someone else's former soul, the odds against receiving all the same particles of that person are very remote. In other words, although soul matter is recycled so that any particular soul is constituted of particles from a number of former souls, in itself it will almost certainly be unique. Thus in terms of soul it is difficult to talk about reincarnation: what is reincarnated is that aspect of the individual that is signified by a name.

The name is the link between the body and the soul, or better perhaps the signifier of the joint presence of body and soul as a person in the visible world. Names are transmitted through alternate generations, a person receiving the name of a recently deceased member of the grandparental generation. The name goes into abeyance on the death of its bearer, but it is under these circumstances that the significance of the name in the relationship between body and soul becomes fully apparent. In Trio, to ask the name of a dead person makes no sense—in other words, a question such as 'what is the name of your deceased father?' is not understood. The properly formulated question is 'what is the deceased name of your father?' The Trio point out quite reasonably that just because your father is dead, this does not mean that he has ceased to be your father. In other words, it is not the relationship that has ceased to exist but the name which signifies and binds together body and soul as a living, visible, social being.

As a further example I will take the Maroni River Caribs of Surinam as described by Kloos (1971), with additional information from Magaña (1988). Although heavily influenced by Christianity, similar features to those I have noted among the Trio and Waiwai are discernible. The Maroni River Caribs have the words *a:ka*, *aka:limbo*, and *ekato:nimbo* which Kloos translates respectively as 'soul', 'former soul', and 'ghost'.⁶ There are several souls, located in different parts of the body, but Kloos considers them to be different manifestations of a single entity. At death, the former soul makes a hazardous journey to heaven unless the person has met a bad death, in which case it remains on earth to haunt people. The ghost, *ekato:nimbo*, comes into existence at the moment of death,

6. Kloos (1971: 151) notes that in 1907, Penard and Penard had recorded the word *kasoeloe* as 'soul of a human being' and states that it is unknown in that sense today, when it means 'bead'. This is interesting, as the Piaroa of Venezuela use the concept of 'beads' to convey ideas about awareness and knowledge (see Overing 1988).

some people claiming that it is the shadow that acquires an independent existence,⁷ and that bothers the living, causing sickness and death (1971: 151–2). However, Kloos also suggests (*ibid.*: 216) that it is only the ghosts of people who have met bad deaths who are troublesome in this way. According to Magaña (1988: 162), who mainly relies on earlier sources, the Kaliña conceive of various souls, which are located in different parts of the body and have different destinations on death, some going to the sky and others remaining on earth converted into animals and spirits. In fact these two positions, except for the question of whether there is one or more souls, are not that different and bear strong resemblances to Trio and Waiwai ideas on the matter.

A further striking similarity to the Waiwai is the fact that Maroni River Carib funerary practices differ according to whether the deceased is an infant, an ordinary person, or a shaman (Kloos 1971: 146–7). Here it is not the method of disposing of the corpse that varies but the degree of elaboration of the funeral. Everyone is now buried in a graveyard, although formerly burial occurred in or near the house, an old canoe being used as a coffin. A wake is held for both ordinary people and shamans, although in the case of the latter different types of song (spirit-songs) are sung by an assembly of shamans. For an infant no nocturnal feast is held and the burial takes place with little ceremony or public attention. Although it is not explicitly stated, it would seem safe to assume that also in the case of infants also, neither of the two further feasts celebrated for older people is held. Whether or not either of these feasts traditionally involved secondary burial, neither does so today, and Kloos interprets them as partly commemorative of the dead and as partly marking the gradual phasing out of mourning (*ibid.*: 147–51).

A baby goes without a name (*e:ti*) for some time, although Kloos does not specify how long. The name is given to it by a maternal grandmother, who is said to dream it. These names are also said to be old (*ibid.*: 104). There is nothing here that contradicts the two earlier cases, but one may speculate on whether the unceremonious treatment of dead infants is limited to the period before they receive names, or in Christian terms before they are baptized.

We continue to find ourselves in familiar territory when we turn to the Kapon and Pemon of Guyana, Brazil and Venezuela.⁸ Among these people there is *pon*, the substance or flesh of a body, which is distinguished from *esak*, which refers to the body as a whole. The term *esak* also has the sense of ownership of or control over something and thus appears to have a semantic overlap with the Trio term *entu*. However, *entu* does not mean ‘body’, nor does it have ‘the notion of incorporating something’, as *esak* does. The spirit or soul (*akwaru* among the

7. It is not clear what *ekato* means, since the word for ghost, *ekato:nimbo*, is clearly derived from *ekato* and *nimbo* and presumably means a ‘former *ekato*’. However, I have failed to find a translation of *ekato*; Kloos does not elucidate the term, nor is it mentioned in either Ahlbrinck (1931) or Hoff (1968).

8. The Pemon are composed of the Macusi, Taurepan, Arekuna and Karamakoto, the Kapon of the Akawaio and Patamona.

Kapon, *ekaton*⁹ among the Pemon) acts as a life force and is understood to be a portion of the radiant light (*akwa*) that emanates from the sun. However, this is not a merely mechanical concept but has qualitative and moral associations as well as quantitative variation. Thus someone with more soul or spirit is more intelligent, knowledgeable, wiser and happier. The Akawaio also refer to an eye-soul (*ewang enu*) but, like the Waiwai, do not credit it with much importance. Finally it might be noted that the Trio word for soul, *amore*, occurs among the Akawaio with the same meaning, not in everyday speech but only in shamanic songs (Butt Colson 1989: 53–61; Butt Colson and De Armellada 1990: 13–34; Butt Colson, personal communication, 1997).

In an earlier article, Butt (1954) also refers to the concept of *akwarupo*,¹⁰ ghost, literally ‘deprived of a soul’, which suggests that it only comes into existence on the death of a person. She makes the point that at death the *akwaru* goes to the sky, whereas the *akwarupo* remains to haunt the earth. She also notes that they are seen as being respectively good and bad (ibid.: 52–6). Once again, we have in basic outline a very similar set of ideas to those we have already examined.

The Yekuana of southern Venezuela, another Carib-speaking group of tropical forest cultivators, recognize the existence of six souls, although all of them involve verbal elaborations of a single basic term, *akato*, which literally means ‘double’ and is derived from *aka*, ‘two’.¹¹ Two of them, the eye-soul (*ayenudu akano akato*) and the heart-soul (*ayewana akano akato*), are contained within the body, represent immortal life, travel during dreams, and return to heaven on death. These souls are irreversibly good and contrast with the other four, which are external to the body and are redemptive in the sense that they absorb the sins of the individual. The ‘soul in the Moon’ (*nuna awono akato*) absorbs most of the wickedness of a person and burns for eternity, whereas the ‘soul in the Sun’ (*shi awono akato*) has some goodness about it and returns to its home in the sun at death. The ‘soul in the water’ (*tuna awono akato*) is the reflection of the individual in the water whither it returns on death, and is considered as nearly as evil as the soul of the Moon. The final soul is that of the Earth, *akatomba*, which reveals itself as the shadow and after death wanders the earth in the form of a small dwarf making bleating sounds (Guss 1989: 50–1). Although Guss does not say so, one

9. While the Pemon word *ekaton* would mean ‘names’ in Trio, Butt Colson makes no mention of names being part of the person. Williams (1932: 182) gives the Macusi word for one’s soul as *i-t-é-katón* and one’s former soul as *i-ka-ton-be*. The Akawaio word for name is *esik* (Audrey Colson, personal communication, 1997).

10. In 1954, Butt used ‘l’ rather than ‘r’ in both *akwaru* and *akwarupo*. The flap ‘l’ in Carib languages often sounds like an ‘r’ and may be regarded as orthographically equivalent to it.

11. The Yekuana conceive of every object, animate or inanimate, as having an invisible double or *akato*. Accordingly this is a very important concept in the ordering of their universe. Guss (1989: 31–61) deals with it at length in a section entitled ‘The Dual Nature of Reality’.

might guess that *akatomba* means 'former *akato*' and is thus the equivalent of the ghost or *ekatinho* of the Waiwai, the *ekato:nimbo* of the Maroni River Caribs, and the *akwarupo* of the Pemon.

In choosing four examples with which to compare the Waiwai one is obviously being selective, but to some degree the selection has been driven by the nature of the material available. There are many Carib-speaking peoples for whom we have little or no information on this topic. It cannot, therefore, be purely a result of selection that a high degree of convergence of ideas has emerged. Indeed, given the different backgrounds, theoretical standpoints and aims of the ethnographers concerned, the coincidence is remarkable. A distinct and basic pattern is present which consists of a soul dispersed through the body, which is an essential component of the individual's living existence. There may be more than one part or aspect of the soul. At death a part of the soul goes to the sky and part stays on the earth as a ghost, although the latter may only come into existence at death. There is some correlation between the soul which goes to heaven and goodness and the ghost that remains on earth and wickedness. Beyond this there is a degree of variation which may result from either genuine local elaborations or differences in ethnographic presentation.

One such variation concerns names. We saw that in the Trio material the name is an essential ingredient of the living person, while Fock states that the Waiwai name has a psychic component. In the other cases the name does not appear to have this characteristic, although it may be noted that the syllables forming the Trio word for name (*eka*) recur in the Waiwai word for soul, *ekati*, in the Maroni River Caribs word for 'ghost', *ekato:nimbo*, in the Pemon word for 'soul', *ekaton*, and possibly in the Yecuana word for 'double', *akato*. This may be an insignificant coincidence but it is suggestive, especially when it is placed alongside another feature of names throughout the region, namely the secrecy within which they are veiled, which in turn arises from the intimate association between individuals and their names. What it suggests is that names are as much an essential of individual personhood as other components such as body and soul.¹²

If we look outside the sphere of Carib-speakers, we find among many peoples of Lowland South America that the name is not simply an aspect of the person or a psychic component but a component of the psyche. Examples are very numerous and I will only adduce two. The first are the Tukanoan Barasana of the north-west Amazon among whom the name is soul in its purest, immaterial form, in contrast to the souls associated with the soft organs and bones of the body (Hugh-Jones 1979: 133–4). The second are the Arakmbut of the Madre de Dios region of Peru. Their ideas are strikingly similar to those of the Trio; for them the person is

12. Audrey Colson, in providing some very helpful comments on this paper, felt there is probably more to names among the Akawaio than it had been possible to find out because of their high degree of secretiveness about them.

composed of body, soul and name, and the last 'constitutes the essence of a person, binding the body and soul together into one whole' (Gray 1996: 80, 81).¹³

It would seem that ideas concerning the soul among some of the Carib-speakers of Guiana fit well with notions found within the wider tropical forest area. It was Niels Fock, at the dawn of modern Amazonian ethnography, who first sketched these ideas so accurately.

13. For Gray's full discussion of this matter, see his Chapter 6, aptly entitled 'Keeping Body and Soul Together'.

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