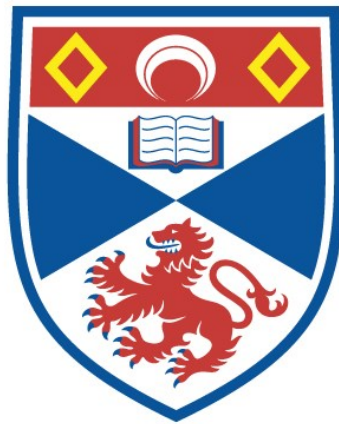


THE SICKNESS : SOCIALITY, SCHOOLING, AND  
SPIRIT POSSESSION AMONGST AMERINDIAN  
YOUTH IN THE SAVANNAHS OF GUYANA

Courtney Rose Stafford-Walter

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at the  
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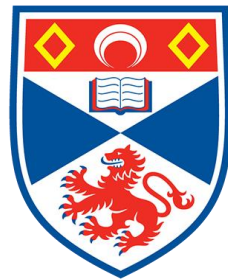
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*The Sickness: Sociality, Schooling, and Spirit Possession amongst Amerindian youth in the Savannahs of Guyana*

Courtney Rose Stafford-Walter



University of  
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

at the University of St Andrews

March 2018

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This thesis is dedicated to the late Edie Turner.

## Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to explore the recent changes in the social landscape of a Wapishana village, due to long-term separation from kin. I consider the impact of a recent educational shift from small scale community based education to regional boarding schools on family life and community structure amongst Amerindian people in the hinterland of Region 9, Guyana. Furthermore, the project analyzes an emergent form of spirit possession that affects almost exclusively young women who live in the dormitories, locally referred to as *the sickness*. Using *the sickness* as an analytical lens, the thesis examines the ways in which young Amerindian women navigate a shift in expectations from their parents and communities as well as how they experience this rapid social change and transformation.

Various vantage points employed in the analysis of *the sickness* help to illustrate the complexities of the current lived reality of Amerindian life. By exploring the experience of kinship and community in the Wapishana village of Sand Creek, it is possible to demonstrate how these relationships are produced and reproduced in everyday life through the sharing of space and substance. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider different aspects of the Creole and Amerindian notions of the spiritual world and their interwovenness in Wapishana lives, drawing out human and non-human agency and how they effect change in the world. Additionally, drawing on the anthropology of education, the thesis identifies the influence the state has on people's lives through institutionalized education, and locates this process within the wider context of historical indigenous residential schools. The ethnographic data on the experience of *the sickness* is put in dialogue and contrasted with other conceptions of spiritual vulnerability in Amerindian communities, examples of 'mass hysteria' in schools or other institutional settings in other parts of the world, and the Afro-Caribbean experience of spirit possession. Finally, through an analysis of the etiology of *the sickness*, the final chapter draws on Amazonian literature to examine the embodiment of gender and the local gendered history of knowledge production in the area.

*The sickness* is a phenomenon that permeates life in Southern Guyana for Amerindian youth, their families, and their communities. Undoubtedly, these various themes found in Wapishana young women's lives influence one another, irrespective of an ultimate manifestation

of spirit possession. In the concluding section I show how these themes can be placed in the wider Amazonian framework of alterity and 'Other-becoming', illustrating how this phenomenon provides a productive tool for the analysis of the experience of rapid social change among Amerindian youth and the impact of these transformations throughout the region.



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## Acknowledgements

The journey that led to me completing this thesis began in 2005 at the University of Virginia, when I walked into my anthropology class and Edie Turner was our guest lecturer. Her stories captivated me and her passion inspired me so much that immediately after I left that class I changed my major to anthropology. As my teacher, Edie opened my mind, and taught me to look at the world with love. As my mentor she believed in me, and convinced me I was capable. But most importantly, as my friend, she was always there when I needed it the most. The last time I was in her kitchen, days before I left for the field, I was anxious and terrified and I kept wondering, how can I go to this place by myself? How will I ever find my way? She looked me straight in the eyes and told me that not only could I do this, but I would be great at it. She gave me the strength and courage to do the most important thing I have ever done. To this day, whenever I start to second-guess myself, I think of Edie and her smile, and I realize that I am strong and smart and powerful and capable of changing the world.

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## The Protagonists



*Photo 1 Uncle Beltram, Auntie Doley and myself*

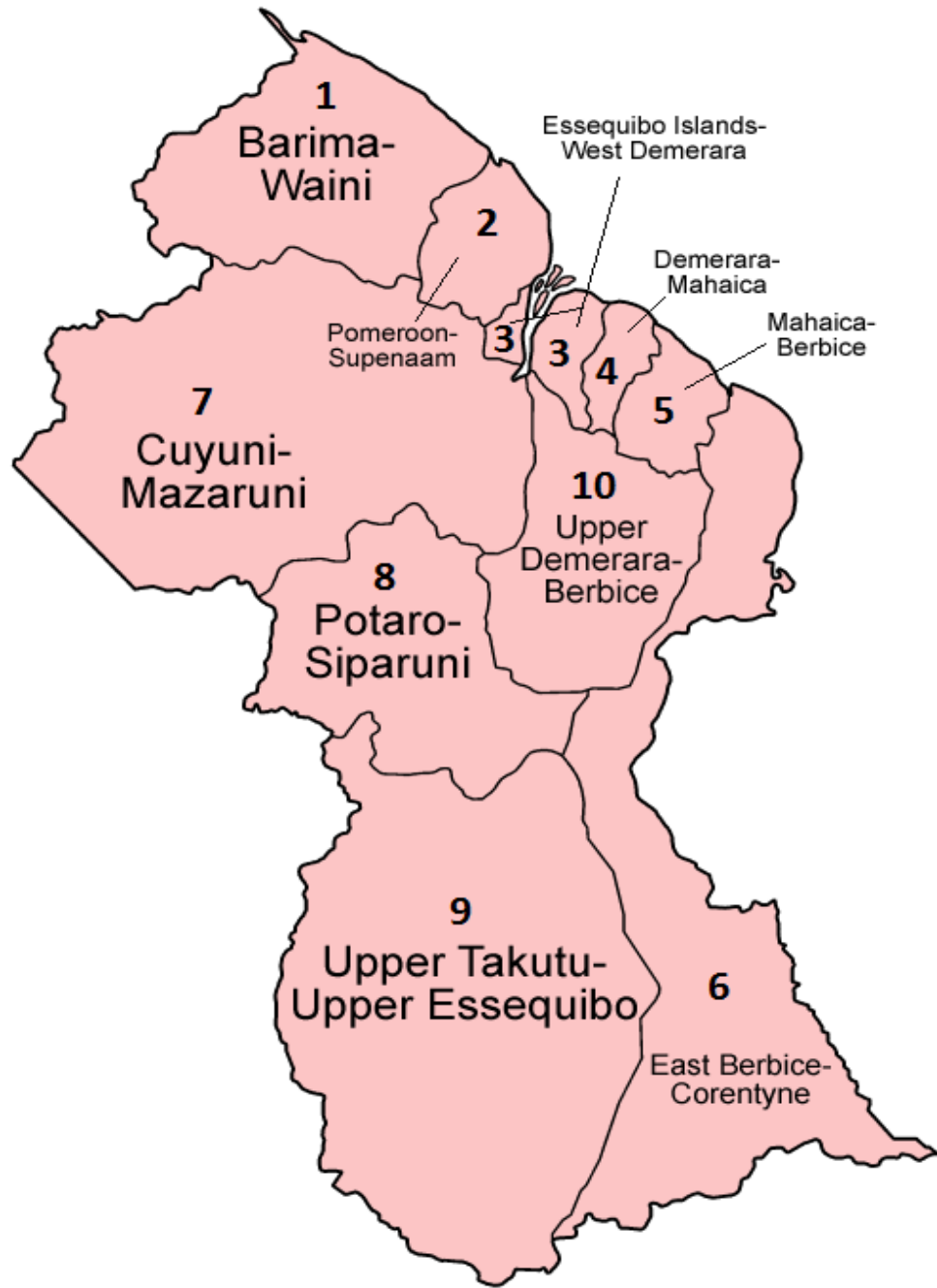


*Photo 2 Etta and myself*





Map 1A Map of Guyana that shows the location of Sand Creek, a few hours south of the border town Lethem.



*Map 2 A map that illustrates the regional breakdown of the nation of Guyana. It is clear that Region 9, where Sand Creek is located is the largest region geographically*

# Introduction

## ‘Our children are forgetting us...’

In the summer of 2007, after a 20 hour bus ride through the jungle on an unpaved road, I first stepped foot in Region 9, and the people of the Rupununi Savannah h have captivated me ever since. I had a unique opportunity to be a part of an undergraduate field school and I was accompanied by other amateur ethnographic researchers from the University of Virginia and the University of Guyana. We spent six weeks in Guyana, four of which were spent living in Nappi, an indigenous village in Region 9.

The Makushi people of Nappi were very welcoming and eager to show us their way of life. My curiosity was matched by their own, and I fondly remember exchanging question for question with my informants on those long, hot and rainy days. During these extended and informative conversations, something struck me. I encountered one sentiment repeatedly—sometimes it was stated directly, sometimes it was subtly alluded to—but it was woven throughout my daily interactions in Nappi. The parents and elders of the community expressed a deep anxiety that their children were leaving to attend boarding school, forgetting their families and community, and never returning to Nappi to participate in village life.

At first, I was puzzled by this concern for two reasons. Although most parents were voicing this anxiety to me, they were also simultaneously sending their children to school with enthusiasm. By no means were all of the comments about and attitudes towards education negative in Nappi village. Oftentimes, in the very same sentence, someone would complain about the young people forgetting their families and community, and then praise the fact that the youth could attend school.

I was also confused by this sentiment because it was July, and all the children and teenagers who spend 9 to 10 months of the year living in the dormitory of St Ignatius Secondary School were back in Nappi. Every day the village was alive with the sound of young people, and they were going to the farm, laughing and playing with their siblings and families, blasting music on their phones and practicing dance moves to the *soca* and *fórró* beats. I didn't see any clues that indicated they had forgotten their families or their community.

The concept of 'forgetting', however, came up in other contexts which helped me to understand what the elders meant when they were voicing these concerns. One of my friends in Nappi, Claire, told me a story that illustrated the connections between leaving the village and the act of forgetting. She was retelling the life story of the oldest woman alive in Nappi. She explained, '...She lives with her grandson. Her husband died [a] long [time ago] and her son left and never came back. She never heard from him. Sometimes people leave and forget about their family, their mother.' Claire continued with an example from her own life, 'My mother forgot about me. She had to take a man and live in Annai. My grandparents grow me up. I tell my children I will never leave them. I can't leave them or no one will love them.'

Claire's story highlights an understanding that underpins the following work, specifically the affective side of kinship and the correlation between co-residence and mutual care. Claire's mother could not continue to love her since she left her daughter and moved to another village.

The concern of Makushi elders about their young people and their communities stayed with me long after my first trip to Guyana. When I decided to undertake the PhD journey, these statements once again came to mind, and I decided to focus on the boarding school experience for Amerindian youth in Region 9, and to explore how the separation of these young people from collective life impacted their understandings of themselves and their plans for the future.

## Ethnographic Context

The Guyanese population today is a reflection of the nation's colonial history of first Dutch and then British rule. Roughly 50% of the population is Indo-Guyanese, descended from the indentured servants, and 36% is Afro-Guyanese, descended from the slave population. Only

7% of the population consists of indigenous Amerindian people (Coleman 2013). Guyana is divided into 10 regions, although an overwhelming majority of the population lives on the coast, while Amerindian people populate the forested interior. Throughout the history of the country, and continuing after Guyana received its independence in 1966, the national economic and political focus of the nation has been on the coast (Farage 2003).

There are nine self-identified indigenous tribes<sup>1</sup> of Guyana. This thesis will only engage with the three indigenous groups who attended the school where I conducted my field research. There were Patamona, Makushi and Wapishana youth living in the dormitory of Sand Creek Secondary school, so my analysis is not restricted to one group. However, the village where I resided was a Wapishana village, and as such, the experiences I am most familiar with are specifically Wapishana in nature. *The sickness*, which I engage with throughout the thesis, however, did not distinguish between indigenous groups, and young Wapishana, Patamona and Makushi girls all suffered from this emergent form of spirit possession.

Makushi, Patamona and Wapishana people live predominantly in the southern part of Guyana. The Makushi are one of the most numerous tribes of the Carib linguistic group (Myers 1944, Wihak 2009) and the Patamona also speak a Caribbean language although Makushi and Patamona languages are mutually unintelligible. The Wapishana population is estimated between 10,000 and 11,000 (Farage 2003), and their language is Arawakan. While the Patamona reside in the heavily forested areas of the north Pakaraima Mountains in Region 8, the Makushi and Wapishana people inhabit the savannahs that make up the borderlands between Guyana and Brazil. The weather and resulting conditions in the savannah varies drastically throughout the year; it is semi-arid in the long dry season and much of it is under water during the rainy season. There are both Wapishana and Makushi people in Guyana and Brazil and there is a long history of contact and movement between these groups (Myers 1944, Farage 2003).

## Schooling in the Rupununi

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<sup>1</sup> The term tribe is a contestable in the anthropological literature (Fried 1975). However it is the term used by Guyanese people themselves and used throughout the anthropological literature on Guyana.

Although Region 9 is the largest region of Guyana geographically, the population is primarily Amerindian and the location is remote, so the number of schools and the resources they receive are fewer than other areas of the nation. In Region 9 there are four secondary schools currently: Annai Secondary school, located the North Rupununi, St Ignatius Secondary located in Central Rupununi, Sand Creek Secondary where I did my fieldwork, located in South Central, and Aishalton Secondary school, located in the Deep South. During my time in Guyana, I heard there were hopes to build a fifth school in Karasabai, in the west of the region, although I'm not sure how far along those plans have come.

In terms of these four schools, one stands apart from the rest. St Ignatius Secondary School, which was opened originally by Catholic missionaries in the early 1900s, has access to a great deal more resources and is well staffed, in sharp contrast to the other schools. Students' test results also mark this disparity, as St Ignatius is ranked as a Grade B school according to the Ministry of Education, while the other three received a rank of Grade D. St Ignatius is by far the oldest secondary school in the Region, as the other three have been built in the past few decades, with Sand Creek Secondary as the newest, built in 2012. Before these additional schools were built, when St Ignatius was the solitary school offering boarding school education, only the students with the top scores on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade exam would be invited to study at St Ignatius, and all other young people would stay in their home villages and continue to study in their primary school, a program referred to as 'Primary Tops'. It is still the case that if a student performs very well on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade exams, they will receive a spot at St Ignatius, regardless of where in the region they are from. In some cases, however, parents and relatives choose to keep their children in schools closer to home rather than send them to St Ignatius, particularly if they live in more remote areas of Region 9. All other young people, who do not qualify for a spot at St Ignatius, are sent to the closest school to their home village.

### *The Sickness*

When I arrived in the field in July 2014, the plans I had carefully developed in my research proposal—to live and do research in the Makushi village of St Ignatius, right outside the

border town of Lethem—quickly proved to be very difficult and unlikely. As often occurs in fieldwork, I had to negotiate the pitfalls and disappointments and find a new place to conduct research. Eventually, after a series of serendipitous events, I decided to move to Sand Creek, a Wapishana village further south.

The village council of Sand Creek not only listened to my proposal for research with enthusiasm and encouraging inquisitiveness, they also seemed eager to welcome me into their community. As Sand Creek is one of the four villages with a boarding school in Region 9, I felt it was a good place to conduct fieldwork, not knowing that it would point my research in many compelling directions I would never have anticipated or imagined.

Sand Creek is the largest village in the South Central zone of the Rupununi with nearly 800 inhabitants when the school is in session. It lies in the valley between two larger forested groups of mountains, but the village itself is in the savannah. The village is spread out, but with clusters of homes in different ‘neighborhoods’ all surrounding the center of the village, where the health post, the village office, the community center and the primary school are located. Sand Creek Secondary school is located away from the center of the village, nestled in the foot of a small forested mountain. The farms, which many people travel to every day, are located in the forested regions on the outskirts of the village. It takes about two hours walking to reach the farm areas, although many people travel there on horseback or on bicycle. Most people in the village grow the majority of their own food on these farms, but there are two shops in the village to supplement what families grow themselves, if people have access to money to purchase things.

Upon my arrival in Guyana, I began to hear hushed discussions and whispered warnings about something the locals were calling *the sickness*, which was almost exclusively affecting young Amerindian women in the dormitories of boarding schools throughout the nation. Although at first I foolishly assumed *the sickness* might be referring to the flu or malaria, it soon became apparent that this was in reference to an epidemic of spirit possessions. While all the accounts of why this was happening in Sand Creek varied to some degree, the girls and members of the community agreed that a ‘Granny spirit’ was the cause of the possession. There is a mountain directly behind the school dormitory, and the people of the community explained that someone

climbed the mountain, disturbed a sacred cave, and released the spirit of an old woman. As a result, she started coming down from the mountain and entered the bodies of adolescent girls. *The sickness* was characterized by young females going into ‘fits’ nearly every night that lasted anywhere from 20 minutes to several hours, and the girls of Sand Creek Secondary were experiencing the largest number of these episodes in Region 9.

Similar episodes of a ‘mysterious sickness’ have affected young women of Amerindian descent living in boarding school dormitories in other parts of Guyana as well. It was first reported in an Arawak village, Santa Rosa, one of the largest Amerindian communities in Guyana, in 2006. The girls who fell sick displayed the same kinds of symptoms that I witnessed in Sand Creek—they reported having headaches and pain in their stomachs followed by uncontrollable thrashing of their bodies (Moruka mystery illness seems to have gone away, 2009). This ‘mysterious sickness’ then died down for a period of time until it resurfaced in October 2008 and then again in February 2009 (Santa Rosa mystery illness prompts request for psychologist, 2009). Seventy-three girls between the ages of 13 and 18 were affected by this ‘mysterious sickness’ at the Santa Rosa Secondary School (Moruka mystery illness seems to have gone away, 2009).

The administration of the school first contacted medical doctors, who could find no physical illness that would explain the symptoms. Following this, the Catholic priest in the area requested the assistance of a psychologist from the United States, Kathleen Seipel. She stayed in the community for four days, interviewing the girls (Psychologist gives another spin to Santa Rosa mystery illness, 2009). Her official statement afterwards said that the mysterious sickness was psychological, and was caused by ‘mass hysteria’ or a ‘mass contagion’ affecting vulnerable girls who did not have access to an adequate support system. In her report she also commented that, ‘In general, the possibility that the problem could be psychological was more common in people with more education and/or more developed leadership skills (Statement by psychologist on mystery illness stirs controversy, 2009).’ This was received very poorly in the community and throughout Guyana, as one of the Ministers from the Ministry of Education, Dr Desrey Fox, explained that these statements were not only derogatory but also unacceptable. Fox advocated a multi-disciplinary approach to the mysterious sickness, acknowledging that it may be psychological as well as spiritual or supernatural (Statement by psychologist on mystery illness



stirs controversy, 2009). When the students went home at the end of the school year, they recovered from the symptoms, and no further bouts of it have been reported at this particular school (Moruka mystery illness seems to have gone away, 2009). However, there were reports of similar episodes emerging at a primary school nearby about a year later (Mysterious illness strikes at Hosororo Primary, 2011). While I could confirm reports of these instances of ‘mysterious sickness’ through a search of Guyanese newspaper archives, the people of Sand Creek told me there were also instances of this in other regions, which I could not find any evidence of in news outlets. I did, however, speak to teachers and school administrators in Annai Secondary and Aishalton Secondary schools at the end of my field research, and both groups confirmed there were episodes of a similar sickness taking place in these schools.

While in Sand Creek, the focus of my research quickly shifted from the subtle changes in young people’s lives that occur as a result of the boarding school education model to the traumatic and violent spectacle of *the sickness*. After hearing all about this emergent form of spirit possession, and eventually witnessing it myself, I realized I had a new list of research questions to address, such as exploring why boarding school dormitories are harborers of this alien form of spiritual suffering. It was evident that the space and the type of sociality or behavior these boarding schools were designed to produce varied dramatically from those found in daily village life. Although the dormitory environment clearly aspired for a clinical rationality, in this case, it was marred with a form of human suffering that seemed to defy all attempts at rational, physical explanation. Another question addressed the sharp gendered manifestation of the possession. What was it about young female bodies that makes them more susceptible to the *sickness*?

In the end, in order to answer these questions about *the sickness*, I had to return to the themes that underlined my original research questions. I intend to draw out through the course of this thesis, how Amerindian personhood contributes to the (re)production of community, how attitudes about education inform relationships with powerful outsiders, and what role schooling plays in social transformation in the savannahs of Guyana.

It is important to note that, similar to the situation in Santa Rosa, *the sickness* was not a long-term affliction. Although it began in 2013, the year before I started my fieldwork, when I returned to visit Sand Creek in the summer of 2017, Auntie Doley explained that the girls were

no longer getting sick in the dormitory. As it was the month of July, and school was not in session, I could not do any additional fieldwork in Sand Creek Secondary, but I think it would be very interesting to observe what has and has not changed since I was last there, on the final day of school in 2015.

Regardless of the fact that *the sickness* is no longer occurring in Sand Creek, I believe this spiritual crisis and its two year duration illustrates how the experience of separation associated with a boarding school education affected these young people, and reflected much about contemporary Amerindian life in Region 9. Apart from shedding light on something exclusive to Sand Creek, I suggest that phenomena such as *the sickness* provide crucial vantage points from which we can analyze transformation in indigenous Amazonia. While this tension between development and more traditional ways of life is manifested in Sand Creek in particular ways, I don't think the tension it produces is exclusive to this village. Through striving to understand not only the phenomenon of *the sickness*, but also the social world it takes place within, this thesis will provide a contribution towards a better understanding of indigenous ways of perceiving and experiencing those transitions and transformations that we all too often tend to gloss over as 'development' or 'social change'.

## Thesis Outline

The thesis is broken down into three sections. The first section is comprised of the first and second chapters, which both focus on kinship and community. The first chapter introduces the reader to three of the main people who shaped my experience in Sand Creek and who are featured prominently throughout the thesis: Etta, Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram. The purpose of spending time to describe them and their life histories is two-fold. First of all, their relationships with one another, and eventually myself, exemplify the affective side of kinship and the centrality of these relationships in everyday life. Additionally, they highlight other themes that consistently run through the thesis, such as the strain of long-term separation and relocation.

The second chapter builds on the relationships described in the first, to show initially how kinship is produced and reproduced through the sharing of food and substance, indicating the importance of co-residence in Amerindian lives. The chapter continues by illustrating the responsibilities and obligations that accompany kinship relationships, and how these smaller kinship groups come together to form the wider community. Finally, it touches on the fragility of Amazonian conviviality, in order to illustrate the daily amount of hard work the pursuit of a harmonious and cooperative village entails. The participatory roles I describe in these first two chapters provided me with a deeper understanding of the kind of home environment the school girls come from, and facilitated a more direct means of comparing the social space and lived experience of school to that of the household and village.

The second section of the thesis, comprised of chapters three and four, provides the necessary context to understand the conditions *the sickness* is taking place within, but in two very distinct ways. The third chapter delves into the Wapishana spiritual world and illustrates that while everyday life in Sand Creek is comprised of continuous, mundane activities, it is simultaneously filled with fears of spiritual threats and precautions to avoid them. Throughout the chapter I draw in ethnographic vignettes that engage with the spiritual world, the relationships between spirits and humans, and how this impacts everyday life in the Rupununi. I focus on several spiritual beliefs that are common amongst other Amerindian groups but also describe Creole, coastal influences such as obeah magic, to illustrate that understandings of spirituality derived from various ‘cultural origins’ are woven into the fabric of Wapishana lives.

On a very different note, but still providing the crucial context for an understanding of *the sickness*, the fourth chapter provides a comprehensive look at Sand Creek Secondary school. It explores the physical space, the content of the curriculum and the weekly assemblies, my experience as a volunteer teacher in the school, and the behavior of the students. Throughout the chapter, I draw in specific elements of anthropology of education and the history of indigenous schooling to highlight various aspects of the current situation in Sand Creek. Relying on the picture of kinship and community from the first section, I also draw attention to what is different, what is missing, in dormitory life.

Finally, the last section of the thesis, comprised of chapters five and six, engages directly with *the sickness* itself. The fifth chapter consists of my first hand ethnographic material of *the sickness*, with thick description highlighting the way it is manifested in the bodies of the young women who are affected. I try to clearly capture the trauma and terror that *the sickness* inspires. As the afflicted girls avoided speaking about *the sickness* as often as possible, this section includes excerpts from the only conversation I had with the girls about their experiences of *the sickness*. The ways in which *the sickness* stands apart from other kinds of spirit possession also emerge. I explore how it deviates from typical Amerindian spiritual notions, as discourse and practices that tend to focus on keeping the soul within the body. This chapter also puts *the sickness* in dialogue with both episodes of ‘mass hysteria’ in institutional settings (such as schools) and the ritual spirit possessions of Afro-Caribbean religious movements, in order to demonstrate how it stands apart.

The final chapter of the thesis describes the various treatments employed by the school administration and the families of the afflicted girls, as well as a series of possible causes suggested to me throughout my fieldwork. It explores the various attempts of the doctors, the priests and preachers, and the *pia'man* or shaman, to treat the sick children. It illustrates how the school children, their families and the members of the community strive to understand and explain this radical phenomenon. Here I draw in various aspects of Amazonian literature to further explore the themes of gender, movement and knowledge production that emerged repeatedly throughout my discussions surrounding *the sickness* with the people of the Rupununi.

In the conclusion, I draw all of the themes into the framework of alterity and the Amerindian body's constant state of ‘Other-becoming’, and demonstrate how schooling fits into this framework. This final section explores the interplay between change and continuity in the Rupununi, and locates the example of boarding school education within a wider discussion of transformation throughout lowland South America. Finally, it explores how young Amerindian people are navigating these drastic shifts in expectations from their elders and their communities, as well as how the landscapes of their possible futures are transforming in a very Wapishana way.

## Chapter Summaries

### Chapter 1: Kinship and Family Life in Sand Creek Village, Guyana

The first chapter sets the background with a detailed description of family lives in the village of Sand Creek and as such facilitates a direct means of comparing a home environment to the school space. The performative aspect of kinship is emphasized through a portrayal of the ways in which these relationships are enacted in everyday life. The chapter introduces three main informants: Auntie Doley, Uncle Beltram, and their daughter Etta and retells the stories they shared about their own lives, their experience as a family in Sand Creek, and how distance and separation have exasperated, impacted and informed these kin relationships.

### Chapter 2: Consubstantiality, Community and Conviviality

The second chapter builds upon the first by using the examples of this particular family to draw out the nuances of Amazonian literature on kinship. It illustrates how family life functions to foster sociality and community in an ethnographic context. Connections are drawn between the language of kinship and the cultural construction of personhood which reinforce the centrality of co-residence and the notion of consubstantiality. The chapter demonstrates how kinship relationships are produced and reproduced through the sharing of space and substance, and how these smaller kinship groups come together to form a wider community. The next section explores the affective side of sociality, conviviality, how this is sustained in practice in Amerindian villages. This sets out a strong basis for juxtaposing the intimate and affective side of family and community life with the institutional and clinical experience of living in a boarding school dormitory.

### Chapter 3: Amerindian Spiritual World

The following chapter contextualizes *the sickness* by exploring the wider Wapishana world of spirits. It highlights that while much of everyday life in Sand Creek is focused on mundane activities like those described in the previous chapter, as a feature of the vibrant spiritual world everyday life is also filled with discussions and fear of, and preventions for illness and death. Through a series of ethnographic vignettes the chapter highlights the interwoven influences of Amazonian and Creole

spiritual understandings and the implementation of these approaches in daily life. The chapter demonstrates that sickness and death are a result of human or non-human agency, and that this allows for negotiation of the loss of a loved one in the social world and ultimately the possibility for resolution. It also highlights the role that food plays and a conduit for supernatural threats. By taking into account the socio-historical and regional dimension of Guyanese Amerindian life, the chapter engages with Creole understandings of the spirit world, such as obeah magic, and how these influence Wapishana beliefs and practices. It will illustrate that Guyanese Amerindians employ and interweave these sets of spiritual beliefs, and rarely differentiate between them and as such will call into question the role and purpose of drawing these boundaries.

#### Chapter 4: Sand Creek Secondary School and Indigenous Education

The following chapter interrogates the relationship between Sand Creek Secondary School and the Guyanese state and explores the ways in which the school space allows for and/or fosters a space of spiritual vulnerability for young Amerindian women. Through an ethnographic examination of the school site, the curriculum, and the class structure the chapter illustrates the lack of regard for Amerindian ways of learning and the embodiment of knowledge. By mapping the relationships between staff, students and the wider Ministry of Education, the text explores ideas about discipline, power and governance and what it means to be a good subject of the state. The current situation in Guyana is compared with other historical instances of indigenous young people in other regions who were forced to attend state schools, i.e. the Carlisle era of the US and the Stolen Generation of Australia. Throughout the chapter there is an engagement with particular aspects of the anthropology of education that highlight certain aspects of the current situation in Sand Creek.

#### Chapter 5: ‘Granny got her’: *the sickness* in Sand Creek Secondary

After exploring the wider spiritual world in the third chapter, and setting the scene of the secondary school in the fourth, the fifth chapter deals directly with ethnographic details of the manifestation of *the sickness*. Through a thick description of the movement of female bodies while they are possessed, how the other students respond to it, and how the young women describe it afterwards, the chapter puts *the sickness* in dialogue with three other ethnographic instances for comparison. It first explores Amerindian notions of spiritual vulnerability such as spirit attack and spirit wandering. Then it describes instances of ‘mass hysteria’ that took place in schools and other institutional settings throughout the world. Finally it explores the practice of spirit possession in

Afro-Caribbean religions. Throughout this dialogue the chapter demonstrates how *the sickness* stands apart from all three in various ways.

## Chapter 6: Social History, Causes and Treatments of *the sickness* in Sand Creek

Slowly accumulating snapshots and short stories about *the sickness*; the reader's experience will mirror my own as I tried to understand the history of the sickness in the village. The chapter uses accounts from Auntie Doley, members of the village, students in my class, teachers, parents, and religious figures, to trace the beginnings of the sickness in the village, and the various treatments the people of the community employed. In this chapter I explore the various causes of the possession that the people proposed throughout my stay in Guyana, and how this reflects the wider Amerindian social world. Through exploring these proposed causes, this part of the thesis will engage with the embodiment of gender, the history of gendered knowledge production and how it relates to movement, and the influence of gender in intergenerational and community relationships and Amerindian lifeworlds.

# Chapter 1

## Kinship and Family Life in Sand Creek Village, Guyana

### Chapter Outline

The first chapter provides a context for much of the ethnographic material throughout the rest of the thesis, by introducing the three main people who shaped my experience in Sand Creek: Etta, Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram. Through a detailed description of their life stories, I will also pull out several important themes that will guide the rest of this work, such as the importance of the affective side of kinship, the reality of living alone in an Amerindian community, and the way gender motivates and informs movement in the Rupununi. It will also elucidate the cadence of everyday life in the village and the palpable experience of kinship relationships.

### Foregrounding Kinship

*On a sweltering afternoon in Sand Creek, Auntie Doley and I were gathering vegetables from the garden so we could prepare lunch. After picking leafy greens, beans and tomatoes, we came into the house and stood around the sturdy wooden table in the kitchen chopping, dicing and grating. She turned to me abruptly and said, 'Miss Courtney<sup>2</sup>, I will miss you. You are the only one I will miss, because you will remember me. I don't miss*

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<sup>2</sup> The people of Sand Creek called me Miss Courtney because when I first arrived I was a volunteer teacher at the school, and all women who work as teachers throughout the Rupununi are referred to as Miss as a sign of respect.



*my children. They don't bother with me. They never call. They never write letters. They never send money. My son hasn't been back to Sand Creek in over 7 years. I only miss my grandchildren and I pray to God that they are ok.'*

Kinship studies have been central to anthropological pursuit since Lewis Henry Morgan's breakthrough in 1871, when he began looking at the terminology of kinship or what he called 'nomenclatures of relationship' as a semantic set, a set of meanings (Morgan 1871, Trautmann 2001). Through this approach he emphasized that kinship terms are culturally organized, and are not a reflection of 'real things existing everywhere in the world and to be held constant' (Trautmann 2001:274). Kinship studies returned to the fore of anthropological investigations more recently with studies of relatedness, with the work of Janet Carsten in Malaysia (1997) or Jeannette Edwards in the North of England (2000), and this new approach to kinship studies also featured prominently in Amazonian literature. Morgan's original insistence that kinship is socially and culturally constructed, rather than a reflection of genetic truths, was valuable for anthropologists to develop new ways to think about kinship in lowland South America.

The study of kinship in mainstream anthropology shifted with Schneider's Critique of the Study of Kinship (1984), which drew out many Eurocentric assumptions that remained at the heart of kinship studies, mirroring a greater movement in the discipline from focusing on structure to practice. 'New kinship' differs from the original approach in many ways including a discussion of relatedness, and a focus on gender, the body and personhood (Carsten 2000: 3-8). Although a discussion of kinship has always been central to Amazonian studies, this shift paralleled the study of kinship in lowland South America in many ways discussed below.

With this new approach to studying kinship, anthropologists began to focus on the affective and performative side of these relationships in an Amazonian context. Amerindians understand that human beings are not born, they are made through the interactions they have with other persons, sharing space and substance. The conception of kinship and humanity are interwoven, as Cecilia McCallum notes amongst the Cashinahua, an indigenous group that lives in Peru and Brazil, 'Proper behavior towards kin is behavior that both defines what it is to be

human, and creates humanity' (2001: 71). Gow also observes the interdependence of the creation of humanity and kinship relationships amongst the Piro, an indigenous group in Peru, explaining that:

Piro social processes and hence Piro kinship, can be characterized as the transformation of others into humans and humans into others, through time [...] For any given Piro person, this process starts in the fabrication of humanity shortly after birth, and concludes in the making of otherness shortly after death. (1997: 7)

Piro bodies are made into humans through becoming kin to other Piro bodies (Gow 1997). In other words, an Amerindian body can only become a person through building and maintaining relationships with their kin.

As I will explore more in depth in the next chapter, these relationships are produced and reproduced through several social processes, and the performative aspect of this is crucial. Thus, Amerindian people need to share space in order to share substance, and co-residency assumes primacy when it comes to kinship relations. This has been noted in the Guyanese context, as Rivière explains that 'real kin' is constituted by 'prescriptive endogamy', the concept that physical proximity subsumes any genealogical distinctions, and co-residence is key to the formation of kin relations (Rivière 1984:32).

The excerpt from my field notes above is a significant indicator of how kinship is conceived of and experienced for several reasons. Not only does it tell the heartbreaking story of Auntie Doley's children leaving the village and 'forgetting her', but it also emphasizes the performative and affective side of kinship. When she expresses that she does not miss her children, she does not mean that she doesn't think of them often, but articulates what is so frequently noted in the Amazonian literature—that kinship must be constructed and reconstructed through time and acts of mutual care. She is expressing the notion that kinship ties can weaken over time and distance, and in some cases can be lost. This is not by any means permanent and if her children returned to the village, or engaged with any performative aspect of kinship, such as calling her, writing her letters, sending her money, or demonstrating love through actions, she would certainly 'remember' them again.

In the following passages I hope to convey not only the pervasive continuing importance of kinship in an Amerindian community, but also how the context in which these relationships

are built and maintained are changing in specific ways. These passages will also provide a context for the rest of the ethnographic material in the thesis. They will introduce three of the main persons that the rest of the thesis will revolve around; they will describe the village space and they will convey the tenor of daily community life.

The motivation behind my choice to describe this family in great detail and to introduce the reader to these three people is two-fold. As this chapter will illustrate, they played an enormous role in my immersive experience within the community, going so far as to call me and treat me as their sister and daughter. These relationships developed over time and the transition was not always a smooth one. I'm certain that Etta, Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram found giving me a place to call home and associating themselves with me as kin difficult in ways I was never even aware of. Once they began 'keeping me as a daughter', my overall experience in the village changed dramatically, thus highlighting the significance of these relationships. Prior to this shift, many people in the community would regard me with suspicion and in some cases ignore or avoid me. Once the members of the community were able to place me within the network of these kinship relationships, however, they began inviting me to important meetings, to work on the farm with them, and to many of their parties. My experience of kinship relations with this family was palpable and powerful, patiently shaping my understanding of the Wapishana way of life in Sand Creek.

These three people have played a significant role in my fieldwork, and their stories shed light on the ways in which the landscape of village life is changing due to long term separation, which will be a focus throughout the thesis. Etta no longer lives permanently in Sand Creek, and Uncle Beltram spends several months at a time away from the village working in the mines. By portraying the daily life that I experienced alongside these people in the Rupununi, I will show not only how things are changing in dramatic ways, but also how the prominence and importance of kinship relationships remains constant.

## Etta

I cannot remember the exact moment that I met Etta, a Wapishana woman in her mid-20s. Mrs. Foo, my landlady in Lethem, had mentioned I might run into Etta when she was cleaning the guest house. Indeed, whenever I spent a sweltering afternoon in, I would see her quietly moving from room to room. She was quite shy, and the first few times we saw one another we didn't speak. Normally, she would continue to clean while I was on my way out, to hurry around the dusty red streets of the border town of Lethem, trying to secure meetings in St Ignatius and convince myself my project wasn't unraveling. I do, however, remember the exact moment I met Enzo, her three year old son. He was singing to himself and making a good amount of noise, jumping all around in the back of the house, full of energy. I said 'hi' and he said 'hi' back, with a big smile, flashing his brilliant white teeth, a sharp contrast to his sun-soaked skin.

Eventually, Etta and I started saying 'hi' to one another, but for the first week our short interactions never turned into much of a conversation. Over the following week, however, we would have longer chats about the weather or the number of mosquitos behind the guesthouse, but not about anything of importance. These were the weeks that I was finding it very difficult to speak to the people I needed to, such as the *toshao*<sup>3</sup> of St Ignatius and the regional chairman, about doing my research in St Ignatius, a Makushi village just outside the town of Lethem. I was getting a markedly poor reception from everyone, and I was really worried I would have to start from square one again. One afternoon, after a particularly unproductive meeting with the chairman, I was sitting out behind the guesthouse by the outdoor kitchen, chain smoking cigarettes and trying desperately not to cry. I heard the door open and Etta came out carrying a mop and a red bucket. She took one look at me and stopped short. She immediately asked me what was wrong. I gave her a long, rambling explanation about the trouble I was having getting permission to do research in St Ignatius, and was considering going to a Wapishana village in the south instead.

Up to this point Etta was just listening quietly, with empathy in her eyes. After my last comment she smiled and exclaimed, 'Oh—I'm from Sand Creek!' She pulled out her old plastic

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<sup>3</sup> *Toshao* is the term used to identify a village leader. They are elected by the entire community, and in Sand Creek this would occur every three years, unless there were extenuating circumstances, i.e. the *toshao* falling ill, dying or choosing to resign.

smartphone and started showing me some blurry pictures of the village. While flipping through the photos she said, 'Everyone falls in love with the mountains down there. I am planning a trip to the village soon to visit my mom. There are buses that go twice a week, on Tuesdays and Saturdays.' She knew I was planning on going to Brazil that weekend, but suggested that I could meet her there when I returned to Guyana. She mentioned that if everything went well, I could even ask her mother if I could stay in her home during my time in the village. She said, 'Mommy is living there all alone. Daddy is working in the mines, and my sisters and brothers are all living away from the village. I try to visit once a month. She is the head cook for the dormitories in the boarding school.' By this time, I had a smile from ear to ear, and Etta seemed excited by the prospect of me visiting her village as well. She gave me her number and told me she would message me with the information about the man who drives the bus, Hendricks. I asked if she knew when school officially started and she told me it would be September 1st. I was thrilled because, assuming the village council of Sand Creek would approve my research project, I would still have a window of time to return to Georgetown to apply for the official permissions before the start of the school year.

Etta left the guesthouse after assuring me she would help me sort out my situation, and I was elated that the woman I had gradually gotten to know was from Sand Creek. I soon discovered that this wasn't so much about luck or the randomness of the universe, but was in fact a result of family. Etta was the partner of Mrs. Foo's son, Jason. The relationships that grew out of my staying first with Mrs. Foo, and then successfully moving to Sand Creek and living with Etta's mother, influenced and shaped my research in many formative ways.

Etta herself is one of the earlier examples of young Amerindians that were sent to boarding school. In her youth, she left Sand Creek and attended school in St Ignatius, just across the bridge from Lethem. She had mixed feelings when she talked about going to school. She was living in the dorm at first, but broke one of the rules, spending more time out shopping in Lethem than was permitted, and after that Auntie Doley had to arrange a paid stay with a family in the village. As often as they could, Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram would send her a little *farine*, cassava meal, or *tasso*, salted beef, two staples of the Rupununi diet, or a little bit of money.

When she finished school, Etta briefly worked as a teacher in Sand Creek. I don't think she was particularly enthused by the job, and when she speaks of that time she often describes 'sporting'<sup>4</sup> and hanging out with her colleagues rather than the actual teaching aspect of the job. This job only lasted about a year. Etta then left Sand Creek for a longer period of time. She became pregnant with Enzo, and moved to Boa Vista in Brazil to live with Auntie Doley's sister while she waited to give birth. Enzo's father has never been in the picture.

Etta met Jason through her sister Rena, who was helping to look after Jason's kids (he had a daughter and a son from his previous marriage), and cooking and cleaning his house. The arrangement was mutually beneficial as Rena was pregnant and was relying on the small amount of money Jason was paying her. He was also kind and would take her to the hospital for her check-ups. After Rena introduced Etta and Jason, they fell in love right away, and Etta has been living with him in Lethem ever since.

On my first trip to Sand Creek, the minibus picked me up in the early hours of the morning, long before the sun rose over the savannah. The bus ride takes a little longer in the rainy season, as the wheels often get stuck in the mud of the unpaved road. I spent the time dozing off and chatting with Hendricks the minibus driver. When we reached the crossing, where the boats leave for the village, I met several people from Sand Creek who were waiting to travel out to Lethem, including *Tosbao* Rocky, the village leader. He enthusiastically welcomed me to Sand Creek. Then two men, Andrew and Lenski, helped me to carry my bags down to the village boat, joking how heavy they were. After the 30 minute boat ride, the men tied my bags onto the village 4x4 and took me on a crash tour of the village, concluding at Auntie Doley's front door.

Enzo ran out of the house with his usual enormous grin, and Etta popped her head out with a big smile as well. She waved at Andrew and Lenski and shouted at me, 'Come on in!' I walked into the little green house with concrete walls and a tin roof, and my stomach growled loudly in reaction to the delicious smell of breakfast. Auntie Doley invited me into the kitchen area, with a reserved smile. Etta explained with a grin that they were waiting for me! We sat down at the long, and well-worn wooden table, to a feast. There was fried farine with eggs,

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<sup>4</sup> 'Sporting' is a Guyanese term that implies drinking and hanging out with friends, or partying.

sausage and bora, boiled corn, corn porridge, and lemongrass tea. Auntie Doley ate a big bowl of the porridge, and told me that Amerindians like to eat porridge of many kinds—‘corn, oat, cassava, even mango porridge’.

The tin roof of the green house not only attracted the heat but simultaneously magnified it within the house, so after breakfast we all went to sit under the huge mango tree in front to escape the heavy air. The roots protruded from the ground in all directions around the trunk, providing excellent natural seating under the shade. Enzo jumped around in all directions, running this way and that, but Etta, Auntie Doley and I sat quietly at first. Eventually, Auntie Doley asked me a few questions about why I decided that I wanted to live in Sand Creek. I explained that I was interested in schooling, and how it was different in the hinterland compared to the coastal cities. I added that I was wondering how boarding schools were impacting Amerindian families and communities since many students are separated from their families at such a young age. Auntie Doley nodded along and replied that some children as young as eleven leave their families and homes to attend school in Sand Creek. Etta mentioned her own experience, leaving Sand Creek to go to St Ignatius, and how she found it to be difficult. Auntie told me there were Wapishana, Makushi, and Patamona children at the secondary school in Sand Creek and commented that the Patamona youth travel all the way from Region 8.

Later that evening we pulled the benches out of the house and into the front yard to escape the heat once again. We were feeling lazy since the sun was still so hot, even though it was slowly sinking behind the mountains. There was a young girl named Theresa staying with Auntie Doley when I arrived. She offered to paint my nails light purple and while she was at it I asked Auntie Doley if she could teach me to dance the *fórró*, a Brazilian dance popular in the Rupununi. She burst into laughter and explained that the young girls know how to do it. She turned to Theresa and told her to go get her friends and to borrow a speaker to play music. Within twenty minutes there was a small crowd of girls, an enormous speaker sitting in the front yard, and Etta hooking up her phone to play music. A few neighbors came over to enjoy the music and watch my futile attempts to learn the steps to the Brazilian beats. Turns out that despite hours of practicing, I was not skilled at dancing the *fórró*. Auntie Doley and her friends were sitting just inside the house, the boys were sitting around the edges of the light, choosing the music and drinking brandy, and Etta, the girls and I were dancing in the middle of the light.

As the evening went on one of the boys handed Etta a plastic two liter bottle with a dark yellow liquid inside. She had a big swig and handed the bottle to me. I gulped some of the sweet, strong liquid down, and right away it warmed my body from the inside. Etta explained it was wine made from soursop<sup>5</sup>. I handed it back to her and she gave some to the girls, who each had a small sip. The strong wine made my head spin as I started up at the brilliant stars, and all of us girls were laughing and dancing.

Two mornings later I asked Etta to go with me to meet with *toshao* and ask him about my project. The sun was already high and hot as we left the house, and I got the impression that she thought we were getting a late start. Full after a delicious breakfast, and with little Enzo in tow we headed towards the village office. Etta mentioned that she hoped the *toshao* would be there, because his house was ‘far, far.’

We walked along the largest road in the village, a ruddy—almost red—color, unpaved but wide enough for vehicles to drive on. We passed an array of buildings. There were three distinct types: those made of mud bricks and thatched roofs, those made of concrete and sand walls with tin roofs, and the government buildings that also had tin roofs but were painted a very specific color of pale yellow. The buildings were in clusters of two or three, and most also had a little garden close by with some fruit trees and vegetables growing. The savannah was dotted with these gardens but also bush grass, mango and cashew trees, coconut palms, and bushes, but stood in sharp contrast to the heavily forested mountains surrounding the valley.

After we followed a bend in the road, two deep green trees came into view, marking both edges of the road. One was a mango tree, and the other a cashew, and they were both enormous. The leaves provided a great, but short, relief from the unforgiving sun as the shadows danced along the dusty road.

Etta pointed out the village office, and we walked up to the small white concrete building with a tin roof. A wooden table was visible inside the building, pushed up against the wall, with a radio on it. There was one plastic chair and in it was a young lady sitting by the radio, waiting to receive calls. We walked in and everyone said ‘Good morning!’ I introduced myself to a man called Francisco, who explained that everyone called him Filho, and he was the DDO—the

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<sup>5</sup> A green fruit with spiky skin, that is native to the tropical regions of the Americas.



District Development Officer. He asked me a few friendly questions. I asked them if the *toshao* was in today, and the woman inside said, ‘He has not been in today so he must be at his house, but perhaps he will come into the village later in the day.’

Etta was clearly not pleased that we would have to go to the *toshao*’s house. She once again reiterated that it was far, far away. I, of course, had no concept whatsoever about what that really meant. We set off in the direction of the deep green mountains, and I would find out later, the farms. We stopped by the big, mint green, wooden shop first, and a pregnant woman with enormous brown almond shaped eyes gave us a few suspicious looks and sold us some sweet drinks, cichle, and cheese puffs. Then we set off down the road.

The further along we went, the narrower—and wetter—the road became. Soon into our journey we were dealing with the flooded out savannahs. The path had turned into a small lake, much deeper in certain sections, although some parts were almost dry. Enzo was being a good sport, satisfied with his Chubby soda and the candy, but we had to hold his hand carefully as we walked through the flooded out portions, so he wouldn’t slip. Etta explained we were walking through the black mud, which could be dangerous because it was very slippery and unpredictable. I learned that she was not exaggerating almost right away, as my leg slid out from underneath me. I managed to regain my balance without falling completely in the mud, but I did splash around a bit in the water.

As we embarked further away from the center of the village the mosquitoes descended on us. I could hear their buzzing constantly in my ears, even when I couldn’t see them. They were relentlessly munching on every exposed bit of our bodies, and I suddenly realized why Etta had insisted on wearing jeans despite the fact that the weather was sweltering. And just when I thought it couldn’t possibly get any worse, the mosquitos started to swarm at us. There were giant black clouds of these monsters flying around our heads making the most deafening sound of buzzing, like a symphony straight from hell. Etta shouted—‘Run!’ Although I didn’t know how running could help us, (they had found a feast—how could we escape?), I followed her advice and ran, clinging to Enzo’s tiny hand. He was having a hard time keeping up with his short legs, and Etta, who was in front of us, kept yelling, ‘Run, boy run! Follow Miss Courtney! Run!’ We were running in puddles a few inches deep and on the black mud, so we were splashing, slipping

and sliding in every direction and showering ourselves with mud and water. After a minute or two of running we found a space on the path that wasn't quite as flooded and left the swarm in the dust. There were still a few tiny winged fiends attacking us, but it felt like nothing compared to the experience of the few minutes prior.

Finally we spotted a benab in the distance, and Etta assured me that was *toshao's* house. We covered the last bit of the path, fortunately without encountering any more swarms, and walked up to the gate that distinguished *Toshao's* house from the open savannah. He must have seen us coming, and as we opened his gate and crossed into the yard he came out of the house. He shook my hand and Etta graciously introduced me. I explained that I hoped to spend a year living in the village, volunteering at the school and learning how to farm and make kari and other Wapishana ways of life. He explained that he had received my letter, and was happy to plan a meeting with the Village Council so I could request permission to do my work. He was very positive and encouraging. After setting a time and place for the meeting, Etta, Enzo and I set off across the savannah towards my new home.

The kindness and generosity that Etta offered me, by assisting me with writing the letter that preempted my arrival and in helping me to visit Sand Creek, critically influenced my reception in the village. I did not even realize the extent of the impact of her friendship until later on in my fieldwork. In fact, introducing me to the village as someone she knew and cared about was, I believe, what made the greatest difference between my poor reception in St Ignatius and the welcoming reception I received in Sand Creek. I requested to do my research in St Ignatius as a single female, without a companion or obvious kinship relationship, and upon later reflection it is no small wonder they said no. Indeed my solitary status not only set me apart from every person in the Rupununi, but being perceived as a loner with no relations could have had much more serious repercussions. A person without kin relations in Amazonia is associated with dangerous or undesirable qualities. Els Lagrou explains the implications of the state of a loner amongst the Cashinahua stating, 'In Cashinahua imagery about identity and difference, the idea of 'stranger' or 'enemy' can easily be subsumed under the rubric of 'free-floating being without a fixed abode' or, in other words, spirit beings (yuxin or yuxibu)' (2001:163). As I was a stranger with no relationships to speak of in St Ignatius, they rejected my request to stay there.

In Sand Creek I was Etta's friend, eventually her sister, and someone she would vouch for, so the people were happy to have me.

The relationship between Etta and I deepened over time with the sharing of stories and intimate details about our lives. But the initial friendship we developed allowed for my access to other friendships and relationships in the village, and set me up for my impending relationship with Auntie Doley.

## Auntie Doley

Auntie Doley had an infectious warmth about her. When she smiled, the wrinkles around her eyes crinkled and her face lit up. A short, plump, huggable woman, she would brush a little coconut oil into her long, dark, straight hair with a comb every morning. A soft spoken woman by nature, she could also be stern when she needed to be. Going to work at 6:30 am and returning after 6:30 pm, 6 days a week, she worked very hard. On her day off she would normally ride her bike two hours to reach the farm, where she processed cassava to ensure we never ran out of *farine* at home.

It is quite a question to ask someone you've never met if you can move into their house. When I first discussed moving to Sand Creek with Etta in Lethem, she explained that her mother was living alone in the village and would probably like to have a companion. When I arrived in the village, however, this was not the case—the 12 year old daughter of a neighbor, Theresa, was living with her. Auntie Doley did welcome me into her home anyway, on the condition that her husband would approve of the arrangement. She sent a message to the mining camp where he was working in 'the bush'<sup>6</sup> but let me move into the other bedroom in the house in the meantime.

Shortly after my arrival in the village, Etta returned to Lethem as Enzo was starting school. So it was just Auntie Doley, Theresa and myself living in the little green house. With the absence of Etta, the dynamic shifted slightly. Auntie Doley had the first Saturday of September

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<sup>6</sup> <sup>6</sup> 'The bush' is a Guyanese term for a remote area in the interior of the country, typically in the rainforest.

off work. Having a weekend day free was rare for her. I had only been living there officially for a few days, and in the beginning, Auntie Doley and I were shy with one another. Curiosity often won out over our shyness, so we would talk every evening when we both came home from school. Spending a free Saturday getting to know one another was a treat.

I woke up on that sunny Saturday around 7 am, late by village standards. Auntie Doley had sent Theresa to go ask her mother if she could help her, either by accompanying her mother to the farm or by minding her baby brother. Auntie Doley was outside when I got up, sitting next to a cutting board full of a rainbow of fresh ingredients. She patiently and carefully demonstrated how to make breakfast. We curried a pumpkin that came from her family farm, and she showed me how to make roti—a thin Indian bread that goes hand in hand with a curry. The process was complex, involving several steps and as I watched her I knew that despite her careful demonstration, I would find it very difficult to make on my own. After baking the roti on a flat pan, the last step was picking up the searing hot bread and clapping it in your hands, which Auntie Doley did with ease. This was misleading and she laughed when I yelped as the dough burnt my hands. We cut up canned sausages and fried them with some greens from the garden out front. This time spent with Auntie Doley, in her favorite space of the kitchen, helping her cook, was delightful. As my part in the kitchen, she asked me to make coffee, and handed me the Nescafe instant coffee and powdered milk, which I was not used to making or drinking. I added far too many coffee granules and despite the massive quantities of sugar I mixed in, the drink was bitter. Auntie Doley laughed at me again. I would grow accustomed to her good natured giggle at my basic inability to do things like cooking, washing my clothes, and working on the farm. As a remedy for the bitterness, I stirred in a lot more hot water and powdered milk and while it improved the taste by a landslide, it also meant we had a pitcher full of coffee.

As we were putting the finishing touches on our breakfast feast, Theresa walked in the door. She explained that her house was empty when she arrived and presumed that her mother must have already gone to the farm. Auntie Doley chastised Theresa for not going after her mother and said, ‘You must help your mother. She needs your help.’ It was decided that Theresa’s punishment for her ‘laziness’ would be deep cleaning the kitchen later that afternoon and we all sat down to enjoy the breakfast.

After drinking a few cups of coffee each, which made a small dent in the amount I had prepared, Auntie Doley and I were ready to ‘gaff’ or chat all day. We eagerly traded off asking each other questions for the whole morning and into the afternoon. We talked about what felt like everything under the sun.

Auntie Doley, working as the head cook in the dormitory, had a lot to say about the school. Early on in our conversation she mentioned *the sickness* and I asked a few questions because I was still unclear about the details. I had heard a bit about this emergent form of spirit possession that was affecting the girls living in the dormitory from various people, but this was the first time I discussed it with Auntie Doley. She told me that only the day before she had witnessed one of the girls getting sick and falling to the floor. The girl felt like someone was choking her. Auntie Doley explained that the girls see the spirit of an old Granny which takes over their bodies and they no longer remember what they are doing. She mentioned that the school building had never been blessed and that some of the girls don’t dispose of their Kotex<sup>7</sup> properly and by not burning them, the spirits could be attracted, implying that these reasons could be the causes of *the sickness*.

She began to tell me about her family. Auntie Doley has four living children, one son and three daughters. Leo is the eldest, and he lives up north and works in the mines. Rena and Bercina, the two middle daughters, have jobs working as cooks in mining areas in other regions of Guyana. She said that Bercina was the cleverest of her children in school but she couldn’t afford to send her to secondary school. She still regrets this and expressed that this was a hardship for both her and Bercina. She was able to make enough money to send Etta, her youngest daughter, but with disappointment in her tone and her eyes, she said ‘Etta didn’t carry through.’

Of all her children, we talked most about Etta. I already knew this from Mrs. Foo, but Auntie Doley brought up the fact that Jason–Etta’s partner–was technically still married to his first wife who lived in Georgetown. Auntie Doley explained that she had talked seriously with both Etta and Jason about how wrong they were, in the eyes of God, for their actions. ‘Only God can judge’, she said. She believed Jason’s wife may return at any time to take him back. She

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<sup>7 7</sup> In the village they would use the brand name Kotex to refer to all menstrual pads.

also expressed concern that Enzo thought Jason was his dad, but in fact, he was not. She has never met or seen Enzo's father. She told Etta that she would have to tell Enzo that Jason is not his father when he reaches the age of 11, because otherwise, he would never respect her. Auntie Doley explained that all her children had partners and children, but none of them were married. Her face drew in as she explained this. She was clearly troubled and explained that this kind of behavior would be frowned upon by God.

Immediately after, Auntie pulled a shoebox out of her room full of small cards, notes, letters and pictures of every shape and size. We went through the pictures one by one and she picked out a picture of her mother. It was a very old, black and white picture—hazy, fuzzy and blurred in the depths of time and memory and yet you could see the family resemblance. She explained that her parents were 'farm people' who lived off the land. In summer, when the children didn't have school, the whole family would go out to live at the farm for months at a time. They didn't eat any processed foods—no bags of rice or sugar. They had sugar cane on the farm if they needed to sweeten something. She said, 'The new generation is different. Before, you could just get a fish from your neighbor. He would give it to you. Now, with the new generation, you have to pay for it. Everything costs money.'

She told me that her older sister left to go to Georgetown 'to work as a maid in a foreigner's house' when Auntie Doley was 14. Auntie Doley said, 'She forsake the whole family. She only came back once when my mother was alive and left her son behind. She never came back for him. He was raised by his grandparents and my sister, but he started being bad. He started thieving things. He went to the mining area with his bad friends and kept thieving things there. His own friend shot him because he wasn't sharing the stolen goods fairly.'

After we finished looking through all the pictures, Auntie Doley got up from the kitchen table to do some washing and so I grabbed my big bag of dusty clothes and dragged it outside as well. We each filled a big plastic basin with water from the well, and I watched her pour a substantial quantity of washing powder in the water, stirring with her hands. I tried to mimic her exact movements as I never learned the proper way to hand wash clothes. Auntie Doley handed me a little wooden bench to sit on, and she settled down on the old tire in the front yard. I

watched her as she twisted the clothes, forcing the water through the fabric until everything was all sudsy. I tried to do the same.

With our hands deep in the basins splashing around with the soggy clothes, we kept ‘gaffing’<sup>8</sup>. Auntie would always rinse everything twice, so I did the same. She showed me where she kept the clothespins to hang the clothes and how to wedge a stick under the wire to prop the line up. The clothes were soaring in the air, halfway as tall as the mango tree. She warned me of the danger of cows, who love the smell of soap and will devour clothes that have that scent. ‘We must be vigilant any time the clothes are out’, said Auntie Doley.

There was no exact moment when the relationship between Auntie Doley and myself shifted into something deeper. This happened gradually, and through these kinds of activities, as she showed me how to cook, told me stories about her life, and demonstrated how to properly hand wash dirty clothes. This passage is also important because it is unique. This was the only instance where Auntie Doley ever went through her box of pictures with me, and was one of the handful of times she would speak about her parents or siblings. She talked about her living children more often, but she only told me the story of her two deceased children once.

Many months later, after Uncle Beltram returned to Sand Creek from the bush, Auntie Doley shared the story about her first two children with me. While Etta was the first to tell me her two eldest siblings had passed away, and Uncle had shared some details a few times when he was high<sup>9</sup>, this was the first time I ever heard Auntie Doley speak about it. We were all sharing a meal of fried fish and *farine* along with the first batch of homemade pineapple wine that I had made, with Auntie Doley’s guidance. After dinner all three of us were feeling the effects of the tropical wine and Uncle began telling me the heartbreaking story about their eldest daughter. Auntie Doley interjected, explaining that they had just returned from the farm one day and they were preparing to cook for her in laws. She sent Andronnie, their first daughter, out to fetch water. She asked, ‘How stupid am I to send such a small girl to fetch water?’ Auntie Doley was so occupied with getting everything ready, she forgot about Andronnie. It was guava season so she absentmindedly assumed her little daughter had just gone to eat guava. Leo, the baby at the

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<sup>8</sup> A Guyanese term for chatting and laughing.

<sup>9</sup> High is the term used in Guyana to indicate mild intoxication from the consumption of alcohol. It has a similar meaning to the term ‘tipsy’. Drunk, on the other hand, indicates a serious level of intoxication.

time, wasn't yet two. He kept repeating 'Andronnie fell, Andronnie fell.' But they didn't pay him any attention because he was so small. Auntie Doley said gravely, 'This is why it's important to listen to young children.' A little while later, when she actually thought about how long it had been since she saw Andronnie, she ran out to the pond<sup>10</sup> and saw the girl's toy floating there. This was during the rainy season so the water was high. Uncle Beltram had to dive three times before he found her body. It was so deep he almost couldn't hold his breath long enough to pull her up. Auntie Doley said her mother was deeply vexed with her after the girl died. In fact, she was so sad about losing her granddaughter that she died shortly afterwards. The guilt and loss Auntie Doley felt over this was palpable. It was etched on her face.

Auntie Doley had her first baby when she was 16. He was developmentally challenged and died very young. She had her second child, Andronnie, a few years later. Then they had Leo, who was 8 months old when Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram got married in the church. Auntie Doley was 21 when she wed Uncle Bertram. Rena and Bercina were then born, one after another, and finally Etta—the baby—was born, whom she calls, 'the prodigal daughter.'

The fact that Auntie only spoke about her dead children once is a reflection of the Amerindian approach to grieving the death of a loved one. This involves spending considerable time and energy forgetting the dead (Taylor 1993, McCallum 1999, Conklin 2001a), as to perpetually grieve a loved one puts the living at risk. She would speak of her living children more frequently, but would often emphasize that they never remember her demonstrated by the vignette at the beginning of this chapter. This kind of language highlights the emphasis Amazonian people put on living with their 'real kin'. McCallum notes how this notion is illuminated in the Cashinahua language, stating:

*Enabu*, literally 'my relatives', defines the group of people with whom a person should live...when distant or dead the physical sensation of their absence is described as *manu-* (to feel longing, to miss). This emotion can provoke illness in the pining relative, who might become too despondent to work or move [...] The Cashinahua feel that close kin should care for each other and have a right to expect such care. (2001:32)

While Auntie Doley was not too despondent to participate in her daily life, speaking of her children and asserting that they were forgetting her communicated her loneliness and sense

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<sup>10</sup> This is the word used in the village to refer to a household well.



of abandonment. She was not receiving the kind of care that she had a right to expect from her husband and children.

One afternoon Auntie Doley enthusiastically went over to see her sister, Auntie Torscilla, who lived next door, to inquire if she had any caterpillars to eat. She had *tarmín* indeed, and after watching my two Aunties devouring them I decided to pop one into my mouth. They were absolutely delicious. The older women laughed at my enthusiasm. I exclaimed that I wanted to eat all kinds of interesting things before I went back to the US. Auntie Torscilla reflected that she used to eat anything her mother ate, but now she doesn't eat all that stuff. She explained that since she lives alone, she can't eat iguana because she doesn't have anyone to catch it for her. At this point, she mentioned she was hoping to find someone to travel to the farm with her and stay overnight. I volunteered to go, and as Auntie Doley and I walked home I peppered her with questions about what I should pack for the trip to the farm.

Throughout my fieldwork, in the informal chats and everyday situations, I would discover pieces of information, and their significance often stood out only in retrospect. This short interaction with Auntie Torscilla illustrated what it meant to be living alone in Sand Creek. Auntie Torscilla explained the implications in terms of access to food. The sharing of food is a critically important way to demonstrate relationships of care, which I will expand on in the following chapter, but it is important to note that producing a meal was one of the difficulties faced by a person living alone. She declared she can't eat iguanas anymore, as she doesn't have anyone to catch them for her, and she also mentioned that she needed someone to accompany her to the farm, as it would be very unusual, and dangerous, for someone to go to the farm alone for an overnight stay. These are the real challenges associated with living alone.

When Etta first suggested I ask Auntie Doley if I could stay with her, she mentioned that her mother was living alone. However, when I arrived in the village, Theresa was living with her. Auntie Doley explained the mutually beneficial arrangement. While Theresa lived with her, Auntie would teach her how to cook and clean properly. In exchange for the assistance with these chores, Auntie would also buy her notebooks for school, hair ties, and other little necessities.

Living alone in an Amazonian community is difficult beyond the logistical problems associated with it, as detailed above. Conrad Feather notes amongst the Nahua of Peru, ‘...it is solitude, rather than hunger or discomfort, that constitutes the basis of suffering’ (Feather, 2010). Els Lagrou also notes the danger of being alone, without kin, amongst the Cashinahua, stating, ‘...a person so resents the absence of those who ‘made’ and looked after him or her, that were the person to live without them, he or she would no longer be the same but might become transformed into a stranger (*nawa*), a spirit (*yuxin*) or an animal’ (2000:152). Relationships with kin, that are actively performed, provide roots for persons in a community, and without these vital links a person’s identity becomes weak, and they may transform against their will into a non-human.

In Sand Creek they have approaches for mitigating this danger, such as Theresa living with Auntie Doley before I moved to the village. After it was clear I was staying in the village for a while, Theresa moved back in with her family. Although Auntie Torscilla did not have someone living with her, her daughter would often send her young children to stay with Auntie Torscilla, particularly overnight. One afternoon she walked around the corner with her daughter’s baby boy in tow. She told us the boy was hers now as he had stayed with her for three nights in a row. She explained, ‘He doesn’t even like his parents—I’m serious. His dad said his son is neglecting him. It’s like he doesn’t even have a son anymore.’ She clearly found this amusing, laughing as her grandson cuddled up to her. This is consistent with how Amerindian children circulate among kin and in no way diminishes how strongly their presence is valued (Peluso 2015).

Even though Auntie Doley and Auntie Torscilla were not actually living alone in practice, several of their family members were either living outside of the village permanently or for long periods of time, and this situation was not unique to them. As Auntie Doley noted early on in my stay in Sand Creek, ‘Everything costs money’, and the number of jobs available in Sand Creek are few and far between. As a result, many husbands, older sons and brothers, like Uncle Beltram and Leo, would spend the majority of the year away from their home community working in the mines.

## Uncle Beltram

Eventually I would grow very close to Uncle Beltram, but our relationship started off in a peculiar way. For the first four months I was living in his house I had never met him. During this time he was living up north, looking for gold and diamonds in a remote part of the Guyanese interior for many months at a time. There was the occasional rumor that found its way to our house that Uncle Beltram was going to come home at month's end, but he never seemed to actually arrive.

He did return to the Rupununi though, in the end of November 2014, a few days before my 28th birthday. Auntie Doley and I travelled out from Sand Creek to Letham on the minibus, so she could meet him and so I could meet my family (who were visiting from the US for my birthday). It had been many months since I had seen my parents and my brother, and my excitement was visibly apparent. Auntie Doley hadn't seen her husband for many months either, but she seemed just as calm and collected as always as we left the village. We arrived at Etta and Jason's house a few hours later and Enzo came barreling out the door to attack me with hugs. He also hugged his granny, and then I scooped him up and placed him on my hip. He had a massive grin across his face and he shouted, 'Grandpa is coming home Miss Courtney!' I said, 'That's right Enzo! Are you excited?' He nodded vigorously.

Auntie Doley and I settled in on the couch, as Enzo climbed over us like a jungle gym. Etta bustled around the kitchen preparing tea, bake and *tasso* for a breakfast feast fit for her father. It was almost 9am, the time when Uncle Beltram's minibus was due to arrive in Lethem. I assumed that we would be waiting at least a bit longer, since I have never (before or since) seen any form of transportation in Guyana arrive on time. However, the bus pulled up in front of the house, and a little girl with braided pigtails slowly hopped out. She came up to Auntie Doley and gave her a big hug. I thought this must be Diana, Rena's daughter. She was travelling with her grandfather so she could spend Christmas time in the village.

Uncle Beltram stepped out of the minibus. I immediately understood why his nickname was Uncle Tall man, as he was much taller than most of the men I had met in the village. He was slim, and despite the wrinkles on his face, undoubtedly a result of many years of mining in the sun, he had a youthful look about him. He was dressed in smart clothes, plaid shorts and a

button up shirt. He walked slowly towards Auntie Doley and gave her a hug. While there were no massive displays of affection, they shared a brief kiss—if I had glanced away for a second I would have missed it—and then they just settled in right next to each other like no time had passed at all. I was standing in the background while this all occurred, and after they sat down I came up to shake Uncle Beltram’s hand. He was reserved but kind, and gave me a smile. We all sat down for breakfast, and Uncle Beltram expressed his amazement that I, a white girl, was eating *farine* and *tasso*.

It was challenging for me to communicate with Uncle Beltram because he was suffering from partial deafness. He lost much of his hearing in a diving accident three years before I came to the village. He started diving for gold when he was young, in his teens, and continued to do so until the accident. He once explained to me that the divers were usually in the water for at least five hours at a time, and it could be very dangerous. They would dive deep and explore tight passageways looking for gold or diamonds. On the day of the incident, Uncle Beltram was underwater for a few hours already when a massive chunk of leaves and soil fell on his head and knocked him out. The other divers dragged his body to the surface and he was bleeding from his ears, eyes, nose and mouth. He assured me that it hurt ‘bad, bad’. The ‘boss man’ gave him an injection to make him sleep, and he passed out for thirteen hours. When he woke, most of the pain was gone, but he was still bleeding a little. He couldn’t hear anymore and he hasn’t been able to hear ever since. When he was telling me the story, I asked him if he stopped diving right after that. He said, ‘No, of course not. I was diving again the next day. It was my job.’

After the morning of our initial meeting I didn’t have a lot of time to spend with Uncle Beltram. I was spending time with my family in Lethem, Sand Creek and Brazil and then I left Guyana and travelled at the end of the year. So, when I returned to the village in early 2015, we were quite friendly with one another but a bit shy. By this time I was no longer teaching at the school, and I was often sitting around the house in the afternoon, either reading or writing field notes and waiting for something to happen. This gave Uncle and myself a lot of time to get to know one another. One afternoon, I was writing in my room, and our neighbors Auntie Helen and Grandpa Manuel peered in my window. Auntie Helen said that I needed a man in the bed with me since it’s so cold. I said you may be right and we all laughed. They told me they were

going to go drink with Uncle Beltram and I said I would come have a little taste in a few minutes.

They were drinking juice and high wine, a strong Guyanese spirit, mixed together in a bottle with a pitcher of juice on the other side. Uncle Beltram was already a little high and he loved to tell stories while he was drinking. When I came into the kitchen to take a sip or two of the fiery liquid, he immediately started telling me the story of his first time diving for gold. He was 14 years old and visiting his sister in Lethem on his summer holiday. He was happy to see her since it had been 3 or 4 years. One day his older cousin dropped by her house and asked if Uncle Beltram wanted to go to work to make some money. He was very tall already but also very 'fine'<sup>11</sup>. Before this summer he used to work at Dadanawa ranch for 7 Guyanese dollars a day. He was interested in making more money, and made up his mind to go with his cousin. He asked his sister not to tell their mother. It was a Thursday when his cousin first asked him to go and they left the following Sunday.

At first Uncle didn't dive. He washed pots and burst firewood and did odd jobs around the mining camp. He said when he first made \$5000 Guyanese dollars<sup>12</sup> from working all the odd jobs, he was ready to go home – he thought he was rich! It was the first time he had ever seen so much money. One day his cousin took him to watch the divers. He observed as they put on their suits and the 'lung' [the tank] and dived down under the water. On his first attempt to go underwater he was breathing water in his nose and had to come up to the surface right away. Even so, he prayed every day they would let him dive. Finally his cousin said, 'It's your turn- you get to dive!' He was so excited. He said there was so much gold in the Mazaruni–'too much gold!'–they called it El Dorado. He explained that a person could gather up 300 ounces. The boss would only give them \$160 Guyanese dollars (about 50p) for each ounce of gold, so that's when he first learned to 'thief'. He would take a little gold for himself to sell for better prices. He only worked there for part of June, July, August and part of September and then headed back home. He knew he had to finish school. He went home with lots of money–\$167,000 Guyanese dollars.

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<sup>11</sup> A Guyanese term for very thin.

<sup>12</sup> While this amount of money may not have been equivalent to a lot of money in GBP, in the context of the village, where at that time not many people had access to a lot of money, this amount would go a very long way.

He returned to Sand Creek right away to surprise his parents. He bought them all kinds of presents—clothes and housewares. His mother was overjoyed to see him. They both started crying. She assumed he was at Dadanawa or in Brazil but he told her first he had gone to town [Georgetown], then to the bush to work and he showed her he had brought lots of money for the family. His parents bought some alcohol with his money but they didn't have any food. He went over to Auntie Doley's house 'like a big man.' Her parents used to mind pigs—and he bought a big pig with \$200 Guyanese dollars—without any problem. They threw a raucous welcome home party.

Uncle Beltram said he knew he had to go back to school but he was already a month late. He explained that at some point, I think around when he first got back to the village, he and a couple of his buddies got drunk off strong wine and went to school. The headmaster, Winston Pugsley, was furious and sent them all away, threatening expulsion. All the other boys got licks<sup>13</sup>, but Uncle's mom just talked with him about it. As he was only 14 and wanted to finish school, he went back to the headmaster and implored Sir Pugsley to allow him back in school. The headmaster kept yelling at him but did eventually permit him back to finish the school year as long as he promised never to drink or fight at school again. Despite his misbehavior, or perhaps because of it, all the girls in school liked Uncle Beltram because he was such a 'big man', but he had his eyes on Doley even then. With a grin, he boasted that even though all the ladies loved him, he chose the best one. That was the last year he spent in school and afterwards he went back to diving full time.

By the time Uncle Beltram's story drew to a close, we had polished off the high wine. He explained that they wouldn't have any more alcohol until he got back from roundup, much to Auntie Helen and Grandpa Manuel's disappointment. Uncle Beltram wanted to find one of his cows and slaughter it that night, so we all went off in different directions—he jumped on his horse to find the cow, Grandpa Manuel and Auntie Helen went back home across the yard, and I settled into my hammock.

Throughout my time in Sand Creek, Uncle Beltram would often regale me with tales about his extraordinary life. He was well travelled, and told me stories of times he spent in

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<sup>13</sup> A beating.

Brazil, Venezuela, and even Colombia once. Working in all kinds of odd jobs, he spent time living all over Guyana. This stood in sharp contrast to the stories Auntie Doley would share with me, which almost exclusively revolved around the village and her family. She had crossed the border to Brazil in the past to visit her sister, but she never would leave the village for great lengths of time.

Uncle Beltram would occasionally suggest that Auntie Doley come with me to America to ‘see the place’. Once I was discussing this with Cowboy Andrew and he explained to me very seriously that this would not be good for Auntie Doley. He asserted that she probably wouldn’t even want to get her passport, because she couldn’t leave Sand Creek for any length of time since she would worry after everything—her chickens, her garden, her farm and her family. In terms of Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram’s generation, men were and continue to be much more mobile than women.

## Generations and Gendered Movement

Along with providing a thorough introduction to my three main informants and elucidating the context of village life, these vignettes also highlight many of the themes I hope to draw out throughout the thesis, particularly the themes of long term separation and gendered movement. As illustrated above, Auntie Doley is the only person in her family who lives in Sand Creek full time. Etta visits sometimes, and Uncle Beltram lives in the village sporadically for periods of time, but he always leaves again.

The fact that during my time in Sand Creek I noticed a lot of discourse in the village about women living alone, speaks to a wider reality in Amerindian life—that gender informs the way people move in the Rupununi. It is also important to note that Sand Creek is a village with a secondary school, so parents with school-aged children did not have to say goodbye to their kids. In other nearby villages, where young people must leave to attend boarding school for most of the year, this could increase the number of households facing long-term separation from their kin. With their men in the mines and their children in school, the logistical and

spiritual implications of living alone are becoming a reality many women of the Rupununi must face.

There has been a shift recently that can be seen through the experiences of Uncle Beltram, Auntie Doley and their children. In the not so distant past, illustrated by the sharply different stories Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram shared about their youth, young men would often travel, but young women would stay at home in the village with their families. This was not always black and white, highlighted by the story of Auntie Doley's sister who went to Georgetown to become a domestic worker. It is important to note that she did not return to the village except to abandon her son there, and that she disconnected from her kin and community. This is one of the sharp distinctions between Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram's generation and Etta's generation. All of Auntie Doley's children have effectively moved away from their home village, and notably, not only her son, but also all three daughters. I will return to the question of gender and how it influenced movement in local history, as well as how this is changing, in the last chapter of the thesis.

This chapter highlights several questions about the centrality of co-residence and the social processes associated with kinship production in Amazonian communities. It addresses how long term separation associated with boarding school education, as well as other motivations for extended stays outside of the village, such as mining or other kinds of work, impacts these processes. In the following chapter, I will explore the affective side of kinship by taking a closer look at the social processes that produce and maintain kinship ties.



# Chapter 2:

## Consubstantiality, Community and Conviviality

### Chapter Outline

This chapter will build upon the understanding of kinship depicted in Chapter 1 in three distinct ways to further elucidate how Amerindian communities are sustained and experienced. First, I will explore how kinship relationships are built and maintained through the sharing of space and substance. Next, I will demonstrate how smaller kinship groups work together to build the wider community. Finally, I will explore the complexity involved in the maintenance of these kinds of communities, as conviviality is fragile and can be lost.

### Consubstantiality

In the first chapter I noted that human beings are made into persons through kinship relationships in Amazonia; I will now explore the social processes that allow this to take place. Human bodies are produced and reproduced by those around them, and this transformation takes place through consubstantiality—the sharing of food and substance. These processes not only create each person, but simultaneously create a community (Gow 1989, Lagrou 2000, McCallum 2001, Mentore 2005, Rival 2005, Santos-Granero 2009, Vilaça 1999). The sharing of space and substance is the most important aspect of community formation in the Amazon, which illustrates the centrality of co-residence and affective life. Every member of a collective, starting with close kin and then moving out into the wider community, is involved in each

other's creation, achieved through the social processes associated with consubstantiality, such as living in the same space, cooking and sharing food and demonstrating mutual care of kin. This results in a wider 'community of similars' (Overing 2003:308).

Consubstantiality has been noted throughout Amazonia, and there are several ethnographic examples that illustrate the same kind of processual personhood that emerged during my time with the Wapishana people of Sand Creek. As social relationships are mediated through the body in lowland South America, the satisfaction of corporeal desire, through the sharing of food and substance, results in the creation of social ties (Gow 1989:581). The fabrication of the body is a continual process and kinship is constituted through sharing food with your parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents and children and sharing sexual substance with your marital partner (Viveros de Castro 1998). Gow describes this lifelong process amongst the Piro of Peru. While babies are born with the potential to be persons, they have to be made into people through sharing food and responding with kin terms. The term *nsbinikanchi* in the Piro language denotes mind, memory, love, and thought and is embodied by Piro people through the sharing of substance with kin, which results in a 'fully subjective organ of kinship' (Gow 2000:51). Conklin describes something similar amongst the Wari' of Brazil—that all the bodies of family are part of an 'organic interactive whole' (2001a:118).

As the constant production and reproduction of kinship relationships is necessary, much of daily life in Sand Creek revolved around sharing space, substance and stories with kin and neighbors. Most families spent a great deal of time working together on the farm, growing and processing cassava and other kinds of food. Women spent a lot of time making *farine*, cassava bread and *parakari*, cassava beer, while men devoted a large amount of time to hunting and fishing in order to provide meat for their families. As the following vignettes will illustrate, many daily tasks not only focused on the consumption of food and drink with family but also took place in the vicinity of such activities.

One night, several months into my stay in the village, I found myself tossing and turning in bed. The house felt too hot and I couldn't fall asleep. Sometime after midnight, I heard some banging on the locked door, and Uncle Beltram's familiar voice exclaiming, 'Inside!' waking Auntie Doley. I climbed out from under my mosquito net and went to open up the door. Like

many times before, Uncle Beltram had gone out fishing as soon as the sun went down. He normally wouldn't come back until the sun was rising, but this night he was successful right away and was holding a big bag full of fish. He poured them into a basin right outside our front door with a grin and Auntie Doley started cleaning them while I put on the pot with water and *cassareep*<sup>14</sup>. We cooked up two big pots of fish pepperpot. I set the table, scooped out a big bowl of *farine*, and boiled water for tea. We sat down for a delicious dinner together just after 1 am.

Over the meal, Auntie explained that when she was young, her father would go out fishing at sundown as well. Since all the kids would go to bed without food, her mother would wake them up in the middle of the night for dinner whenever her father returned. We quietly munched on the fresh and spicy fish and Auntie smiled and told me that we were having a real Wapishana dinner.

This dinner was significant because a successful marriage in the village was illustrated by the exchange of food. The reciprocal and gendered acts of fishing and then preparing the meal achieve two things. They not only satisfy hunger, but they also demonstrate mutual care. These exchanges reinforce the centrality of kinship bonds in everyday life, between husband and wife and parents and children.

Throughout my fieldwork, Auntie Doley and her sister, Auntie Torscilla, spent a lot of time with me on the farm, showing me how to process cassava and make cassava bread and *farine*. They also showed me how to make different kinds of local alcohol, such as *parakari* and pineapple wine. When I first arrived in the village I was hopeless at making Amerindian cuisine, but Auntie Doley patiently showed me how to prepare several meals. These acts of providing sustenance, processing and cooking food, and making alcohol, have a deeper significance. By teaching me all these things, Auntie Doley was reinforcing our relationship, and showing that she cared for me. In turn, I was building friendships, kin relationships, and community in substantial ways when I shared the food and drink I made.

One evening when Auntie Doley returned from the farm, she complained that there were caterpillars infesting all of her cassava plants. I asked her how she could get rid of them

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<sup>14</sup> A thick black sauce made from boiling down the poison extracted from the cassava root when it is processed to make farine or cassava bread. This sauce is the base of pepperpot, as well as several other Guyanese dishes.

and she said with a wide smile, 'We eat them!' She wasn't exaggerating about the infestation and over the month we ate bowls and bowls of the green and black caterpillars. Every time we ate them, however, Auntie would remind me that eating the chrysalis was even more delicious. Although I was hesitant to try a caterpillar the first time, by the end of the month I was used to eating bugs, and I was eager to try the chrysalis. One Saturday night, Uncle Beltram came home from the farm and proudly presented us the brown, crunchy pods. Auntie Doley prepared them for dinner, frying them up until they were crispy, much like the caterpillars. They were delicious. Each bite tasted like soft creamy, garlic cheese.

As we sat down at the dinner table to enjoy the meal, Uncle Beltram regaled us with some more of his stories about his extraordinary life. He held up one of the chrysalis in front of his face, and explained how hard it was to get food while he was living in Region 8. He recollected how once he went with a group of men from a village to hunt a bush cow. They tracked it for eight days before they finally caught it. Then they cut it up into huge chunks, one for each person to carry. As they had followed the cow in many different directions over the final few days of the hunt, they found themselves lost in the forest and had no idea which direction to take to get back to the village. Luckily, Uncle Beltram knew how to use a compass since he previously worked for the geological survey during one of his many odd jobs over the years, and he told the men he could get them home. They didn't believe him but they followed him anyway. Finally, after travelling a long way they got back to a place they recognized. The journey took many days and by the time they reached the village the meat was already stinking. They didn't have time to roast it when they killed it and it was raining the whole time they were travelling so they couldn't salt it and dry it either. They ate the rotten meat though, as they didn't have anything else. He said they would eat pepper pot with rats, caterpillars, and frogs. Once in Region 8 Uncle Beltram even killed a sloth and cooked it up. He said, 'You can't waste that meat. Hunger is the best sauce.'

A lot of daily life is not only spent on producing food, but as illustrated above, food and drink are very often the topic of discussion over a shared meal. On this occasion, knowing that the chrysalis were Auntie's favorite food, and that I was excited to try them, Uncle went out of his way to bring home this Rupununi delicacy. He then entertained us with the tales of the strange food he ate while in Region 8, explaining that the food was scarce there. This specific

focus in Amerindian communities on what kind of food is consumed and with whom is due to their understanding of the impermanence of bodies. Bodies are molded by the kind of food they consume and the kinds of social relations they engage in. One of the first questions Auntie asked me was what kind of food I missed the most while in Guyana. Due to consubstantiality, my body was different when I arrived because I was used to eating different food. Uncle pointed out in his story about living in Region 8 that the Patamona people are different, because they eat things that Wapishana people would rarely, if ever, eat, like frogs and rats and sloths.

The impermanence of Amerindian bodies is related to an underlying Amerindian cosmology that Viveros de Castro was the first to describe—perspectivism. It stands in contrast to a Western understanding of the difference between nature and culture. Perspectivism is the notion that all humans and animals have the same condition of humanity, and the body itself negotiates the actual experience of the world (Viveros de Castro, 1998). In other words, animals see themselves leading social lives, just as people do, but their bodies distinguish what actions they are actually experiencing. For example, a human could see a jaguar drinking blood from the carcass of its prey, but from the jaguar's own perspective, it is drinking cassava beer in the same way a human would (Viveros de Castro, 1998).

Vilaça highlights how consubstantiality and perspectivism come together in the threat of a shift in perspective:

For the Wari', one of the main defining factors of corporal specificity (whether of the individual or the species) is diet. They say: we are Wari', we eat larvae, we drink maize beer, and so on; the white lip peccary eats fruits; the jaguar eats raw flesh. Later on we shall see that when a shaman wants to change species, he starts to accompany the animals of the new species and eat their food. However, while the diet produces identity, since eating the same food forms similar bodies, sharing food is also a strong indicator of a prior identity and those who eat together affirm their similarity. (2010:100)

These observations indicate not only the power of sharing food and substance to solidify similarity, but also the possible danger of failing to follow these proscriptions. As Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram provided and cooked food for me to consume, not only did my body become more similar to theirs, but through consuming the same food as one another and their kin, they also reproduced their own identities as real persons.

The mutually negotiated identity of a person is never permanent, however, and must be constantly maintained in order to avoid an unwanted shift in identities, not only in Sand Creek, but throughout Amazonia. Many ethnographers have noted that sharing of particular kinds of food and sexual substance is the way in which bodies are constructed and reconstructed to prevent unwanted bodily transformations in lowland South America (Santos-Granero 2009, Vilaça 1999 Viveros de Castro, 1998). As identity and sociality are always subject to change, they must both be recreated constantly through the hard work and effort of everyone in the community. Aparecida Vilaça stresses this explicitly: ‘Humanity is not something inherent, but rather a position that must be fought for all the time’ (1999:180). Only impermanence remains constant in the Amerindian worldview.

This common condition of humanity across species supports a transformative view of identity. Many Amazonian myths, including some I heard in Sand Creek, touch on this idea and indicate the danger of an unpredicted or unwanted shift in perspective. Often the people in the myths unknowingly and without warning assume the perspective of an animal or a spirit. This explains the care and social work that indigenous communities put into constantly reproducing humanity. As illustrated through these stories I shared, consubstantiality plays a central role in maintaining the identities of the people within a community and preserving their human perspective. The creation of identity is never final, never static, and never complete and must be carefully and consistently maintained by monitoring what goes into the body (Rival 2005). It follows that farming, cooking and eating together plays a central role in everyday life in Sand Creek, not only to create kin, but also to create a wider community.

## Community

As twilight fell, many months into my stay in Sand Creek, I was in the house boiling water and preparing to cook dinner when I heard Auntie Doley calling out ‘Miss, miss—you have to come sell this beef cuz our eyes aren’t good!’ That was the precise moment I received my first big responsibility, something which Wapishana parents expect from their daughters. It was now

my duty to ‘sell out’ a huge cow and collect all the money. Uncle Beltram and the *vaqueros*<sup>15</sup> had killed the cow under the mango tree before the sun set over the mountain. As it grew darker, they efficiently removed the hide and used their cutlasses to quarter the animal. They carried over the immense sections of meat and tied them up outside under the tarpaulin.

Word of fresh beef travelled quickly through the village and we had a few customers right away. Cowboy Andrew cut the smaller pieces for me and I weighed them on the hanging scale, packed them in plastic and collected the money. Uncle Beltram set aside a pile of meat and bones for each vaquero who helped with roundup and the slaughter. Each vaquero chose his pile.

My British teacher friends, Sam and Alex, were also at the house and Uncle carried over a bucket of cherry wine for them and the vaqueros. While the men were drinking, Abbie, Auntie and I were cooking in the kitchen. I quietly mentioned to Auntie that I was worried we didn’t have enough food to feed everyone who was at the house. She said ‘No, we don’t have enough *farine* to feed them.’ This was not literally true. I thought we might run out of chicken or beef, but we actually had two full buckets of *farine*. However, this was how Auntie indicated who we were and were not compelled to share with, as these kinds of rules were complex and never explicitly explained. As *farine* takes days to produce, this was always the particular food Auntie would use to illustrate who we were obligated to feed and who we were not.

This was more clearly indicated in another instance later on in my fieldwork, when our neighbor came by to request some *farine* for herself and her kids while Auntie Doley was at work. I ended up giving her a small bag. When Auntie Doley came home I mentioned what had happened, and Auntie Doley was frustrated with our neighbor for asking and irritated with me for sharing the *farine*. She explained that our neighbor had ‘big’ daughters who could easily work on their family farm, or help Auntie Doley on her farm, and that their mother was often out ‘sporting’ and drinking, and never went to the farm herself. Auntie Doley worked in the dormitory 6 days of the week, but still made time to go to the farm to make *farine*. As our

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<sup>15</sup> Vaquero means cowboy in Portuguese. Due to the proximity of Brazil and the emphasis on ranching that spanned both borders, Portuguese words pertaining to cattle rearing were often used throughout the Rupununi.

neighbor was not being reciprocal by helping Auntie Doley at the farm, or sending her daughters to help, we were no longer expected to share with her.

That evening, Auntie Doley was happy to share her *farine* with Cowboy Andrew and the teachers, who stayed for dinner. We were dining elbow to elbow at the packed kitchen table. Auntie Doley made beef pepper pot with some of the fresh meat and it was my first attempt at making chicken boily. I thought it was pretty good after a bite, but Auntie Doley informed me of my mistakes—I had put too much water and I didn't put the salt in soon enough. She didn't descend into fits of laughter like she had the other morning when I burnt a pancake, so I assumed I was making some progress in the kitchen.

After dinner all of our guests thanked us for the food and slowly walked out into the dark savannah. Auntie Doley and I carried out all the plates, pots and cutlery and it began to rain while we were washing wares in the yard and gossiping. It was just a drizzle at first but soon enough the sky started pouring buckets on us and our clothes were quickly soaked through. Uncle Beltram popped his head out the front door and started scolding Auntie Doley for having me out in the rain, shouting 'Miss will get sick tomorrow!'

It was getting late so we decided to get ready for bed. I went outside to brush my teeth and noticed a huge group of twenty or more cows gathered under the mango tree, in the same spot where Uncle Beltram and the vaqueros had killed the cow earlier that evening. The cows were making lots of noise, snorting and mooing and crying. Startled, I shouted into the house and asked Auntie Doley what was going on with the cows. She explained that they always behave this way after we've killed one of their friends. In this simple statement, Auntie Doley illustrated her understanding of perspectivism. This act of mourning for the cows was equivalent to the way people mourn the loss of their loved ones, but the differentiation between cow and human bodies prevented us from seeing the experience from their perspective.

The next morning I woke up to Auntie Doley shouting at Uncle Beltram. When I came outside, the look on her face demonstrated that she was 'vexing with him bad'—a Guyanese way of expressing extreme frustration. She turned to me and with an exasperated tone, explained, that she had asked him to wait and kill the cow in the morning but he did not listen and now parts of the cow were spoiled. I think it was the intestine she was cleaning that had gone off. She



sighed and said they would cook it for the puppies. She continued cleaning out the digestive tract with a disgruntled face. Not a single piece of the animal went to waste.

Auntie Torscilla dropped by just after that and Auntie Doley gave her sister one of the cow's stomachs, called the book, because it has so many parts to it that it looks like it has pages of a book. Auntie Torscilla was delighted and, with a wide smile on her face, said to me, 'This is my favorite part.'

Auntie Celeste walked across the open space between our house and the shop. I identified her by her shock of gray hair long before she walked into our yard. She came to buy meat. Auntie Doley smiled at her and said, 'You never come and visit Miss Courtney.' Auntie Celeste replied, 'I don't have time.' Auntie Doley explained, 'She always remembers you and talks about how sweet your *kari* is.' Auntie Celeste laughed and smiled at this compliment, and Auntie Doley slipped an extra pound of meat in her bag free of charge.

In the late morning as we distributed the meat, I was careful to note who received a gift of beef. All the vaqueros who helped to catch the cow received their meat the night before. Auntie Doley gave Auntie Torscilla her favorite part of the animal. All of our immediate neighbors received free meat, including Auntie Helen and her family and Auntie Laura and her family. I heard Auntie Doley scolding Uncle Beltram that morning, saying, 'Give to your neighbors!' as I think giving meat to Auntie Laura wasn't one of Uncle Beltram's top priorities. But he gave me a plate and I carried the beef over to Auntie Laura's house. Our interaction was very brief— she just asked if we had slaughtered, took a plate, transferred the meat, washed my plate and gave it back. When I returned from the errand, Uncle had left to bring meat to Auntie Zen and Emma, his sister and her daughter-in-law. Cowboy Andrew's wife and her children came over to collect the cow's head.

As I mentioned, not a single piece of the animal went to waste, and tracing the ways in which the meat was distributed highlighted the obligations a person has towards their family and neighbors. While kinship relationships can be very beneficial, there are several expectations that come along with them such as sharing beef if you slaughter a cow. The gifting of meat shows how the sharing of food clarifies the proximity of relationships, as when Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram's close family were gifted meat, irrespective of whether or not they lived close by.

Neighbors were also gifted beef, emphasized by Auntie Doley scolding Uncle Beltram to ensure he did send beef to Laura and her family. Beyond this, we can see that those who helped with the slaughter and the breakdown of the cow, the vaqueros, were rewarded for their assistance with free meat and bones, but they were not invited to share our meal on the evening of the slaughter. Cowboy Andrew, who was also our neighbor, not only helped with the slaughter but stayed later than all the vaqueros and he was invited to share the whole meal with us. Also, his wife and children were invited to share breakfast the following morning. Auntie Doley also gave Auntie Celeste an extra pound for free after mentioning my love for her *kari*, which she had generously shared with me in the past, forming a basis for our friendship.

All day Uncle and I were around the house selling beef. We sold 54 pounds of meat and a cow heel. In the late morning, Deputy *Toshao* dropped by to buy beef for the community work. I explained to Uncle what it was for and he promptly packed up a bag of beef. I quickly double checked with him that we didn't need payment and handed it to Deputy *Toshao* and said 'This is our family's contribution.' He was very thankful and said they would remember it and announce it during the next meeting.

Uncle Beltram gifted beef to the Deputy *Toshao* for the community work session, to feed the people working on projects that benefited the whole village. This kind of generosity towards the wider community was very important, and almost all the food and drink passed around at community work was donated from families. For large scale community work projects or community celebrations, like Christmas, the men would organize hunting parties together to provide the food, and the women would work together to process enough cassava. The proximity of relationships Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram had with other members of the community could be traced along the lines of whether or not the exchange of meat was free or cost money.

Illustrating another instance of reciprocity and sharing, one Friday Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram held a *manior*— 'a self-help'<sup>16</sup>— which entails family, neighbors and friends accompanying them to the farm to help weed and plow. My ankle was fresh out of the cast from

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<sup>16</sup> Manior (in Wapishana) and self-help (in English) are both local terms for work parties throughout Wapishana villages in Southern Guyana.

a recent break, so I could not join them at the farm. However, I knew they would all be coming back to the house after working all day, and that *manior* parties were greeted with food and drink upon return. I wasn't exactly sure what to prepare. Even though I had a vague idea from attending other *maniors* in the past, this was my family's first proper *manior* since I moved to Sand Creek. I knew there were several buckets of *kari*, and Auntie Doley never explicitly asked me to prepare anything, but as food was normally a big aspect of the reception when the workers returned from the farm, I decided I would try to make something.

Auntie Helen came back from the farm early and started straining the *kari*. I confessed to her that I wasn't entirely sure how to throw a *manior* party, and asked for help. She gave me a knowing smile and sprang into action. First things first, she served up two tall cups of *kari* for both of us, which tasted quite strong, and then we cracked beers and got started on the chicken, both of which I purchased from Azad's shop. She cut it up into sizeable pieces for me as I always struggled cracking the bones with my cutlass. She then made the executive decision that we would make chicken curry. I set aside the leftover pieces—the neck and liver—and explained that we normally boiled them for the dogs. She asked if she could take them for her family, and I said of course. Her three youngest children (she has 11 in total) were following us all over the place, and she would send them to do little things like fetch garlic, draw water and wash wares. I remarked about how helpful they were and Auntie Helen joked that I needed to make a few children of my own so they could help me with the chores.

As we started to fry the curry in the kitchen, Auntie Torscilla and Auntie Mary came home and joined us. Somehow the conversation drifted to my less-than-ideal love life. Auntie Helen asked me a very open ended question about my former boyfriend. I knew she and the others knew that we had broken up. She still asked the question in a way that allowed me to explain what happened. All the Aunties were sitting at the kitchen table, and as they listened to my story, they sipped their beers and nodded sympathetically.

Auntie Torscilla told me about her own story of a broken heart. She had her first child with a man who didn't care about their child. She said she was devastated when he left the village and abandoned her. Her parents helped her until she met the man who would become her husband who did not hesitate to take care of both her and the child. Although we never

directly addressed what's going on with Auntie Helen's husband, who works in the gold mines up north, he hadn't been home in close to a year. I didn't know if he ever sent money, or if she had to rely on her father—Grandpa Manuel. He was not only very old but also seemingly drunk a lot of the time and she had 11 kids. Only the five youngest were living at home though, and I think sometimes her older boys, who also work in the mines, were sending her some money.

Inside this feminine space of the kitchen, while we cooked and prepared the food and drink for those still at the farm, I was not surprised that the women brought up my recent break-up, as it was a cause for concern.. Like Auntie Helen had earlier, the women in my life in Sand Creek often made jokes about how I needed to make children. I wasn't in the same category of woman as they were, as I didn't have a husband or any children, and thus was not a 'complete woman' despite my relatively old age. I will explore this concept of a 'complete woman' more deeply in the final chapter of the thesis, but it is important to note that preparing the food and drink to receive a *manior* is an important feminine act of mutual care for kin, neighbors and friends who accompanied family members to the farm.

Eventually, Auntie Mary went to fetch her large music box from her house and the evening slowly but surely turned into a party. Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram came back from the farm late in the afternoon. They were some of the last people to arrive back home. I offered to bring them chicken curry and beer but they said they were tired and just wanted to sit down. A while later, Uncle Beltram let me bring him a plate of food. I told Auntie Doley I didn't really know how to throw the party but I had tried. In response, she looked around at all the tipsy people munching on chicken curry and she just laughed.

As the sun went down, the party turned more spirited. The loud music reverberated in the open savannah and attracted some people, mostly neighbors and some school boys. Everyone started dancing to the *fórró* and *soca* tunes—the most popular music in the Rupununi. I spent the majority of the evening sitting off to the side in the grass with the Aunties, drinking *kari*. Auntie Torscilla was dancing up a storm that night with several of the gentlemen of the village. She saved us the first time we ran out of *kari* by retrieving a bucket from her house. Finally, when we ran out of *kari* the second time, everyone packed up and headed off.

The reciprocity of food, drink and work is clear in both of these ethnographic vignettes, and this is how smaller kin groups work together to build wider communities. The *manior* party highlights the same principles of generosity and reciprocity illustrated by the gifting of meat. All of the people who travelled out to Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram's farm to assist with weeding, pulling out cassava, and processing it, were provided with chicken curry, *parakari* and in some cases beer. This is a typical way of thanking those who have offered help. It is important to note the gendered aspect of the reciprocity. Both men and women take part in these work parties, but the women work together to provide the food and drink afterwards. While it is not absolutely necessary, I never once heard of a large 'self-help' party where the hosts did not provide food or beverage afterwards. In fact, in my experience 'self-helps' were called directly in relation to the amount of alcohol the women of the house produced. As Auntie Doley and Auntie Torscilla made several batches of *kari*, they could ask their neighbors and family to turn up for a 'self-help'. It is an unspoken agreement and it appears unlikely that anyone would provide help if they did not anticipate this kind of reciprocity afterwards. Once again we look to consubstantiality, the sharing of food and drink, to not only create kinship relationships, but to reinforce connections amongst the wider community.

## Conviviality

As I've established throughout the previous passages, personhood is shaped and molded by the social relationships a person engages in, and the space and substance they share. As such, building of community is vitally important in Amerindian lives. In lowland South America human beings are constituted in two distinct ways—by human agency as autonomous persons, but more importantly by feelings of belonging to a wider collective life (Lagrou 2000:52). Essentially, a person can only understand themselves through the complex web of social relationships they develop and maintain throughout their lives (Lagrou 2000, McCallum 2001). It has been noted throughout Amazonia that sociality can only be created through individual people's agency, and as a result sociality and autonomy constitute one another (Overing and Passes 2000:14). Current theory in the Amazon has focused on the affective side of sociality, conviviality, which is never static, and always has the potentiality to change (Overing and Passes

2000). It must be constantly (re)produced with intentionality of the autonomous self by the members of the community. Daily, it is built and rebuilt through the collective working and speaking together (Passes 2000) and maintaining good relations with one another by actively avoiding negative feelings. In the following vignette, the Mother's Day party provides a window into the way that sociality and conviviality are actively created, maintained and experienced by the people of Sand Creek.

Mother's Day was a big holiday in Sand Creek for celebration, drinking and revelry, and not only a day to celebrate mothers, but also grandmothers and aunts and all female relatives. Auntie Doley came home early from work that afternoon. I had made cupcakes to surprise her and as soon as she got home I offered her one with a beer. She mentioned how she had seen people by Emma's shop on her way home but she didn't stop by. Earlier in the afternoon Uncle Beltram asked me if I was invited to that party. I told him I wasn't, to which he replied that he wasn't either, but since it was his family (Emma is his nephew's wife) he was planning on going by anyway. When I told Auntie what he said, she explained that she didn't like to go there because they 'dose you up': 'You have to drink so fast then they give you another and you can't enjoy.' You can't just sit with a beer and gaff. I explained that I used to like to hang out with Emma but we had a misunderstanding about how much money I owed her at one point, and we haven't spoken much since then. Auntie Doley said, 'Yes, that's how they stay. They will even charge family and close family, for rides to Lethem and places. It's all about money.' She explained that she loved them because they were her family but she didn't like to go to their place. She would prefer to stay by herself because then she has no trouble.

About a half hour later we heard the loud rumble of an approaching motorbike. Medex Lenski (Uncle's nephew, Emma's husband) pulled up in the yard. Clearly a bit high, he announced 'I'm here for my Auntie! It's Mother's Day!' He explained enthusiastically that he and his family had been cooking all day and we were all invited to the shop. They had curry and pepper pot, mutton and pork. We asked Lenski if he had seen Uncle Beltram and he told us that he was not at Auntie Emma's shop. Auntie Doley asserted that she would not go to the party because Uncle Beltram would 'vex with her' if she went without him. However, Medex refused to take no for an answer and asserted, 'He can't vex with you—you have to come. You're my Auntie and it's Mother's Day!' I told them I would come to the party a little later. Auntie

climbed on the back of his bike, turned to me, smiled and said—‘See I still have people to come and collect me.’ She was thrilled that despite the fact that her children were absent from the village, she still had relatives who wanted to celebrate her on the holiday.

In late afternoon, Uncle came back to the house repeating that he was ‘High, high, high.’ I wrote him a note to explain that Auntie Doley had been forced to go to Auntie Emma’s so he wouldn’t vex with her. I asked him if we should go meet her. He said he would come to the party eventually, but not at that moment. He explained that he had been out doing round-up, so he had to bathe and clean the cow heel. Also, his friends were coming by the house. He told me he still had work to do yet but he wouldn’t mind if I went along to the party. I think he was a little upset indeed, that Auntie Doley had gone to Emma’s shop without him, just as she predicted.

Shortly afterwards, Sam and I headed down the road towards Emma’s shop. As we approached the party we saw some people dancing the *fórró* out front. When we went around the side we found Auntie Doley sitting with Uncle Beltram’s sister, Auntie Zen. They were chatting, and I sat next to Auntie Doley. There was roast pork and roast mutton on the table and Sam and I helped ourselves to the delicious food. Eventually, Auntie Zen told her daughter to bring us more. She came back with the bottom of a pig’s leg and a mutton bone. I was gnawing on the pig’s leg when Shane, the village dentist, pulled up on his motorbike in his usual state, boisterous, intoxicated and without a shirt.

Although there was plenty of food, up until this point there was nothing to drink, which was very unfamiliar for a typical Sand Creek party, as they usually revolved around passing out homemade alcohol. Auntie Doley mentioned that they had one case of beer for the mothers but they had already ‘drank it out’. The empty plastic case below our feet was evidence of that. Soon enough, however, Lal and a young boy returned on Lenski’s motorbike with *kari* and rice wine—tonic. This was the strong stuff Auntie Doley was always warning me about. I took one sip to try it and it tasted a little like sake. I decided to stick with *kari*. Auntie Doley pointed out that Shane was saying something ridiculous to Sam really loudly. He was repeating that Sam was ‘like Elton John’, which was his way of calling him gay. She said, slightly annoyed, ‘He is drunk and disrespectful and looking for trouble.’ She urged me to save Sam by calling him over and I did

what was asked of me. Emma joked that Shane should put on a shirt, and Lenski proclaimed that with ideas like that she should be the next *toshao*. We all giggled to ourselves.

As the sun went down, everyone was clearly starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. Since Sam and I joined the group, people had been arriving steadily from all over the village. Almost everyone started dancing. We moved the bench we were sitting on to watch the dancers. The hosts were passing out Banco wine, a sweet red wine that came in a plastic bottle, which neither Auntie nor I wanted to drink. Since sharing drinks with one another is synonymous with the building of relationships, it is incredibly rude and disrespectful to say no to an offer of alcohol, particularly if your cup was empty. However, we found a solution to this conundrum by accepting the drink and slyly passing it to Sam, who would enthusiastically drink anything. Shortly afterwards, however, he got too drunk and went home.

I overheard Auntie Zen talking to Auntie Doley. She told her that the other day when he was drinking at their house, Uncle Beltram had said, 'I have a new daughter; I have a white daughter'. A little while later Emma's oldest daughter came over to Auntie Doley to tell her Uncle Beltram had arrived. It was very late and Auntie Doley and I had assumed that he must have slept instead of coming to the party. His sister mentioned she had seen him earlier dancing by Auntie Celeste's, which explained why he was so high when he came home that afternoon. But he had arrived and was standing just beyond the reach of the shop lights. Auntie Zen said 'Let his daughter go fetch him.' I said sure, hopped up and went over to meet him. He explained that he was late since he had dropped to sleep after his friends came over. I was not surprised since he was already drunk when I left him and I'm sure his friends brought something else to drink when they came to the house. He followed me back to the benches, and I noticed he was much more sober than the last time we spoke. I handed him the beer I had saved for him.

Half an hour later, after Uncle had a couple glasses of tonic, he offered his hand to Auntie for a dance. It was fun to watch them because Auntie is short and round, Uncle is tall and slim and they were gliding all over the dance floor in perfect unison. Auntie Zen and I, both a little high, remained on the bench chatting. She told me she and Uncle Beltram had two brothers living up in Georgetown, and two sisters in Brazil. They had three other siblings who had died. Uncle Beltram and she are the only two left in Sand Creek. She had two children,



Lenski who is four years older than his younger sister, Joanie. I asked her why she decided to only have two kids, since having such a small family was fairly unusual in the Rupununi. She explained, 'It was my husband's choice. He didn't believe in punishing a woman. But he died. Two years ago. He was a retired teacher and a *toshao*'. She was visibly devastated by her husband's death. Tears fell as she told me about him. While she was sad, she also appeared to be very angry with him for leaving her alone to look after their two children and six grandchildren. She explained that he had died from a sore on his leg and said, 'Oh my, if you had seen it Miss Courtney, it was so big!'

We sat in silence for a little while after speaking about her husband. Abruptly, she turned to me and told me I would really miss Sand Creek and I will have to come back to visit. I told her I would definitely visit, and that I would miss eating *farine* so much since we only have sweet cassava in my country. She told me I could make it with the sweet cassava without a problem. She assured me that it also makes a nice strong *kari*. I smiled and said to her, 'I would have to make a few buckets and serve it to my friends at house parties in Scotland.' Although Auntie Doley, Uncle Beltram and myself eventually headed home, I'm sure the party continued until every last drop of alcohol was consumed.

This party was a textbook snapshot of many other parties I attended throughout my time in Sand Creek. Additionally, as previous Amazonian ethnographies have elucidated, only through the observation of daily life do we shed light on what is important for Amerindian people themselves: the personal, intimate and affective relationships they form with their kin and wider community. Several aspects of the party illustrate what it is like to spend time with one another in the Rupununi, and how this relates to Amerindian notions of the person, the body, and proper social life.

Amazonian cosmology is based on the underlying notion that the world is a dangerous and violent place and it can be transformed into a peaceful and beautiful life through intense, collective, social work (Overing and Passes 2000). This worldview posits that the conditions for peaceful life are born from the unpredictable and dangerous, but because of this there is a constant potential for destruction of tranquil sociality (Overing and Passes 2000). This is embodied through the pursuit of 'the good life' where each person has to overcome negative

feelings like anger, jealousy and stinginess in order to interact with others in the vein of love and generosity (Lagrou 2000). The transformation of the negative aspects of social interactions and the wider world is critical to the maintenance of happy and fertile communities, but can never be achieved permanently. That is why Amazonian people focus so much on the everyday, since this is the space where they work so hard as a whole community of autonomous selves to produce and reproduce conviviality.

This concept of conviviality is not to be taken lightly. Conviviality is inherently fragile, as a product of how intensely it is lived and experienced (Overing and Passes 2000:24). It is a way of life that takes constant hard work to maintain, which is clearly illustrated in analyzing what happens when it fails. Santos-Granero describes the dissolution of two Yanéscha settlements in Peru stating, ‘because Amerindian conviviality is so intense, its rupture generates equally intense but opposite emotions– negative emotions that prevent people from living together’ (2000:284). The fact that in this example the aggrieved Yanéscha people cannot live together because of how fiercely they experience these reverse feelings of ‘anger, hatred, shame and guilt’, illustrates how powerful the feelings of love and compassion are in successful convivial life (Santos-Granero, 2000: 282).

During the Mother’s Day party the convivial atmosphere was evident, as everyone shared food, drink, dances, stories and laughter. One can also see how this concern for the fragility of conviviality plays out in this example. Auntie Doley explained that she loved her family (notably her in-laws) but she doesn’t like to spend time with them because she wants to avoid trouble. She criticizes their focus on money rather than sharing with family, and their insistence on ‘dosing you up’ or getting their relatives too drunk. As long as she doesn’t spend too much time with them, then she can avoid these negative feelings that put conviviality and sociality in danger. Maintaining the balance in favor of positive feelings towards family members can oftentimes rely on the amount of time spent with them. This focus on maintaining conviviality is also demonstrated by Lenski arriving on his motorbike demanding her presence at the party, (which she found flattering) and her choice to attend the party. Denying such an invitation would have been insulting to her family. We also witness this in the concern for Shane’s boisterous insults that were frowned upon and commented on for endangering the positive atmosphere.

In the not so distant past, as illustrated by Santos-Granero, the typical way of dealing with broken conviviality impacted the social fabric in profound ways, rupturing social life and resulting in the dissolutions of villages and heightened mobility of smaller kinship groups. The Wapishana people of Sand Creek, however, rely on their proximity to the church, the school and the health center, which limits the movement of larger kinship groups. Arguably this makes the preservation of conviviality all the more vital. Keeping the peace was achieved more often in my experience by avoiding people that could incite negative feelings. The trick for maintaining conviviality was keeping to oneself and one's close kin.

This chapter establishes not only the centrality of kinship, but also how it is achieved through sharing space, substance and stories with one another, and how providing, preparing and sharing food are acts of mutual care that build and solidify relationships with family. These kinship groups rely on one another to form a wider convivial community that everyone works hard to maintain. These notions reemphasize the importance of co-residence introduced in Chapter 1. It is also important to note the gendered aspect of sustaining conviviality, illustrated by the production of the food and drink that so much of the community revolves around and thrives upon.

The first two chapters have focused on the centrality of kinship relationships and community, and how these are created in the context of everyday life in Sand Creek. The ethnographic material highlights that in order to achieve these social processes, much of daily life revolves around routine and repetitive tasks, like making alcohol, preparing for parties, and producing food by either hunting and fishing, or processing cassava on the farm. In the following chapter, I will illustrate that alongside these mundane activities, there is a vibrant spiritual world in Sand Creek that complicates daily life. Through a careful exploration of the implications of these spiritual understandings, the chapter will provide a context for the experience of *the sickness* in Sand Creek Secondary school.

# Chapter 3

## Amerindian Spiritual World

### Chapter Outline

Aside from a collective focus on the procurement and production of food and drink in Sand Creek, and the resulting relationships sharing these substances create and recreate, in this chapter I will demonstrate the equal role that the vibrant Wapishana spiritual world has on community life. Apart from the routine acts of farming, fishing, hunting and throwing parties, everyday life in Sand Creek is also complicated by intense fear and memories of illness, death, personal loss and suffering. A great deal of time and effort is dedicated to precautions for or treatments of illness, conversations addressing, and in my case, explanations of and teaching about the implications of this spiritual world. An important facet of the social reality in Sand Creek is navigating between the mundane and the super intense in everyday life. Through a careful exploration of ethnographic material that deals with intersections between humans and spirits, animals and plants, such as *kanaima*, ghosts, poisoning and witchcraft, and obeah magic, this chapter hopes to address three things. First, it will show how the overall complex that incorporates illness and death in regards to *kanaima* and shamanism is understood through the lens of human agency and social conflict, and that this allows for the possibility of revenge and resolution. Secondly, it will highlight that, just as food is central to the production and reproduction of social relationships, it also has the potential to be the conduit of poison or spiritual attack, and is one of the core mediators between human and spirit realms. Finally, this chapter explores how the spiritual world in Sand Creek is made up of a blend of various sets of beliefs, such as specific Wapishana beliefs, wider Amerindian understandings and some practices

and fears incorporated from the Creole coast of Guyana. By examining this mixture, the chapter calls into question the practice of reifying Amerindian sociality into ‘bounded ethno-linguistic groups’, and explores how ambiguous and blurred boundaries provide the creative material to sustain Amerindian communities.

## The Envious World of Humans and Spirits

On my second day in Sand Creek, I was sitting at the long, gnarled wooden table in the kitchen across from Etta. Her three year old son, Enzo, an endless ball of energy, was rolling around on the green linoleum that had been placed over the hard earth in the kitchen, and climbing in and out from under my mosquito net. My skin was sticky with sweat and my body was still adjusting to the weight of the hot savannah air in my lungs. The heat had us feeling lazy, just sitting and chatting, unmotivated to move. In the middle of our conversation, Etta abruptly turned her head to the side and asked if I knew about the *kanaima*. I told her while I was in Surama, one of my Makushi friends had mentioned something about them.

She lowered her voice slightly and said:

There are a lot of strange people around Sand Creek recently. There is a problem in the school. A lot of envy. Maybe someone wanted to be the headmaster, and sent a lot of envy into the village, and it caused a lot of bad things. The girls are getting *the sickness* in the school, getting possessed and running up, running up the mountain. And you know about Sir Shakoor<sup>17</sup>? Who got arrested? Well a lot of people from other villages were upset about what he done to their kids, so they sent *kanaima* to Sand Creek.’

I was still finding my way through the vibrant Wapishana spiritual world, so I asked if the *kanaimas* were the ones possessing the girls in Sand Creek Secondary. Etta assured me that it wasn’t *kanaima*. She could see I was confused, so she told me a story her friend had shared with her recently. The woman was washing her clothes in Sand Creek. She put her baby in the wash basin just for a few moments, while she bathed her body in the water. Despite how quick she

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<sup>17</sup> Sir Shakoor was the deputy headmaster at Sand Creek Secondary School the year before I arrived in the village. He was removed from his post by the Lethem police right before graduation at the beginning of the summer of 2014. The dorm parents had found a hickey on one of the young male resident’s neck. Through questioning the boy and his close friends, it was determined that Sir Shakoor was responsible for it. He was accused of molesting not only that boy but a few other boys as well, who also lived in the dormitory. No one really knew what happened to him, whether or not he was still in jail.

was, when she turned around to face the bank she caught sight of an old man and two young men standing near her baby. Etta explained that a few of Auntie Doley's cooks had also spotted the same three men walking in the village, but that *kanaimas* aren't very dangerous during the day time.

Etta explained:

Daddy knows a lot of the *kanaima*. He works at a job where lots of them work and he knows how to treat them. He treats them with respect. *Kanaima* will listen well, but they don't speak much. Once when Daddy was home in Sand Creek he was working at the farm and he saw a *kanaima*. The person followed him back to the house and they had an argument, but the *kanaima* had mistook him for someone else. When Daddy went back to the mines the same man was there working, and he waved hi at him.'

She also told me the heartbreaking story of a four year old girl from the village. Etta described the circumstances of the incident,

'Her mother didn't care for her and her father was in and out of the village, so she was being raised by her grandparents. They were severely mistreating her, beating her, putting pepper on her private parts, and making her do too much work, as much work as an older child would do. A strange man came to the village, and he was always watching the young girl. One day he tried to approach her father to tell him his daughter was being mistreated by her grandparents, but her father responded by trying to fight the strange man. One day, not too long after the fight, the grandparents and the little girl were going to the farm for the day. They gave the girl a very heavy load to carry, and she couldn't keep up with them. They went on ahead, leaving her far in the distance. She disappeared.

No one knows what happened to her. They never found any parts of her body. Some people say that she died, but many believe the strange man turned her into a land turtle. When the villagers returned to the very spot she disappeared, there was a giant land turtle standing next to the load she was supposed to be carrying. Several years later the same strange man returned to the village. The people told him that the little girl had disappeared and he said simply, 'I know. She is happy and healthy and doesn't want to come back here.'

Although this strange man, an implied *kanaima*, rescued this little girl from a bad situation, Etta assured me that *kanaima* could do evil things as well. She told me about her young cousin, Madonna, who died a few months prior. Madonna was attending secondary school at St Ignatius and living with an elderly woman who never had kids. Everyone who saw her the night before she died said she was in a good mood, out sporting with her boyfriend until late at night. The next day they found her body hanging from the mango tree in front of the house. Her neck was broken and there was sand in her vagina. The police said she had killed herself but Etta said,

‘We don’t see it that way.’ Etta also explained that sometimes the elderly woman would lock Madonna out if she came home too late, so a *kanaima* must have got her while she was outside. When her parents went to see her body in the morgue a few days after her death, her trousers and underwear were pulled down to her feet. There was a blackout the night before in Lethem, and Etta speculated that must have been when the *kanaima* snuck into the morgue to molest the body. To illustrate her point, Etta showed me a picture of Madonna’s body on her cellphone.

In this short conversation Etta revealed the vibrant Wapishana spiritual world, how it is interwoven into everyday life in Sand Creek, and highlighted the ways in which the lines between human and spirit beings can blur, particularly in regards to *kanaima*. Only after spending time in the village, was I able to understand the importance of this conversation, what Etta was trying to convey, and why she felt it was important to inform me of these things.

Many people shared stories, particulars and details with me about *kanaima* throughout my time in Guyana. It soon became clear that *kanaima* are persons. It could literally be anyone and in fact, a person could act perfectly normal with you, while they were actually trying to kill you. Auntie Doley would always emphasize this, saying, ‘You don’t know a person’s heart. Only God knows what’s in their heart.’ In his work on *kanaima* amongst the Patamona, Neil Whitehead expands the definition further, stating that, ‘The term *kanaima* refers both to a mode of ritual mutilation and killing and to its practitioners. The term also can allude to a more diffuse idea of active spiritual malignancy, in existence from the beginning of time, that consumes the assassins (2002: 1).’ He highlights the centrality of discussion of *kanaima* in daily life and how the fear of *kanaima* impact how people behave, i.e. whether they travel to the farm on a certain day (2002: 1). *Kanaimas* can detach their spirit from their body easily and often, so while they are killing someone in one location they can be physically present elsewhere (Butt Colson 2001: 223). *Kanaimas*, in their act of killing a human, are producing ritual food, and as such they have to return to the body when it has begun decomposing. Etta is referencing this practice when she describes how her cousin’s body was disturbed in the morgue. Molestation is not always an aspect of this process, but *kanaima* do regularly return to consume their victim’s body (Whitehead 2002:94). It is also important to note that *kanaimas* are known to train other persons to become *kanaima*. They can be hired as a kind of contract killer, by any humans wishing ill will on another, for a price.

While Etta spoke about the *kanaima*, she also introduced another key aspect of concern and danger that shapes the super intense and mundane aspects of life alike, envy. When she first mentioned that a lot of strange things were going on in the village, she immediately attributed this to an excess of envy. Throughout the literature, the force and power of envy in Amazonian villages has been noted consistently. This is because, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the overall and ever incomplete goal of an Amerindian village is to be social and convivial with kin and neighbors, and envy is a particularly destructive emotion in terms of this pursuit (Overing and Passes 2000). Stephen Beckerman and Paul Valentine elaborates on this stating:

Anger and envy are dangerous emotions; they are always understood as a sign of violence and aggression against others. Anger (often seen as the consequence of greed, envy, grief, jealousy, or the like) directed outward may be ‘good’, but within the community it is always deeply destructive. (2008: xvi)

In fact, in many communities, envy is considered to be one of the primary motivators of all sorcery (Izquiero, et al, 2008: 177).

As illustrated by Etta’s comments and the wider Amazonian literature, inciting envy in others can invite a sorcery attack that results in illness or even death. As everyone would like to avoid being the victim of sorcery, the prevention of envy motivated many everyday activities in Sand Creek. I learned almost immediately upon my arrival in the village that the threat of envy informs people’s actions and that I needed to actively work to prevent this. When I first arrived, since I didn’t plan to travel back to the town very often, I brought several boxes of groceries with me. Clueless to the fact that this would be evident to those travelling with me on the bus and the tractor, I was puzzled when Auntie Doley began hiding some of the food in the oven. As the shelves in the kitchen had no cabinets and clearly displayed all the food products, she explained that if people could see what we have in the house, they would want it. She never explicitly mentioned that it would cause envy, but upon further reflection this was what she was trying to prevent. During my time in the village, requests for things that were visible were rarely, if ever, denied, to mitigate the threat of envy.

As a way to avoid the possibilities of negative impacts of envy from others, people in Sand Creek shared with one another. Nominally I was aware of the practice, but at first I navigated this in a clumsy way. Since I had brought so many groceries into the village, in order



to dispel envy, Auntie Doley was very active sharing the supplies with our neighbors and kin. She would send a bag of flour over to one neighbor, and a bag of sugar in another's direction. She would slip a can of sardines or sausages into the hands of the neighbor's son or her grandniece. A few weeks into my stay in the village our shelves were empty. Even the oven hiding space was bare, and I was hungry and confused. Upon further reflection, it became clear that I was being a stingy person, which is well documented in Amazonian ethnography as one of the worst traits you can have in an Amerindian village. Els Lagrou asserts that amongst the Cashinauha, 'To be stingy is the archetypical trait of all strangers' (2000: 154). In my mind I assumed I was sharing with everyone eating the food, since I had purchased all the items. However, Auntie Doley was actually the one sharing by sending out all the items, so by offering nothing to my neighbors myself, I was securing my space as a stranger in the community. After a few days experiencing hunger pangs, I changed my approach. I started travelling to the village with less food to avoid inciting envy, and I started carrying the bags of flour and sugar to the neighbors myself. Once I began to share, instead of Auntie Doley sending the foodstuffs, everything changed. Almost daily, my neighbors, Aunties and cousins would send their children over to me with a little fruit or a few extra fish they had caught.

While this conversation with Etta clarified that I should fear the *kanaima* and that I should be careful to avoid inciting envy, I was still unsure about many of the details pertaining to these complex themes of village life. This discussion was neither the first nor the last time I would hear about the *kanaima* and it took me a several months to understand the nuances and danger of these complex persons.

## Jumbie on the Roof

One evening, several months into my fieldwork, Auntie Doley came home from work and mentioned that the night before there was a *jumbie* on Kathleen's roof. Kathleen's baby was crying in the middle of the night so she went across to her mother's house, about a ten minute walk through the center of the village, to get some medicine to rub on the baby's leg. The light on her torch was weak, the batteries almost dead, so she couldn't see anything. On Kathleen's

way back to her home she heard a loud sound as the solar panels on her roof came crashing down to the ground while all the wires burst. Kathleen screamed and her husband Bull and her cousin came dashing out of the house. Together they searched all around the perimeter of the yard, but were unable to see much. Eventually they spotted a small donkey standing alone in the dark. A moment later when they shined their torches on the spot where the donkey (*jumbie*) stood, it had disappeared! Auntie pointed out that a cat would never have been heavy enough to knock off a solar panel so it must have been a person on the roof.

Auntie Doley tried to tell Uncle Beltram the story in their usual way of communicating, where she would shout at him, and he would repeat words she didn't actually say. I often woke up to these exchanges around 5 am. I know that Uncle Beltram is partially deaf, but sometimes I would see a little twinkle in his eye and I often suspected he might have been exaggerating what he didn't understand because he thought watching Auntie Doley become exasperated was funny.

Auntie: 'The jumbie was on top of Bull's roof.'

Uncle: What?

Jumbie!

Jumbie?!?!

Yes. Bull's roof!

Stan?

Bull!

Stan?

Bull!

Bull?

Yes! His roof!

Uncle turned to me and asked:

Miss, you know about the *jumbie*? They are invisible people, unless they want you to see them. They use high science. They have these little roots, like the size of garlic, and they touch you with this root and you don't catch yourself. They may take the shape of a large animal, like a dog, and scare you and you pass out. When you wake up you feel fine. A few hours later the fever catches you. If he touches your neck with the root, your neck breaks. They usually come from the North—Aracunas and Akawaios. They have the strong high science.

Auntie Doley assured me that these *jumbies* were just passing through, on their way to other villages. As they weren't targeting any individual, they would only bother whoever they encountered. She also explained that they made a very distinct whistling noise, a warning to let you know they were there. She said, 'If you don't heed the warning, they will attack you. That's why you must never walk alone at night Miss. Never.' Uncle Beltram added, 'While I was working in the bush I met a man from the north. From up by Venezuela side. The man liked to eat his food rotten. Completely rotten.' He pointed at his bowl, grinned and repeated, 'Green, green meat.'

*Jumbie*, a Creolized term, can refer to several kinds of malevolent beings in Guyana, many of which I heard about directly or were referenced to during my time in Sand Creek. This included the *Bacoo*, a tiny man with huge eyes who requires a steady diet of bananas and milk. He brings good luck if his owner keeps him well fed and satisfied, but he can cause great mischief when upset. The *Ol Hague*, another example of a *jumbie*, is an old woman spirit who travels as a ball of fire and sucks the blood of sleeping people throughout Guyana. She is usually blamed for any bruises from unknown causes. *Jumbies* can also include, but are not limited to, creatures called the *Bush Dai Dai* and the *Massacooramaan* (Seegopaul, 2008) who could be encountered in the deep forest and were occasionally referenced in Sand Creek. In the above vignette, however, Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram are using the term as a synonym for *kanaima*, which is well known throughout Guyana to be one kind of *jumbie*, associated with shamanism and the rainforested interior of the country. Using the term *jumbie* in place of *kanaima* is a common occurrence in Amerindian areas of Guyana, and I found in daily conversation these terms were used interchangeably unless otherwise noted.

*Kanaima* are known shapeshifters. They are normally associated with becoming jaguars, particularly in the forest. As the people of Sand Creek told me repeatedly, when the savannah is 'dark, dark' the *kanaimas* come out. Audrey Butt Colson documents the *kanaima*'s aversion to not only moonlight, but all lights, and notes that Amerindians will often leave a fire burning for protection from these human hunters (2001: 222). One night during the new moon [the *kanaima* are always out more often during the new moon because the savannah is so dark] Auntie accidentally left her window open when we fell asleep. She woke up in the middle of the night to loud sounds in the kitchen. When she looked up she spotted the silhouette of a cat on the

windowsill behind her. She screamed, waking me up and startling the cat, who jumped out. I heard her immediately bang the window shut and lock it. The next morning she explained, ‘Miss that could have been a *jumbie*. You never know what animals are *jumbies*. It could be a cat, it could be a donkey.’

*Kanaima* are skilled at the use of various magic plants. There are two types of plants they can expertly employ. There are certain plants that are associated with *kanaima*’s ritual killings, like the root that Uncle Beltram noted above. These are a specific class that work through the plants’ physical properties. Another class of plant life that Uncle Beltram described to me are called *bina*, and the Wapishana and their indigenous neighbors understand that these species of plants have magical properties and agencies of their own. They understand there is a spirit animal within these plants, and the ‘spirit force’ can travel outside of the plant’s physical body and, when directed by its human user, can effect change in the world. These plants have many various uses. Some are only used by shamans for preventative measures and healing. Others are found in any ordinary person’s gardens and they can ward off evil, treat common illnesses, and help ensure that children will grow up healthy and strong. It is also very common for hunters to use *binas*, and there are particular plants that correspond to specific animals. If a person has the *bina* in their pocket for a particular animal, the animal will come out of the forest and walk right up to the hunter. Auntie Doley explained, however, that sometimes these powerful plants can alter the person who carries it, motivating them to do bad things, like hunt people. Whitehead elaborates on this in his work, noting that as *binas* assist hunters in their pursuit of prey, and *kanaimas* hunt humans, they have a particular *bina* that helps them locate their human prey. They also rely on plant magic to help them travel vast distances rapidly and return quickly (Butt-Colson 2001:223, Whitehead 2002:91-92).

The fact that Uncle Beltram mentioned that the *kanaimas* usually come from the North is significant, and reflects the fact that discussions about *kanaima* often echo beliefs about other indigenous groups. Many Wapishana expressed to me that all Patamona people were *kanaima*, followed normally by a nervous laugh. There were several instances where people of the community would imply their concern that a Makushi person they know may be a *kanaima*. While it certainly wasn’t unheard of for a Wapishana person to be a *kanaima*, and as Auntie Doley emphasized, we needed to be cautious with other people in the village, overwhelmingly

the allegations against *kanaima* were directed towards outsiders, Wapishana people from outside the village or people from other Amerindian groups. Butt-Colson offers an explanation for this, stating, '*Itoto* and *Kanaima* accusations are very frequently structured by segmentation, both internal to each ethnic unity and between different ethnicities and they clearly express the stereotypes, fear and suspicions aroused by "others".' (2001:227). She explains that danger comes from the outside, but as her work and the work of Whitehead and myself demonstrate, where precisely the danger lies is entirely dependent upon their location within a network. For example, while my Wapishana informants were quick to say all Patamona people are *kanaima*, Whitehead stresses that the people he worked with assert that *kanaima* originated with Akawaio people (2001:39).

### *Kanaima* attack

In February 2015 I was wandering the shops in Georgetown, looking to buy a few things so Etta and I could celebrate Mash<sup>18</sup> upon my return to Lethem. The sparkling masks and brightly colored feathers, reminiscent of any carnival in the Caribbean, were so beautiful that I couldn't take my eyes off them, much less choose one. I texted Etta, asking what color mask she wanted, and my guess that she would choose blue proved correct. I scooped up a bright turquoise mask, with silver rhinestones tracing the eyes. After much deliberation, I finally settled on one for myself as well, scooped up a blue sparkling top hat for Etta's husband, and went to the counter to pay for them, thrilled with anticipation to see all the young people of the Rupununi dancing in masks like these through the streets of Lethem.

That same evening, I was sitting in the hotel room, and although the signal was terrible and the picture kept slipping in and out of the tiny box, I was taking advantage of the last few hours I would have of watching TV. I was eating a pizza in bed and savoring the cool air wafting down on me from the AC unit, when my telephone rang. I saw that it was Etta and I thought

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<sup>18</sup> Mash is short for Mashramani, the celebration of the day Guyana became a Republic on February 23, 1970. Mashramani is an Amerindian word that means celebration after cooperative work, and this is a Guyanese holiday that is celebrated by all. In the Rupununi Mash is celebrated for the entire month of February, with several parades and parties, with the final and most spectacular parade taking place on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

maybe we would chat again about our plans for buying rum for Mash, and where we would watch the parade. As soon as I picked up the phone, I instantly noticed her voice was strained. The conversation was hurried, and she told me she would not be in Lethem when I arrived. She was going to Sand Creek that night; Uncle Beltram was sick, and Auntie Doley had sent for her. I assured her I would get to the village as quickly as possible, and I went to bed feeling unsettled.

Although I eventually grew very close to Uncle Beltram, our relationship was distant at that point. As he was living and working in a mining camp when I first arrived in Guyana, during my first several months in Sand Creek I had never met him. He called the village on the radio after I had lived with his wife for a few weeks and requested to speak with Auntie Doley. He asked, 'You have a white woman living with you?' She replied, 'Yes. You have a new white daughter now.' Once a month we would hear a rumor that he would come home soon. After the first three times this happened and he had yet to actually appear, I thought maybe I would never meet him. At the end of November, however, a few days before my 28th birthday, he did come back to the Rupununi. Shortly after this, I briefly travelled so was away from the village, and hadn't had a chance to get to know Uncle Beltram before I left. Although Etta didn't directly say his illness was serious, from the tone of her voice and the fact that Auntie had sent for her (which was very unusual), I knew it had to be.

The minibus trip from Georgetown to Lethem took 18 hours on an unpaved road. When I reached the town, I stayed with Mrs. Foo, the mother of Etta's husband, as usual. Since it had been almost two days since I had heard an update, I asked Mrs. Foo about Uncle Beltram's illness. She explained gravely that he was completely unresponsive. He was lying in his hammock, barely moving, barely blinking. He hadn't spoken or eaten for days. The characterization of the symptoms and the way that Mrs. Foo discussed it confirmed my suspicion that a *kanaima* was involved.

The night Uncle Beltram first fell sick he arrived home late at night, with his knife covered in blood and Auntie Torscilla's dog, which had also suffered some serious injuries. He could not explain exactly what had happened, but fell into his hammock right away with the first signs of sickness. The illness slowly worsened, and he became less and less responsive. He wasn't eating or speaking, and as time progressed he slowly stopped moving. In these dire

circumstances, several members of the community came to the house to treat Uncle Beltram with both traditional remedies and Christian prayers. They would often employ the two approaches at once, burning specific plants procured in the forest while praying profusely and reading the Bible aloud as the smoke billowed around Uncle in his hammock. They stayed with him around the clock, and at one point, they were very worried they would lose him. Despite their fears, they continued their various treatments with determination, and a few days later he began to move and eat again, although he remained weak and dizzy for a while longer.

As illustrated by this ethnographic material, the ease with which the Wapishana people of Sand Creek shifted between Christian and shamanic belief systems was evident throughout daily life. Some devout Christians would reject shamanic efficacy in daily conversation, but oftentimes when these people or their children were feeling ill they would not hesitate to call the *pia'man* [shaman]. Most people in the village would pray to God and read the Bible as a way to encourage healing processes, but also grow and use magical plants. It was very common to employ both approaches when facing illness or impending death, and most people expressed that these belief systems were complementary rather than contradictory.

While neighbors, friends and kin were treating Uncle Beltram's illness, I had to wait a few more days in Lethem before the minibus made its weekly trip to Sand Creek. As we crossed the savannah, I was worried whether Uncle Beltram was feeling better since it is not uncommon for an outsider to be blamed for illness. Despite being concerned, I had promised Etta, and therefore Auntie, that I would get back to the village as soon as possible. I had also been gone from the village for over a month and I wondered how things would be upon my return.

When the minibus pulled up to the little green house, I saw billows and billows of smoke coming from the other side of the house. I jumped out of the vehicle and Enzo came barreling towards me and jumped up into my arms. 'MISS COURTNEY!', he squealed with joy. I gave him a long squeeze and said, 'Hi baby Enzo, I missed you!' The bus driver climbed on the roof and untied my bags covered in the ubiquitous red dust of the unpaved roads, and tossed them down to his friend below. I left the bags in a pile near the house, and with Enzo on my hip walked towards the smoke. Etta came from the direction of the fire and gave me a hug. Peeking around the corner of the house I saw Auntie Doley feeding a fire with pieces of the cassava

plant and could only make out the shadow of Uncle Beltram, who was sitting on a tree stump right in front of the flames so the smoke unfurled over him, covering every inch of his body. Etta told me he was feeling better. Auntie Doley threw a couple more pieces of wood on the fire and came over to give me a hug. She told me she had been waiting for me. I looked curiously over at the fire, and Auntie Doley explained that they were burning the parts of the cassava that are usually thrown away—the forgotten parts, the parts that no one cares about. The purpose of covering Uncle Beltram in the smoke was so the *kanaima* would forget his body and no longer care about him, just like the pieces of cassava.

Two days later, Etta and I were cleaning the house in the afternoon when a woman about Etta's age stopped by. I recognized her but I didn't know her well. Etta prepared a bowl of *shibby*<sup>19</sup> for her, and we all sat outside underneath the tarpaulin. The woman began speaking in hushed urgent tones, explaining that her father-in-law was a *pia'man*, and he had gone into the bush and met a group of men who wanted to kill Uncle Beltram. The first *kanaima* who wanted him dead—the cause of his debilitating sickness and brush with death—had been killed, but there were many more interested in killing Uncle. The *kanaima* she spoke of were only vaguely known to the family—it was someone's son-in-law and a group of men from Karasabi.

After the woman left, Etta warned me that there were a lot of *kanaima* around the village. She explained that while I was away a *kanaima* had killed a man on Old Year's Day<sup>20</sup>. They found him hanging from a tree. When Auntie Doley came home that evening, Etta told her what the visitor said, and Auntie insisted on smoking Uncle Beltram in the house right away. By smoking him in the house she was simultaneously protecting the house and the rest of us who lived there. She lit a fire underneath his hammock with the tops of the cassava and all the scraps of our garlic and onions until the fire was producing an enormous amount of smoke. She and Uncle Beltram then read the Bible together and prayed. The smoke poured out from their bedroom into the kitchen, struggling to escape the confines of the house. The kitchen was so thick with smoke that you could barely see, much less breathe. With our eyes stinging, Etta,

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<sup>19</sup>*Shibby* is a bowl of *farine* with drinking water and is customarily offered to a visitor when they arrive at your home as a form of welcoming.

<sup>20</sup> Old Year's Day is the celebration of the last day of the calendar year. It normally consists of village revelry, parties, sharing food and drinking.



Enzo and I escaped the hazy house and lied down in the hammocks outside. Enzo climbed in my hammock for a hug, and with the smell of fire clinging to us, we all gazed up at the stars.

For many months after the incident, Uncle Beltram and I never discussed the *kanaima* attack or his sickness. One Sunday in May, however, he gave me a glimpse of his own understanding of what had transpired. I was lying in the hammock under the tarpaulin and I saw Uncle Beltram walking across the savannah towards home. He was carrying three furry cow's legs, and a bag full of beef bones. The smile on his face, from ear to ear, indicated right away that he was high. He had gone off earlier to help some men kill a cow, and typically such an event involves a lot of drinking—*kari* or local wine.

I helped him find his knife and put on a massive pot to boil for the cow heel. I carried the knife out to the sink in our yard. He started cracking the bones with the cutlass and threw them into a smaller pot. As he worked he began to tell me about his problems with *kanaima*. He told me in a very matter of fact manner that there were men out there trying to find him and kill him, which is why he never walks to the farm alone, and always has his knife. He explained, 'I'm not scared Miss, I'm not scared. I always have my knife. In the bush I have one knife in my boot and one up my sleeve. I fight them.' Although Uncle was very intoxicated, and as a result was speaking in way that was a bit unclear, he was telling me that he had attacked three or four *kanaima* or *jumbies* or persons in the bush in his lifetime, and also that he had never told his wife.

He continued:

The Amerindians, Miss, they have high, high science and sometimes you won't even see one and it just waits for you and once it touches you, you pass out. You can't remember what happened and when you wake up you're already dying. Once I couldn't see for three days. But I have wrestled them before, and I know they are definitely trying to kill me.

I asked him why they were trying to kill him. He answered:

I don't know Miss, but it's probably about money. One time a man theifed my gold while we were in the bush. I found the man and beat him bad, bad. I pulled him off the bus and beat him and kicked him—beat him bad, Miss. So probably he could have sent them after me. But they can't find me. Maybe they are looking for me in the bush. I'm not scared, I'm not scared. Because when it is your time to die, you die.

The regional literature of Guyana describes several ways you can anticipate a *kanaima* attack. One is by hearing a distinct whistling sound associated with them, and/or if an unknown person comes to your house repeatedly late at night (Whitehead 2002: 88-89). Auntie Doley taught me right away to identify the sound of a *kanaima*'s whistle. Another sign is finding a poisonous snake within the house in the morning (Whitehead 2002: 88-89). *Kanaima*, however, do not typically attack you within your house, although Butt-Colson describes that this does happen on some occasions. She explains that the *kanaima* can sneak into the house, even if it is locked and all the windows are shut, to poison it's prey, and sometimes their entire family as well (2001: 222). The most common kind of *kanaima* attack occurs when they sneak up on you as you are walking alone or with one or two other people. In the forest they typically appear as man or a jaguar, while in the savannah they can take the physical form of a giant anteater. A disconcerting sign that indicates the presence of a *kanaima* is when a person is spotted ahead in the distance at first, and then very rapidly is spotted close by you or behind you (Whitehead 2002: 88-89).

Whitehead explains that there are nonfatal attacks, but these usually are a precursor to an attack in the future, while, 'Attacks that are meant to be final, that are intended to produce ritual food, are extremely violent but not instantly fatal, nor are they intended to be so, according to the perpetrators (2002:93).' He goes on to describe a *kanaima* attack in all its explicit details,

Ideally a victim is first confronted suddenly by a single *kanaima* from the front, then struck from behind with a special club...and physically restrained, if not already unconscious from the blow. The victim is treated with a powder made from astringent plants, usually *koumi*, after which their tongue is pierced with the fangs of a venomous snake, or something, with a splinter of greenheart wood. An iguana or an armadillo tail is shoved into their rectum and the anal muscles stripped out through vigorous rubbing. By pressing on the victim's stomach, the *kanaimas* also force out a section of the sphincter muscle and sever it. Finally, they force a thin flexed twig into the rectum so that it opens the anal tract. Packets of herbs...are then inserted into the anus as far as possible which begins a process of autodigestion, creating the special aroma of *kanaima* enchantment...The sweet odor of pineapple is therefore a sign of *kanaima* attack for the victims and the spoor by which their attackers will be drawn to their bodies after burial (2002: 93-94).

Audrey Butt Colson also describes this kind of attack, explaining that the body is typically beaten and bruised, but, 'After a time the victim regains consciousness, gets up and

goes home, without knowing what has happened. He or she then falls ill and dies in agony within a short time, three days frequently being specified' (2001: 222-23).

These *kanaima* attacks are successful because of the suddenness of the attack,

...frightens the vital force out of its customary body. He then fills the body with poisons, through piercing the tongue and making cuts where the bones articulate. He blocks up all the body orifices, blowing poisonous powders into the mouth and up the nostrils, pulling out and knotting the intestines. Thereby the victim's alienated vital force is prevented from re-entering its body, which, left poisoned and lifeless, dies rapidly (Butt-Colson 2001:224).

This description reflects the Amazonian notion that the body and the spirit are not permanently intertwined, and spiritual vitality regularly enters and exits the body. In this case, as consistent with Amerindian understandings of many sicknesses, if the spirit cannot re-enter the body, the person dies. After the attack, due to the poison in the tongue, the victim is unable to drink, eat or speak, and as a result of the damage to the rectum the victim suffers from intense diarrhea, which is typically the cause of death in the end (Whitehead 2002: 94).

Uncle Beltram's attack rings true with many aspects of the descriptions found in the above referenced literature. Someone snuck up on him from behind and he clearly tried to fight the person, as evidenced by the bloody knife and the injured dog (who died a few days later). He did experience a period of unconsciousness, and when he awoke he didn't remember what happened. He stumbled home with the first sign of sickness, and while he was laying in the hammock he went days without eating or speaking. Whether this attack was meant to be non-fatal or fatal is not clear, but while speaking to the members of the community it was evident that they had great faith in the treatments that cured him, employing the use of magical plants, traditional chants and prayers to God. The smoking treatment after he began to speak again is also significant. According to Whitehead, even if the attack was originally meant to be non-fatal, the *kanaima* would still hunt Uncle Beltram in the future, so by burning all the forgotten scraps and enveloping Uncle Beltram with the smoke, Auntie Doley was hoping the *kanaima* would also forget Uncle Beltram's body, and be unable to locate him when attempting to hunt him in the future.

## Ghost Stories

A few months later, the air was so thick with humidity inside the kitchen that I felt I could grab it—capture it, hold it in my hand. The few pictures Auntie always kept on the wall—of her sisters, daughters and grandkids, were curling at the edges. I imagined it was because they were too hot, just like I was. Even the plastic flowers attached to the green wall looked like they were drooping. I was stirring porridge and the heat coming off the stove combined with the heavy air was almost unbearable. My skin was sticky and beads of sweat dripped down my forehead. The day had been blazing and despite my greatest hopes, the sinking sun brought little relief. Auntie had just returned from work and was sitting on the old, gnarled, well-worn wooden bench at the kitchen table—the central piece of furniture in our house, where almost everything of importance occurs. She filled me in on all the gossip of the day, as I mixed apples and raisins into the porridge.

It was not uncommon for my Wapishana family to tease me about my cooking abilities. They would use the fact that I couldn't make a good chicken curry or that I would occasionally burn pancakes to explain my lack of a husband, but this porridge was coming along fine! My minor cooking feat accomplished successfully, I served up a bowl for Auntie, and put it on the wooden table with a tiny smile of pride. The steam mingled with the tropical air. Auntie ate her porridge happily but I was too hot to be hungry. She finished, put the dishes aside and said, 'We'll wash the wares in the morning. The place is hot. Let us go lay in the hammocks.'

Directly out our front door was a covered space built by Uncle Beltram for my birthday party in December. He created it with the help of his friends, a lot of cassava beer, logs and an old tarpaulin, to protect the partygoers and the cake from rain. There were three hammocks strung across from beam to beam, a rainbow of fabric and rope. Auntie Doley and I climbed into the hammocks and the breeze, like a most welcome guest, lazily came to greet us. I laid back and glanced out at the massive amount of stars lighting up the night sky. As my body cooled slowly, Auntie asked me if I have ever seen a werewolf or a vampire. On a visit to our house a few days before, one of the school girls had mentioned the movie *Twilight*, and Auntie was curious. She suggested that werewolves must be like *jumbies*, because they can turn into animals. I said 'No, I haven't seen one, and I don't know anyone who has seen one.' I explained

that although these are stories from my country, most people aren't actually afraid of vampires or werewolves and said, 'Maybe more people are scared of ghosts. I definitely have friends who have seen ghosts.'

I had been living in Sand Creek for many months and yet the vastness of the savannah continued to make me feel tiny. From my vantage point in the hammock I could glance out in every direction. The valley, illuminated by the glowing moon, stretched in front of me as far as the eye could see. I asked Auntie if they have ghosts in Sand Creek. She replied, 'Yes—sometimes people see their dead family members and when they come up and smile at them, they faint.' Suddenly a chill came over me. Despite the full moon, which typically keeps all the *kanaima* at bay, the conversation was eerie, and my skin rippled with goosebumps. I already knew that the girls with *the sickness* could see the ghosts of the people who had died recently. A few of them told me that while suffering a fit they had seen Vernson—the young man who died in the village the year prior, Madonna—Auntie Kathleen's daughter and *toshao* Stan—the late village leader. When I mentioned the girls and the ghosts to Auntie, she proceeded to tell me the full story of Vernson's death. This was the first time I heard any details of what happened.

Vernson was about 20 years old, a handsome boy who Auntie Doley knew well since he worked at the dormitory as a handyman. She described him as a 'jokey boy', and proclaimed, 'He would make you laugh all day, all day!' While he was working at Sand Creek Secondary, he got into trouble with one of the school girls, who followed after him one night. He was so high that he just brought her home with him. After the headmaster found out what happened, Vernson lost his job at the school. He then became a CSO<sup>21</sup> and was put in charge of passing out pensioners' booklets.

Everyone agreed he was in a really good mood the morning of his death. He was out touring the village, drinking and sporting. He lost his grandfather's bicycle in an alcohol induced confusion, but was able to find it. Shortly after, he was seen drinking by Azad's shop. He then headed over to Uncle Finey's store and bought beers for all the people in and around the shop, delighting everyone in the vicinity. Eventually he went home. Unsteady, he stopped right in

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<sup>21</sup> A CSO stands for community service officer. These are typically young people who get a small salary from the government to help out in the village office and with other village tasks, like delivering pension booklets.

front of his house and braced himself on the bike. His mother saw this and said, ‘You’re drunk-go and sleep.’ He said, ‘ok’ and started walking inside towards his hammock. On his way in he asked his mom if she had washed his clothes since he wanted to pack them away. She went to gather them and then walked out to the well near the house. As she put the clothes to soak in a basin, she realized she forgot the soap. She walked back into the house to find her son hanging there, dead. His hammock was in a pile on the ground and he was hanging from the ropes. She called his brother and said ‘What’s wrong with this boy?’ His brother checked him and said, ‘This boy is dead.’

Auntie Doley told me that the police, after finally making the long journey to the village three days after his death, ruled it a suicide. I mentioned that Abbie had told me Vernson was having problems with his brother, and the police never investigated. Auntie told me that his family had buried his body before the police arrived and they were upset about that. She said, ‘Suicide-that’s not how we see it. Maybe it was a *jumbie*. He was in a good mood, and he died so quick—the time it took his mother to walk from the well to the house. When I saw his body in the coffin his nose was bleeding.’

The night he passed away, the girls with *the sickness* started seeing Vernson while experiencing their fits. The following week they explained to the dorm mother that they had seen Vernson again, but this time he was with a young woman, a girl they didn’t recognize. The next day Auntie Kathleen received the news that her daughter, Madonna, had been found hanging from a mango tree in St Ignatius. This girl, Etta’s cousin, who had been molested in the morgue, was who the sick girls were seeing with Vernson. Auntie Doley told me that Etta had pictures on her phone of Madonna’s body. I knew this because Etta had already shown them to me.

Auntie explained to me that she used to worry after Etta when she was young, because she had so many friends<sup>22</sup>. Everyone wanted to sit down and gaff with her. Auntie told all of her daughters, ‘Don’t curse men. They could set you up for a *jumbie* to kill you.’ She told me she used to worry particularly about one of Etta’s friends, a Makushi man, whose entire family were *jumbies*. One day Etta didn’t want him for her friend anymore, and Auntie started to pray.

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<sup>22</sup>Romantic interests were often called ‘friends’ until something serious became of the relationship.

Later that night, with the moon shining high above, the temperatures had finally cooled down, and the breeze was sending shivers up my spine. I ran inside and grabbed some fuzzy colorful blankets for us. Auntie asked me, 'Does it get cold in your country?' I said, 'Yes, it gets so cold that in the winter you could never sleep outside. You would actually freeze to death.' Cozy in our blankets, we fell asleep under the stars. Around midnight Auntie knocked my hammock, so I woke up swinging in the air. She said, 'It is cold Miss, let we go sleep inside.'

The implications of seeing a ghost are grave throughout Amazonia. As mentioned before, spirits are not understood to be bounded within bodies in lowland South America, and they can wander in and out regularly. When Auntie describes a person seeing their family member and fainting, they are at risk for their spirit to depart from their body. People who are grieving for their loved ones are spiritually vulnerable, and often go to great lengths to protect themselves from their dead kin's ghost or spirit or double. For example, when I returned to field in the summer of 2017, Auntie Doley had only been to the farm once since her sister's death several months prior. When she did go, she became ill and a rash appeared on her skin, which she attributed to returning to the farm too soon after the death. As we prepared to go to the farm together, Auntie instructed me on how to make a mix of coconut oil, mosquito repellent, crab oil and garlic. We slathered the oil all over our open skin, making us smell unappealing to any lingering spirits (and everyone else as well).

Butt Colson also notes this danger in a Guyanese context, explaining that ghosts of a dead family member can actually cause someone to die, as the ghost attracts their living kin to him or her (2001:225). Conklin describes the *jima*, one way a dead person's spirit can appear on earth amongst the Wari' of Brazil, who wait in dark places hoping to pounce on a solitary passerby. She explains:

Wari' fear of *jima* are strongest in the first days and weeks after a death for this is a liminal period during which neither dead person's spirit nor the bereaved family has adjusted to the new state of affairs. The dead person and the loss of the dead person are constantly on the minds of the living, while in the underwater realm of the ancestors, the newly dead person's spirit is said to be homesick for the people and places it knows. (2001a:162)

Taylor describes something very similar amongst the Achuar in Ecuador, stating, 'When a person dies or is killed, his image remains in the vicinity to harass the living...The dead are

acutely lonely and they are sightless and perpetually hungry; hence their reluctance to part with the living (1993:662).’ There are many practices in place amongst lowland Amazonian communities to protect living persons from the ghosts of the recently deceased.

This fear of ghosts is related to the complex experience of grief and the processing of a loved one’s death. To miss someone puts a person at risk, and the clothes and belongings of the deceased and the memories associated with these things are also dangerous. As McCallum describes amongst the Cashinahua, ‘Too much longing brings on a fit of grief, a sense of total loneliness and abandonment. Such people, subdued and morose, are seen as easy prey to possibly mortal illness (1999:455).’ In order to avoid this danger, Amazonian people go to great lengths to forget their kin when they die. Anne Christine Taylor elaborates on the sharp contrast between indigenous groups that maintain relationships with their ancestors after death and lowland Amazonian people stating:

Far from stressing continuity with their ancestors and enshrining their memory in names, epics or monuments, lowland Amerindians expend considerable time and ingenuity in losing their dead, forgetting their names and deeds and emphasizing their remoteness from the world of the living. (1993:653)

They achieve this in various ways, by burning the houses, the clothes and other belongings of the deceased and ceasing to utter their name (McCallum 1999, Conklin 2001a) in some cases, and in other cases they participate in endocannibalism, which releases the deceased’s soul through the consumption of the body, and helps the living to forget (McCallum 1999, Conklin 2001a). Although Amazonian people are frightened of the ghosts of their close kin and loved ones (Gow 1991), there is even more danger in dysfunctional grief associated with remembering (Conklin, 2001a:161).

On this evening Auntie Doley also expressed her fear for her daughters—that men might be *kanaima* or send *kanaima* to them as a punishment for rejected advances or the end of a relationship. *Kanaimas* are known to be skilled at using plants for love magic, and as Whitehead states, ‘There is little doubt that avowed *kanaimas*—and their identity is very much an open secret—revel in their notoriety and use it in innumerable petty ways to advance themselves materially and sexually’ (2002: 105). Whitehead notes an example of a known *kanaima* using plant magic to coerce a girl into sex, and even marriage (2002: 105). He highlights the marginal



and antisocial qualities of *kanaimas*, alongside the dangerous power and threats associated with them, illustrating that women would be very hesitant to embark on a relationship with a known *kanaima*, unless she was ‘*binaed*’ or coerced (2002:105-07).

Although Whitehead focuses on Patamona people in his work on *kanaima*, he also cites a woman named Forester, who conducted a census in a Wapishana village, where 58% of deaths were attributed to *kanaima* (2002:207). He goes on to interpret this in a few different ways. As Forester explains, often *kanaima* is invoked as way to describe relations with both blacks and whites. Whitehead argues first that, ‘...*kanaimas* comes to represent a reaction to a “breach of the social order” an inevitable punishment for stepping outside the cultural system at the behest of outsiders [...]’ (2002: 207). He goes a step further, arguing that the prevalence of claims of *kanaima* related deaths is a result of an indigenous way ‘to supply meaning to an otherwise purposeless death...’ (2002: 207).

This resistance to the idea of a ‘self-inflicted’ death, even in the case of a hanging or a self-inflicted gunshot wound, indicates a deeper complex that draws in *kanaima*, witchcraft, dark shamanism and healing shamanism. As all deaths are understood as being the result of ill will or malevolent intent from another person, this retains death as something to be dealt with at the level of social conflict and resolution, and makes it possible for people to seek vengeance or retribution for the death of a loved one. The attribution of agency to all illness and death, alongside the idea that shamans can either treat, prevent or heal these kinds of sicknesses allows for a level of control and influence over these traumatic experiences. Humans are not the only beings who can effect change in the world though, as many non-human actors are also at play, such as plants, animals and spirits.

## Parties and Poison

As illustrated in the two previous chapters, food is a central aspect in the social processes that support and sustain conviviality. As such, a lot of everyday life is focused on the mundane activities of growing, procuring and cooking food. Providing and processing food are reciprocal gendered acts of mutual care, and food and drink act as very important conduits to build and

reinforce vital relationships. While food and drink preparation, acquisition and consumption are in many ways mundane and repetitive, they can also be the means used for poisoning, attacks, or other dangerous and dreadful things. In the following section I will explore how food and drink are one of the main linchpins between the mundane and the super-intense aspects of social life in Sand Creek.

One morning in June, Uncle came home from checking his net carrying a huge tiger fish and several smaller fish. He put the tiger fish in a bowl by the sink in the yard, and told me he would be right back as he was going to carry all the small fish to his parents. He wasn't right back. He never comes right back if his mother has made anything to drink recently.

When he came back a couple hours later, 'high, high, high', we prepared the tiger fish to fry. With a huge smile he turned to me and exclaimed, 'Miss, I'm frying up this fish for my foreigners!' As he cut the fish into big pieces, he designated who would eat them and said, 'One piece for Miss, one piece for Sam, one piece for sir (he can never remember Alex's name). Oh Miss, I will never forget my foreigners!' We cleaned the fish, cut up the pieces and threw them in a bowl, then carried it in to begin frying up the fish. As Uncle heated the oil in the pan, I turned the fish in a bowl of beaten eggs, followed by a bowl of flour, coating them in the fine white powder. As I did this, Uncle turned to me and said:

Miss I don't eat anywhere but home. If someone offers me food I will say my belly is full, full, even if I'm very hungry. People might put something in your food, poison. You never know. Once one of Auntie Doley's family members tried to poison me. Some people are just bad in the head. I almost left Doley after that, but she cried and I decided to stay. We stayed away from that man though, until he died. Also Auntie Eleanor 'did'<sup>23</sup> that man and that's why he died. She and her family also 'do' Auntie Zen [Uncle Beltram's sister]'s husband and then he got fine, fine and started to cough and shortly afterwards he died. You can pay a *pia'man* to kill someone for you. Just pay \$100,000 [Guyanese dollars, about 350 GBP] and they will kill them. Miss, don't eat anything by Auntie Eleanor. Don't drink anything either. She is a very dangerous woman.'

He tossed a piece of fish in the hot oil, with a loud sizzle.

In his drunken state, Uncle Beltram switched subjects, stating, 'You know Miss, your dreams can tell you when you're in danger. If you dream of either a snake or a tiger you have an

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<sup>23</sup>When Uncle Beltram says that Auntie Eleanor 'did' someone, this is implying that she either poisoned that person, or attacked him in some other unspecified way with her witchcraft, ultimately causing his death.

enemy.’ I described to him the dream I had when I had been in the village for about three months. In the dream, I was lying in my bed in the house, I opened my eyes and realized the window was open and it was daylight outside. Something drew me to the window and I walked towards it slowly, peering out on the savannah. From the corner of my eye I caught sight of the tiger (the jaguar), and it was crouched. It pounced directly at me but the window was covered in glass (an odd bit of dream reality—no windows in the Rupununi are covered in glass). Shocked and terrified, I ran into the kitchen only to realize the top half of our front door was open. It was too late and the tiger leapt through the open space and landed with its paws on my shoulders knocking me to the ground. I woke up at that moment with an audible gasp and fear lodged in my chest. The morning after the dream, I told Auntie Doley and Auntie Torcilla about it over breakfast. They looked at me with large eyes and said, ‘Miss you have an enemy. Be careful.’ Uncle Beltram echoed this sentiment almost verbatim saying, ‘Miss you have an enemy. Be careful what you eat and drink.’

The next morning, I woke up for breakfast and I was chatting with Auntie Doley about Auntie Eleanor’s birthday party that I had been invited to that evening. Over a bowl of porridge, Auntie Doley told me she wouldn’t go to the birthday because she was scared of the woman. A few months before I arrived in the village, patches of skin on Auntie Doley’s neck had lightened in color, and she said after she got the white spots on her neck she wouldn’t eat or drink with the woman again. ‘Miss you will have to be careful at the party. Don’t eat anything while you are there. You are going home soon, and I don’t want you to go back to your country and get sick’, she warned me. She confirmed Uncle Beltram’s story about how this woman was responsible for killing the late *toshao*, Uncle Beltram’s brother in law. Explaining further, she said, ‘When he got sick, Auntie Zen and his family on the Brazilian side carried him to Boa Vista to visit both the hospital and the *pia’man*, but afterwards he was still sick. They brought him back to Sand Creek and he died right here.’

Almost like clockwork, minutes after Auntie Doley told me all these stories, Auntie Eleanor popped her head in the open door and said, ‘Inside.’ Auntie Doley sent me to bring drink for Auntie Eleanor, so I went to the tiny alcohol stash in my room and came back with a bottle of vodka. I mixed a packet of the sickly sweet powdered orange juice with some drinking water to mask the flavor of the cheap liquor. Uncle Beltram popped his head in the back door

and saw that Auntie Eleanor was in the kitchen. He came in but didn't sit down. He wished her happy birthday, and we all took shots to Auntie Eleanor. There was still some porridge on the stove so I served Auntie Eleanor a bowl. I poured another round of shots, finishing off the small bottle of vodka. Auntie Eleanor headed off, presumably to visit some more friends, only after explicitly urging all of us to come to her birthday party that evening. I assured her I would definitely be there!

Later that afternoon I bathed and pulled on a pair of jeans, the party uniform of the Rupununi. Alex, Sam and Franz wandered over to my house so we could all head over to Auntie Eleanor's party together. All the boys were sitting outside under the tarpaulin, lazily lying in the hammocks when Uncle Beltram came home from the farm. He didn't say anything to us, just quietly gave Horsey some water, and then went inside. Shortly afterwards, Auntie Doley came home from work, and I went into the kitchen to chat with them. As I walked in the door, I heard Uncle Beltram telling Auntie Doley that he had been bitten by a young rattlesnake while he was weeding at the farm. Being the incredible badass that he is, he proceeded to crush the snake to death with his bare hands. It only got one fang into his thumb but he told us it was beginning to feel numb. He didn't want to go to the Medex<sup>24</sup>, but Auntie Doley shouted at him, reminding him of the time his mother had been bitten. She said, 'It didn't pain her much the first day, but the next day it pained bad, bad. Miss will carry you to the Medex.' Auntie Doley and I insisted profusely, and finally he agreed. I went outside to tell the boys I would meet them at the party, and headed off down the path with Uncle Beltram at the tail end of the sunset.

The darkness was creeping over the savannah, and Uncle Beltram was clutching his right hand with his left. All the lights were out in Medex's house, even though it was before 7 in the evening. I banged the door with all the force in my little body, frightened that he wouldn't be home. I never thought about Sand Creek as a remote place, except for situations of medical emergency, when the distance felt palpable. I knew that the day before, a boy had been flown to

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<sup>24</sup> A Medex is a health worker stationed in an Amerindian village, and in the case of Sand Creek they were almost always Wapishana, which came in handy so they could speak to the older generation, who, for the most part, were not very skilled at speaking English. Medex do not have the full qualifications of a doctor, but they do undergo a lot of training. Once someone becomes a Medex, people in the village refer to them as Medex in daily conversation, as if this is their name.

the Lethem hospital for a rattlesnake bite. The medical plane never flew at night, so my mind was frantically running through all the possible ways we could get to Lethem.

Luckily, I heard some rustling around in the house, so I knew Medex must have been home. I shouted 'Inside Medex, my Uncle was bitten by a rattlesnake!' I apologized for waking him, as he shuffled around, banging into things and turning on various lights. He shouted to say it was ok, and my relief faded a little as I realized how high he was. He shouted again, this time to say that he would come and we would go to the health center across the yard. It took what felt like forever for him to get dressed, and I kept wondering if he had dropped back to sleep. Finally, he opened the door and peered out at us with the familiar face of Medex after many hours of drinking *kari*. He teetered down the stairs and climbed on his 4x4, like we were going to drive to the health center, even though it's faster to walk there through the shortcut in the fence. He tried to turn on the 4x4 twice, but it didn't respond. In a daze, he turned to me where I was perched on the back grill of the 4x4 and said, 'Wait, what really happened?' I said, 'Uncle was bitten by a young rattlesnake while he was weeding at the farm.' I pointed at the fang mark on Uncle Beltram's thumb. Uncle Beltram explained to Medex that at first it didn't really hurt, but then his thumb got numb and now the rest of his fingers were getting numb and he was feeling the pain up through his arm. Medex said, 'Oh, we don't have to go anywhere.'

He climbed off the 4x4 and we followed him back up the stairs to his house. He went inside and pulled out a syringe with a huge needle. He then fiddled around in some of the boxes in his front room, and pulled out a clear liquid. He filled the syringe with the liquid. Uncle Beltram pulled down his shorts a little and Medex stabbed him in the side of his bum. He pushed the needle hard and it bent at first, until it went into Uncle Beltram's flesh. Despite Medex's medical skills that he had demonstrated several times throughout my stay in Sand Creek, with his level of intoxication, I was concerned about his ability to be precise, or even to locate the right anti-venom. However, he beamed at me and assured me that Uncle would be just fine, and he wouldn't need any more injections. I proclaimed, 'Thank you for saving my Uncle!', and gave him a hug. He held me tight in the hug, and wouldn't let me wiggle out. He said, 'Where have you been? I haven't seen you!' I said, 'You were gone, I haven't seen you! Where have you been?' He told me he had just been to Belgium, Yugoslavia, and the Middle East. If I wasn't already completely convinced he was very intoxicated, this comment assured

me it was so. I told him I broke my ankle so I wasn't going around much, spending most of my time at home. He asked if I could still dance with him. I said, 'I don't know. You're a medical professional—you tell me.' He told me he would see me at Auntie Eleanor's party for a dance, and I agreed to save him one, absolutely sure of the fact that he would immediately pass out again once we left.

Uncle Beltram and I walked home across the dark savannah, passing the brilliantly lit area next to Auntie Eleanor's house, where the party was getting started. When we reached home, Auntie Doley was happy that he had gotten the anti-venom, but told Uncle Beltram he would have to go to his father the next day so he could say traditional prayers over him. Grandpa would have to consult the high science. She turned to me and repeated, in a very stern voice, to be careful at the birthday and not drink any small shots of anything because most likely Auntie Eleanor would put the poison in there.

Auntie Torscilla came to our house with her little granddaughter Evie. I asked if I could go to the party with them. Auntie Doley went and got a few Styrofoam containers for us and told me to us put whatever food Auntie Eleanor offered in them and under no circumstance eat any of it. We walked across the same path that Uncle Beltram and I had taken to reach the Medex earlier. Along the way Auntie Torscilla echoed the warning to be careful about what I eat and drink at the party. We reached the small wooden gate that encloses Auntie Eleanor's house, and she greeted us with a huge hug and a smile. Right away she handed me a large bowl of *sawarao*, a local alcohol made from cassava and potatoes, and told me how she wanted to see me drink it all out that evening. I thanked her. I couldn't avoid drinking the bowl of *sawarao* without being incredibly rude but I heeded all of the warnings and left the party well before midnight.

Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram urged me throughout my time in Sand Creek to be wary of what I was eating and drinking. As Uncle Beltram expressed, he never eats outside of his home. Even if he is very hungry, he will lie and say he is full. This relates back to the concept of consubstantiality, which I explore in depth in the previous chapter. Since Amerindian people are what they eat, they are very careful about where they consume food and particularly who has prepared it. The direct poisoning of someone intentionally is a major aspect of witchcraft and sorcery throughout the Amazon (Buchillet 2004:120, Lagrou 2004:265, Vidal and Whitehead

2004:56, Wright, 1998:162, 2004:98). Auntie Doley explicitly insisted that I do not drink shots or any small pours of liquor as that is an easy thing to slip poison into. Aside from intentional poisoning, there is also the understanding in Sand Creek that you may become ill if people envy you and prepare food or drink that you consume. This is why it is wise to only eat and drink when you are with your family members.

As a guest in the village, I found the idea of always eating at home a tricky rule to follow. Whenever I would visit someone, they would almost always offer me some kind of food or local drink, and it is incredibly insulting to refuse, so I ended up drinking a good deal of *parakari* in many places. Whenever I would get a stomach ache, though, Auntie would always ask where I ate and drank first. She would associate any kind of sickness I developed with eating and drinking outside of the home, although she was much more suspicious of some people than others. Auntie Eleanor, for example, was thought to be a witch by many members of the community, so I was surprised that people were eating and drinking at her house, although it was no coincidence that most of the people consuming things at her party were primarily her kin.

People in the village would draw connections between witchcraft and poison on a regular basis. A friend of mine explained that her brother fell victim to poisoning by a witch in a village close by. My friend Serena was, in fact, forbidden by her mother to go to this woman's house. Serena's older brother used to date one of the woman's daughters. They were very serious and everybody liked them for a couple. One day he caught his girlfriend with another man which left him heartbroken. She begged him to take her back but he refused, saying he couldn't trust her anymore. The woman really wanted the young man to be her son-in-law though, so they say she cast a spell on him. He suddenly left his parents' home and went wandering around, never staying in one place. Serena's mother recognized the symptoms, and carried the young man to the *pia'man*, who treated and cured him. But the woman wasn't ready to give up. She 'did' him again, and this time he got sick, very sick. They carried him to the hospital in Boa Vista but the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. Later, his mother carried him to the *pia'man* again, who removed a small bug from his body. After that the young man recovered, but he never once went to the village where the woman lived again.

The dream I recounted to my Wapishana family also contributed to their insistence that I be careful about what I ate and drank. Having a dream about a snake, or a tiger (a jaguar) in my case, was a very clear indication that I had an enemy. Amazonian people take dreams very seriously, as Conklin describes:

‘Dreams, visions, desires and emotions are widely believed to have the capacity to shape reality. Native ideas about the power of mental states intersect with ideas about the bodily bases of thought, emotion and knowledge, to make mind-altering and body-altering processes inseparable (McCallum 1996a, Pollock 1996.). This is one reason Amazonian peoples devote so much attention to developing a controlling knowledge, emotions and visionary experiences...’ (Conklin 2001a:160).

Conklin explains that the Wari’, who she works with, leave their bodies in dreams, and whatever happens during this time is as real as what takes place during waking life (2001a:135). By no means are all dreams ominous in nature, but in my case this dream indicated I was in danger. It is common for dreams to be the moment when a person realizes that they have been a victim of witchcraft or sorcery, as documented amongst the Matsigenka, as Izquierdo states, ‘Dreams or shocking experiences typically characterize the onset of a sorcery episode’ (2008:178). Indeed, for Amerindians dreams are pathways to cross realities through which one can gain insights, not generally evident in everyday life, linked to ideas of personhood, transformation and agency (Peluso 2004).

Throughout my time in Sand Creek, there were many instances when members of the community drew parallels between snakes and spiritual beings. *Kamudis*, as all snakes are called in Guyana, are dangerous and powerful. For example, in one conversation, Immaculata referred to snakes and demons interchangeably. Also, after my shocking dream about the jaguar, those I told about it explained that if you see a tiger or a snake in your dream, it means you have an enemy. The cosmological significance of snakes can be found in other Amazonian communities as well. For example, Vilaça explains the relevance of snakes in the Wari’ worldview through the lens of perspectivism, stating, ‘...some animals, including the main Wari’ game are conceived to be humans. Wari’, since they are attributed with a spirit, *jam-*, and can shoot and kill the Wari’, who they perceive as enemy or prey’ (2010: 99). Snakes are one of the animals the Wari’ consider to have *jam-*, which means they have the capacity to transform and behave like a human (2010:99). Vilaça also notes the existence of snake-shamans amongst the Wari’, who can



transform into snakes and attack enemies and outsiders. The victims perceive the attack as a snake bite, when they are actually being murdered by a Wari' shaman (2010:306). There is significance in the fact that Uncle was bitten by a snake that same afternoon that Auntie Eleanor came to our home. While snakebites do happen all the time, there is discussion surrounding why a snake may bite a certain person and not another, similar to the attribution of agency when someone develops a sickness.

## Obeah magic

While envy, poison and sorcery are topics found throughout Amazonian literature, and the phenomenon of *kanaima* has been a regional focus in Guyanese studies, I now turn to a discussion that is rarely documented in ethnographies about lowland South America, Obeah magic. This kind of magic is distinctly Creole in nature, and practiced primarily in countries in the West Indies that were British colonies (Fernandez Olmos et al, 2011:155). Obeah magic is part of the religious diversity of the Caribbean. Creolization, defined as, 'the malleability and mutability of various beliefs and practices as they adapt to new understandings of class, race, gender, power, labor and sexuality,' has been noted as, 'one of the most significant phenomena in Caribbean religious history' (Fernandez Olmos et al, 2011:4) Everyday discussions in Sand Creek demonstrate that Creolization is also central to Amerindian lives in Guyana. While the following discussion may feel out of place in the wider description of Amerindian spirituality, Obeah magic is salient in Wapishana spiritual lives. Although it may seem disjointed from an outside perspective, this is not so for the people of Sand Creek, who would speak of their fear of *kanaima* and obeah magic in the same sentence without hesitation.

One morning Auntie Doley told me that her sister's daughter Dionne, was coming to visit the village as she was planning to build a house near her mother, which would enable her to eventually move back to Sand Creek. Auntie Doley explained that when Dionne was young, she was the smartest girl in school at St Ignatius, scoring the highest on all the tests. However, she couldn't afford to finish higher education in Georgetown, and now works as a cook for a mining company. Two days before this I had gone to the farm with Auntie Torscilla, and we picked

plenty of cassava, scraped it, grated it, and put it through the *matapee*<sup>25</sup>. I was planning to go by that morning to sift the cassava meal and practice making cassava bread for *parikari*.

After finishing breakfast and hanging up my wash, I wandered across to Auntie Torscilla's house, following the small shady path underneath the mango tree that winds aimlessly in random directions. I grabbed a handful of *jamon* from the tree on the way, and popped the tart, juicy, deep red fruit into my mouth. Auntie Torscilla has a lovely garden right behind her house, with a fence running along the perimeter to keep all the animals out who would love nothing more than to feast on her vegetables. I walked right up to the fence and shouted, 'Inside!' Dionne peered out of the house and greeted me. I introduced myself and told her I was looking for Auntie Torscilla. She said, 'Oh yeah, the old lady is in the back there in the garden.' She opened the gate for me and I met Auntie T as she was walking towards me. She showed me where the sifter and the cassava meal were. I took a seat on the tiny wooden bench and began my favorite part of processing cassava, the sifting. I placed the woven sifter over an enormous blue basin and grabbed the meal, one chunk after the other. It tends to clump together when it is squeezed in the *matapee*, so I would carefully crumble each bit into the sifter and gently run my hands over it until it fell through into the basin, soft and fine.

Dionne went back into the house after letting me in, but a couple minutes into my activity she came back out and started laughing. She proclaimed, 'A white girl? Sifting cassava? No one will ever believe me. I have to take out pictures of this.' She went back in to grab her phone and took a bunch of pictures of me, admitting that she didn't know how to make cassava bread herself. I offered to teach her and we both broke out into another fit of giggles. She asked if I drank *kari*, and I said 'Of course!'

Once I finished with the sifting, Auntie Torscilla and I started to bake the bread. The cassava bread used to make *kari* is much thicker than the kind served as a part of almost every meal, and has to be left on the flat pan for much longer, until it turns brown. Auntie Torscilla said, 'Just burn it up Miss.' I suppose that after all the other times I helped her make cassava bread, she finally had some faith in me, because she left me in charge of watching it on my own and went to work on the back part of her garden. On the other hand, perhaps she trusted me to

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<sup>25</sup> This is the tool used to squeeze out the poisonous liquids in the bitter cassava root.

do it because the desired outcome was actually burning the bread. While I was at it, Dionne came out of the house again, this time smiling wide and carrying a large cup full of *kari* which she then handed to me. Although the *kari* was slightly sour, it was refreshing as I drank it next to the blazing fire. After I quickly finished the glass, she went in and filled a small pitcher with the thick drink and we took turns drinking glasses of it, as I baked the bread. Auntie Torscilla approved of my baking skills with a small nod, and went to gather all the other supplies we would need to make *kari*.

I spent the whole afternoon with Dionne, talking and drinking. We shared stories about our lives, eagerly asking each other questions. After we had been sipping *kari* for a couple hours, she told me the heartbreaking story of losing her daughter at the young age of three. The conversation started when Dionne pulled out a tiny glass vial she had hanging around her neck and explained that I should be wearing quicksilver as well. As she turned the vial up and down, I could see the thick silver liquid and she told me that it protects whoever is wearing it from evil. She said she bought hers in Georgetown, but I should also be able to buy one in Lethem.

The perpetual smile she was wearing since she had seen me knee deep in cassava meal fell, and her face drew into herself as she said:

Someone sent evil to me, but it got my daughter instead and that's how she died. My daughter was so beautiful Miss. She had fair skin. She was so smart. She could speak both English and Portuguese perfectly. She was so grown up and mature even at the age of three. And she predicted her own death. She said "Mommy I will die soon, but you will have a son to replace me. And Daddy will leave you one year after I die." I thought she was just talking nonsense and I told her so, but all of her predictions were true, for true. It happened years ago, but I can remember it like it was yesterday. She fell ill, she had a fever, and she said, "Mom it's my time to go now. I love you. You will have a son." I told her no, you'll be alright, and rushed her to the hospital in the middle of the night. The doctors never determined what was wrong, what was causing the fever, but she died shortly after we arrived at the hospital.

Her predictions were true. I never planned to have more children but I did get pregnant again. And it was a son indeed. The evil was affecting my son too. It must have been someone envying us because my child's father had lots of mining equipment. He owned it. My son could barely talk or walk by the age of three. One day while he was playing in the garden his fingers, hands, toes and feet started to curl in on themselves. I was so scared. I didn't know what to do. Right at that moment an obeah woman walked by the house. She walked by there often. I never believed in that stuff, and the obeah woman knew it, but she said, "Please let me carry your son. He needs my help. I'm not doing this

for you, since you don't believe, I am doing this for the child. That is why your daughter died, because you didn't believe." So she carried him to her house. She rubbed an egg on his body and bathed him with it to draw out the evil. After this his hands and feet were normal again and he started speaking much more often, and learning fast.

My daughter was also right in predicting that her father would leave. He's a Brazilian man who was working as a miner. When we got together I couldn't speak Portuguese. And that was hard. It was frustrating when my daughter and her father would speak together. So one day I just decided to learn. I started watching TV in Portuguese. He left though, after our son was born. He loved his daughter so much, but not so much his son. I tried to make it work for the sake of our child. Now he lives in Venezuela and is doing his mining there. He sold our equipment. He forged my signature and sold it so he could pay for young and beautiful prostitutes. Those girls only care about having money. Some of the prostitutes are only 14.

In this vignette, Dionne discusses her experience with obeah on the coast of Guyana.

Obeah is the term commonly used throughout the Anglophone Caribbean to describe 'a type of magical practice that uses supernatural powers to alter the physical world (Maraesa 2012: 596)', which is typically associated with Afro-Caribbean people. Although it is one of the most widely known African-derived terms in the Caribbean, scholars struggle to agree on what it means precisely. Bilby and Handler explain why this is, stating,

Obeah is not an organized religion. It lacks a more or less unified system of beliefs and practices involving, for example, deities or gods, communal or public rituals and ceremonies and the physical spaces or sites where they occur, or spiritual leaders...(2004:153)

They do identify two fundamental characteristics of obeah: 'its practice involved the manipulation and control of supernatural forces' and 'it was primarily concerned with divination, healing and bringing good fortune, and protection from harm- although it was sometimes used malevolently to harm others' (2004:154).

While these focuses of obeah do not seem inherently malevolent, the association with the word obeah became very negative throughout the history of the Caribbean. Many prominent scholars have highlighted that this is a result of the colonial powers, who were sometimes the target of obeah practices. They deemed it to be dangerous and less 'civilized' than other spiritual practices (Bilby and Handler 2004, Paton and Forde 2012). Much of the early scholarly work on the subject of obeah relied on Eurocentric and racist primary and secondary sources (Bilby and Handler 2004: 157). This combined with the impact of Christianity on the region in conflict with

other spiritual practices maintained the emphasis on the anti-social elements of obeah. Many laws were put in place throughout the Caribbean criminalizing obeah, including in Guyana. These provisions were included in laws passed throughout the nineteenth-century, although in 1973 Prime Minister Burnham announced, ‘...steps would be taken by his Government to repeal that part of the constitution that made it a specific offence to practice obeah...’(Bilby and Handler 2004: 170). While it is unclear if the laws were officially revoked, today these laws have little impact on practitioners. Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert describe the continuing relevance of Obeah, stating:

In the contemporary West Indies, the term has come to signify any African-derived practice with religious elements, and despite continued criminalization, has come to represent a meaningful and rich element in the Caribbean’s ancestral cultural heritage that needs to be nurtured and preserved. (2011: 155)

Bilby and Handler use the work of Kean Gibson, a Guyanese woman herself, to illuminate the continued relevance and salience of obeah in Guyanese lives and the kinds of obeah practices employed today. Gibson explains that some, ‘do ‘dirty work’...[and] can be enlisted to harm one’s enemies’ or even cause death (2004:164)’ which is the kind of obeah magic that was sent to harm Dionne’s children, a result of envy. But she explains that most Guyanese seek out practitioners for ‘good work’ such as encouraging romantic relationships, resolving family disputes, helping in the accrual of wealth, or determining the cause of illness. She also emphasizes the aspect of protection, as many people seek out obeah practitioners to protect themselves from evil. She provides an example of University of Guyana students who turn to obeah in order to protect themselves from other students who would wish them to fail their exams (2004:164).

Due to the history of the term, however, it does still carry some negative connotation throughout the Caribbean, as Meudec highlights in St. Lucia (2017) and Mantz describes in Dominica (2007). Paton and Forde explain that:

In the Anglophone Caribbean, the term ‘obeah’ was and is widely used to refer to dangerous power, but it has rarely been adopted as an identity by practitioners of its arts, who have referred to themselves as scientists, doctors, spiritual mothers, do-good men, look men, professors, and a range of other terms. (2012: 8-9)

There is a lot of talk of obeah throughout Guyana, and while I never encountered an obeah practitioner in the Rupununi, the influence of this spiritual understanding was regularly invoked even in primarily Amerindian spaces.

In her work in with indigenous Maya people in Southern Belize, Maraesa describes the phenomenon of obeah pregnancy, and she explains, ‘Obeah has been written about extensively in the African diasporic communities in the Caribbean region but it has never been identified as such among the indigenous Maya populations of Central America (2012:597).’ The ease, however, in which the Wapishana people would discuss the danger of the *kanaima* and obeah magic in the same breath emerged right away during my fieldwork. In fact, the people I worked with in Sand Creek were not only just as likely to believe in and engage with, but also rarely differentiate between, Amazonian and Creole spiritual beliefs. Vidal and Whitehead note this amongst the Patamona people, stating:

...it must be recognized that the practice of African-derived shamanism in the form of obeah is not culturally sealed off from other occult or spiritual practice, so that there is a synergy between the cultural significance of *kanaimas*, obeah and other ideas of the priority and possibility of magical action [...]there is nonetheless a widespread appreciation of the potential of Amerindian magic for curing purposes, just as Amerindians will also make use of obeah or, in the Brazilian border regions, the related complexes of *santeria* and *candomblé*. There is an eminent pragmatism in the way in which people will use whatever system or form of magical action that seems to offer the best hope for effective results (Riley 2000). In this way, just as the possibility of *kanaima* acts to empower Amerindians generally in the relationship with outsiders, so too the practice of obeah by national political leaders can be seen as culturally significant beyond those who may share a preeminent belief in the effectiveness of obeah magic. (2004:72)

The understanding that *kanaimas* are dangerous and could be anyone, as well as the fear of being poisoned from a witch, and the possibility of being cursed by obeah magic informed the shape of everyday life in Sand Creek. The way that these people understand, treat and attempt to prevent sickness and death are derived from many ‘cultural origins’. Some aspects are distinctly Wapishana, some reflect understandings that are common throughout Amazonian communities, and some are markedly Guyanese. This calls into question the tendency of scholarship to reify Amerindian sociality into ‘bounded ethnic-linguistic groups’. At least in the case of the Wapishana, it is worthwhile and productive to approach these groups in broader context that will allow for a recognition of the depth of Creolization in Guyanese, Wapishana

lives. Here I turn to Steve Rubenstein's discussion of what boundaries can achieve. He argues, "The very notion that ethnicity is bounded—and the implication that culture can and should be 'contained'—was a modern construction" (289) and he explains that boundaries function through distinguishing an inside from an outside. While this is a powerful distinction in Amerindian communities, in everyday lives these boundaries are often blurred, ambiguous or constantly redrawn. Throughout the rest of the thesis I will draw out how the transversal of boundaries and the blending of the inside and outside provide the creative material to recreate and sustain Amerindian communities and convivial lives.

It is evident that this vibrant Amerindian and Creolized spirit world determined the way people would move through the village and where they would go, where they would eat and drink, as well as who they spend time with. In my experience, I cannot think of a single space or situation where these concerns would not have been heavily considered. As the ethnography illustrates, the spiritual world I encountered in Sand Creek was vibrant as well as consistently and constantly influencing humans' behaviors and experiences every single day. The underlying notion that attributes agency to all sickness and death allows for people to negotiate these painful experiences in the social realm, with an ever present possibility for resolution. This notion will be explored further in Chapter 5, in regards to *the sickness*. Before we begin to explore *the sickness* in depth, building on this spiritual context, I will describe the physical context where this emergent form of spirit possession is taking place. The following chapter will offer a comprehensive discussion of Sand Creek Secondary school, with descriptions of the school, the curriculum, and experience of schooling for Amerindian youth.

## Photographs



*Photo 3 The view from the mango tree next to our home in Sand Creek.*



*Photo 4 Auntie Doley and myself enjoying the chrysalis Uncle Beltram brought home for our dinner.*





*Photo 5 Auntie Torsilla and I making cassava bread in preparation of make parikari*



*Photo 6 Uncle Beltram with the head of the cow he slaughtered*



*Photo 7 Sand Creek Secondary school*



*Photo 8 Sand Creek Secondary school dormitory. This is where the sickness took place, and this is Subrin Mountain located behind it*

# Chapter 4

## Sand Creek Secondary School and Indigenous Education

### Chapter Outline

In conjunction with the previous chapter, the following passages will provide a context for the experience of *the sickness* through a comprehensive look at Sand Creek Secondary school. This chapter will describe the space, offer some background information about the school, and give a brief introduction to the classes and the curriculum. It will examine what it is about boarding schools and how they function that sets them apart from other schools, and explore the historical precedents of indigenous residential schools in the past, with a focus on the Carlisle schools in the US and the Stolen Generation of Australia. The chapter will analyze the interplay between the demonstration of indigenous agency and the structuring of the hierarchy of power inherent in this form of schooling. I will draw in various aspects of the anthropology of education that apply directly to the current situation in Sand Creek. Through some ethnographic vignettes I will describe my experience volunteering in the school, and highlight certain difficulties I had in the classroom, particularly in regards to discipline, and provide a few perspectives to analyze these problems. Throughout the chapter the ethnographic material will draw out the sharp differences the children encounter in their school lives in comparison with life in their home communities, with a focus on Amerindian ways of learning and conceptions of knowledge.

Sand Creek Secondary: A savannah boarding school

The dusty, bumpy road led directly from the center of the village to Sand Creek Secondary. The school was impossible to miss, and in the sea of bright, tropical green of the savannahs the buildings felt out of place. There were three structures of various sizes nestled at the foot of a small mountain: the dormitory, the teacher's apartments and the school itself, all painted the pale yellow color that indicated they had been built by the Guyanese government. The largest of the three was the main school building, the home of all the classrooms and the staff room. It was labelled with neatly painted bold black letters that almost screamed SAND CREEK SECONDARY SCHOOL at anyone who passed along the road. The two story structure, dwarfed by the mountain right behind it, was in the shape of an enormous L. There was a front porch with an overhang in front of the staff room, with a white picket fence marking the parameter. The fence was missing many of its white boards, smiling out towards the village with a gap toothed grin. The staff room was packed full with nine wooden desks, some overflowing with papers, notebooks and books, others completely bare. The windows along the wall were missing several glass louvers, which had fallen victim to the odd football or roughhousing student. The hallway from the staff room led to the headmaster's office, tucked in the corner of the building, like a secret. The windows in the headmaster's office were in the sweet spot, and the breeze blew through them so consistently that the sweltering heat never took over. This could have been one reason why the he hid away in here all day, although I suspected there were other reasons as well.

The classrooms were all located on the left of an open corridor, running along the L shape of the building. All of the concrete walls had square holes at even intervals that increased the ventilation and air flow. These holes proved their worth in the afternoons when the building baked in the blazing sun. Despite this, I would oftentimes still find myself dripping with sweat, while I tried to teach 8<sup>th</sup> graders who were far too hot to learn.

The library was located in the top left-side corner of the building, full of empty bookshelves, with one solitary, enormous desk in the corner. There were only a few books on display; an incomplete set of encyclopedias. The out of date pages, enthusiastically gnawed upon by mice, stated that Germany was still divided.

Huge yellow columns, placed every five feet or so, ran from the second story to the ground, giving the misleading impression that the building was structurally sound. Simply entering any classroom, however, made it clear that the building was slowly falling apart. This was particularly apparent on the bottom level, where the floors were never sealed. A sweeping rota hung on the wall, and every morning the students swept the floors with a palm leaf broom and released huge clouds of white dust, full of indeterminate toxins, into the classroom air. Regardless of how many times students swept each day, there was a fresh layer of dust to inhale each morning. In some of the classrooms there were holes in the walls where chunks of concrete had spilled out. The walls were literally crumbling. This was no great surprise to community members, who whispered in hushed tones that the contractors, hired by the government, made off with a lot more of the money than they invested in the building.

There were three sets of stairs that led up to the first floor of the building. A rickety brown railing ran along the balcony. Part of the top floor was condemned before I arrived in the village. Although it was technically off limits, there was nothing preventing students from exploring the condemned section. The most daring students would occasionally venture across the line and into danger. Every morning I wondered if today would be the day that the top floor collapsed.

Most Amerindian villages in rural Guyana, including Sand Creek, have a state run primary school. To continue studies beyond the primary level, however, the young people of the Rupununi must leave their home communities to attend regional boarding schools, like Sand Creek Secondary, sometimes from as young as ten years old. Region 9 is one of the largest geographic regions of Guyana and Sand Creek Secondary School is the newest boarding school in the region, built in 2012. During my fieldwork, the school had around 200 students, and over half of them lived in the dormitory. There were Wapishana and Makushi children who hailed from the neighboring villages. There were also many students who had to travel great distances to get to school. Even overflow Patamona students from Region 8 were transported by the Ministry of Education to Sand Creek for secondary school.

The children from the closer Wapishana and Makushi villages typically traveled to their home communities three times a year, for Christmas, Easter and summer break. They were

technically only allowed to visit home a handful of times outside of these designated holidays. The Patamona children, on the other hand, were only able to visit their families in Region 8 during the two-month-long summer break. Sand Creek's distance from their home villages made it expensive and logistically challenging for Patamona children to travel home during Christmas and Easter, so they spent these holidays in the dormitory. Effectively these young people spent nine to ten months a year living away from their families and communities.

Philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, the first person to propose boarding schools, determined the experience of adolescence was a crucial period of malleability and opportunity between childhood and adulthood, and deemed parents incapable of providing an ideal educational environment (Cookson and Hodges Persell 1985). In *Emile*, Rousseau describes his alternative for young people, focusing on isolation in a rural space combined with intervention from a knowledgeable teacher, which would produce the appropriate transformation into a 'natural man' (ibid). Ever since this project of Rousseau's first came to fruition, children have been sent to boarding schools in a variety of contexts throughout the world.

Boarding schools, an example of what Goffman deemed a 'total institution', provide unique spaces for educational projects to occur. These kinds of schools stand apart precisely because they break down the boundaries that typically separate distinct aspects of life, particularly the boundaries between where people sleep, play and work (Goffman 1961). Goffman highlighted four crucial characteristics found in all 'total institutions':

1. Every part of life is conducted in the same space and under the same authority,
  2. Each day is spent with the same group of people experiencing the same daily trajectory and receiving the same treatment,
  3. The residents go through the day according to a strict schedule and set of rules and
  4. Every aspect of daily life contributes to the overall plan and ethos of the institution.
- (Goffman 1961, 6)

These four aspects of the experience within a total institution shed light on ideas about power and processes of transformation within total institutions (ibid).

When people reflect on boarding schools in the popular imagination, they often associate them with either the wealthy elite, such as in the case of public schools in the UK or prep schools in the USA, or 'special children' who are in need of 'protection' or 'rehabilitation', such as indigenous children sent to boarding schools in many parts of the world (Cookson and

Hodges Persell 1985). These different kinds of schools achieve different aims, either to train elite youth in the transfer of power, wealth and prestige, or to promote mainstream cultural values (which often contributes to the loss of language and traditional practices) respectively. Both, however, are able to make these transformations of young people as a result of their semi-total institutional nature.

While the elements of Goffman's total institution are still present in Sand Creek Secondary, in an indigenous context certain aspects of boarding schools become more salient, while others don't seem to apply at all. For example, Goffman's definition of a total institution relies on the breakdown of the boundaries between where people work, play and sleep. Amerindian people do not draw the same boundaries between work and social spaces as the school children Goffman was observing in his work. On the contrary, Amerindians value the social aspect of work highly (Passes 2000). The introduction of an authority figure, a strictly imposed schedule, and the constant threat of discipline are the main things that set apart the life in a village from the life in the boarding school. It is also important to note that in indigenous contexts boarding schools provide one of the main spaces where the presence of the state and local community collide with one another, which not only makes them transformational spaces, but also contested and ambiguous (Regalsky and Laurie 2007).

The collision between the state and Amerindian communities is evident in Guyanese boarding schools in indigenous villages, although the situation is complex. On one hand, the schools are located in Amerindian communities and many of the teachers are Amerindian themselves, which allows for a level of continuity. However, the schools are clearly set apart. They are designated as state-run spaces through location and visual indicators, such as being located outside the center of the village and being painted the same yellow color as all government buildings. This—combined with the curriculum, which is designed entirely on the coast—creates a compelling intersection between a state-run educational project and indigenous agency.

## A historical precedent: Residential schools and indigenous youth



There are several notable historical precedents that highlight the contentious intersection between boarding schools and indigenous children. Two that stand out are Indian boarding schools in the US, like the Carlisle School, and the Stolen Generation of Australia. While the social processes that occurred in these historical institutions and what is taking place currently in Guyanese boarding schools are not identical, exploring these examples sheds light on the possible implications of this approach to schooling and the impact on indigenous youth.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the US and Australia implemented two large scale projects that involved indigenous children being coerced into leaving their families and home communities to attend state run boarding schools. Both of these programs had similar motivations—to 'civilize' indigenous people, to 'save' them from a life of backwardness, and make them into 'useful' members of society (Jacobs 2009, Cheater 2010, Manne 2004, Hoxie 1984). This reflects the Christian and enlightenment philosophy that children are more susceptible to change, to learning new ways of being (Cheater 2010). While these practices were called different things, 'assimilation' in the US, and 'protection' in Australia, they both involved the systematic removal of children from their families and highlighted the belief that institutionalization and education were the keys to 'raising up' these 'backwards races' (Jacobs 2009, Cheater 2010, Manne 2004, Hoxie 1984).

In the 1880s the US government determined the solution to what they had deemed the 'Indian problem' was to move indigenous youth from their reservations and place them in state run boarding schools (Jacobs 2009). This marked a new era in Federal Indian education programs. These programs began emphasizing education as the only means to 'civilize' a 'savage' race (Hoxie 1984). The boarding school program was pioneered by Captain Richard Pratt, founder of the Carlisle School, a well-known indigenous boarding school that served as a model for similar schools throughout the nation (Hoxie 1984, Jacobs 2009). Pratt stressed the importance of removing children from their indigenous surroundings to avoid 'contamination' from family, friends and tradition (Calloway 1999) and he believed that proper education would 'transform' Indian children into ideal American citizens (Hoxie 1984). The schools had a compulsory attendance policy, although it wasn't uniformly enforced. By 1902, however, there were 17,700 Native American children attending the 154 boarding schools throughout the country (Hoxie 1984, Jacobs 2009). The young people were removed from their homes between

the ages of eight and ten and on average they would spend five to ten years away from their families and communities (Jacobs 2009:31).

Within the boarding school the children were educated in 'American values' and a mainstream brand of patriotism (Calloway 1999). In direct contrast to their everyday lives on the reservation, the boarding schools had a regimented schedule and harsh discipline policies. Native American youth were given new names, punished for speaking their native languages, and discouraged from returning home during breaks. There was also documented instances of physical, sexual and emotional abuse in these residential schools. These features of boarding schools and the trauma of being forcibly removed from their families and homes resulted in many instances of suicide in the boarding schools (Calloway 1999).

Similarly in Australia after 1904, when the first comprehensive act to assign full guardianship of Aboriginal children to the Chief protector of each state or colony passed, it became common practice to permanently separate 'half-caste' children from their families and 'raise them to a white standard'. Over the next several decades over 20 percent of Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families. Administrators aimed to educate and re-socialize those children, to 'civilize' them, and believed that the success of these projects lay in the ability to fully separate these children not just from their families, but also from their ways of life (Manne 2004). The Protectors would go to great lengths to ensure this separation. They would change young people's names, send them to homes on the other side of the state, separate them from their siblings, tell them their parents voluntarily gave them up, and punish them if they used their native language (Cheater 2010). There were no inspections or regulations on the living conditions in these institutions, and Aboriginal youth were educated in overcrowded classrooms by uninformed teachers. They were often trained in menial labor, including many hours of backbreaking work, and subjected to harsh discipline (Haebich 1988).

The fundamental contrast between these situations and contemporary Guyana is the absence of forcible removal in Guyana. In the Rupununi and throughout rural areas of Guyana parents are not required to send their children to boarding school. However, the postcolonial context in Guyana is crucial to understanding the motivation behind sending Amerindian young people to boarding school. Many parents and elders continue to draw connections between

education and ideas of 'development' and 'modernity'. As a result there is an increased social acceptance, if not pressure, to attend these state schools. Many striking similarities remain between these historical examples and the present situation in Guyana. In both instances the curriculum reflects the mainstream culture and language, the education system has a form and structure that perpetuates an imbalance of power between the state and indigenous peoples, the boarding schools foster dislocation and language loss, and the long term separation associated with this form of schooling impacts the continued production and maintenance of indigenous knowledge.

### Indigenous education in South America: the structuring of hierarchy

Historically, government policies about indigenous education in South America emphasized the idea that a uniform national culture was necessary to provide equal citizenship to indigenous peoples (Rockwell and Gomes 2009: 102) which resulted in education that homogenized difference. Attitudes towards indigenous education experienced a shift in the 1970s due to the indigenous rights movement (Macedo 2009:174). Furthermore, Amerindians view the school as a pathway for becoming the right kind of citizen (García Bonet 2018). From the first written draft of the Declaration of Rights of Indigenous People by the United Nations there was always a major emphasis on the right to education (Aikman 1995:411), illustrating indigenous agency in relation to education. The situation is very complex however, and despite the demand from indigenous people for access to schooling for their young people, many educational policies in South America continue to teach a curriculum in the dominant language and culture of each country and the form and structure of the education systems continue to create and perpetuate a certain relationship between indigenous people and the state (Rockwell and Gomes 2009). Beyond this there are wide reaching effects of these education systems on the spatial organization of Amerindian communities and their social worlds (Rival 1996, Rubinstein 2001, 2012).

In South America, the majority of indigenous groups have requested formal education from the state, as a way to enskill their youth with literacy and mathematics (Macedo 2009: 170). Amongst the Shuar of Ecuador, parents send their children to school in order to gain access to

empowering knowledge, in hopes of transforming Shuar society into one that can interact with settlers on their own terms (Rubenstein 2001, 2012). Classroom education for youth is so important for the Ashaninka of Peru that it motivates the demand for land titles and the reorganization of their communities. They believe that educating their young people will protect them from being taken advantage of by outsiders (Killick 2008). It is a common notion amongst indigenous elders in South America that the next generation should learn important knowledge and techniques of the state in order to protect land rights and gain respect for indigenous groups (Macedo 2009:184). When speaking with Amerindian elders in Guyana, it became immediately apparent that they shared this view. In several instances they insisted that, despite the fear that their children would leave for boarding school and never return to their home village, attending secondary school was an important and valuable opportunity for Amerindian youth. It would give the next generation a chance at a 'better' life. Throughout many indigenous communities, and certainly in the Rupununi, the idea of education is understood as a primary way to renegotiate the relationship with the outside in order to protect themselves and their communities.

Although classroom education equips indigenous youth with literacy and a new understanding of the economic principles of the state, the form and structure of education is not socializing indigenous young people into a 'space of mutual recognition of difference'. On the contrary education is bringing them into a 'subordinate role in the national configuration' (Rockwell and Gomes 2009: 98). Paulo Freire, in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, indicates the implications of this kind of imposed education,

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world... As long as they [the oppressed] live in the duality in which TO BE is TO BE LIKE and TO BE LIKE is TO BE LIKE THE OPPRESSOR, this contribution is impossible. (Freire 1972:15)

The consequences of the kind of education that integrates indigenous groups into the 'logic of the present system' is evident throughout South America. In Guyana, for example, the government's lack of understanding or concern for indigenous social structure and ways of learning is clear in the design and implementation of the boarding school system. This has

resulted in an educational project that has been far less successful than the Ministry of Education hoped it would be. Indeed, as Rockwell and Gomes argue, recent policies in Latin America 'have taken up the international calls for 'multiculturalism' and 'interculturality' while implanting mechanisms for bringing indigenous people under fiscal, political and legal control' (2009:98). Rival argues in a similar vein that the continuity of Huaroni identity itself is undermined within the school (1996:153).

In the past, Amerindians were not allowed to speak their native language in Guyanese residential schools, mirroring similar post-colonial contexts such as the Carlisle Schools or the Stolen Generation. Although these policies are now changing, in classrooms in the hinterland of Guyana the curriculum is still based on 'mainstream culture and language' (Wihak 2009). This is manifested in the decorations in the classrooms, as Wihak noted signs on the walls listing qualities of a 'good Guyanese citizen' in English. The rhetoric about educational policies in Guyana reinforces a particular negotiation of a hierarchy of power. For example, a document published by the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs states, 'The creation of the Hinterland Scholarship Program was also one of the measures taken to integrate Amerindians into wider Guyanese society bringing them on par, *at least educationally*, with other Guyanese' (2013: 3, my emphasis).

The articulation of these complex hierarchical power structures that complicate relationships between indigenous peoples and the state are manifested every Friday morning at Sand Creek Secondary, during the weekly assembly. Assembly is almost like a church service for Sand Creek Secondary School. All of the grades file into the assembly room, a huge rectangular room on the second floor with rows and rows of chairs facing a bare stage. Somehow there are never enough chairs though, so every week the bigger boys have to carry chairs in from the nearby classrooms. The square holes in the walls for ventilation run evenly along both walls. A nice breeze flows off the mountain and through the room, keeping it delightfully cool, in contrast to the rest of the classrooms.

The assembly always starts with a morning prayer followed by the school pledge, then the Guyanese pledge. In unison, all of the students shout the school motto, 'Onward towards success!' All of the students then sing the song of Sand Creek Secondary together, which creates

a deafeningly loud chorus. In this song they list all of the attributes to which each student should 'aspire'. The song draws a blueprint for a particular kind of citizen that can be productive in wider society. One of the verses goes:

God Bless Sand Creek Secondary  
We strive always for excellence  
We gain all the skills, values and attitudes  
To shape our future  
We learn to be profound leaders  
Sand Creek Secondary  
Working together  
Sand Creek Secondary  
Wearing white and blue

The first assembly of the year was run by the student government, and each of the following weeks was organized by a different class. The students presented various poems, dances, and skits throughout the two hours. They normally had a guest speaker who would deliver a moral talk, and at the end the headmaster presented his remarks, which could last anywhere from ten minutes to the better part of an hour, depending on his mood. In the first assembly of the year the Medex, the town health worker, was the guest speaker. He encouraged the students try their very best at school, and put a lot of effort into studying, and then listed a series of opportunities they would have after doing well in secondary school, including the opportunity to become a Medex in the future. He followed up his moral and inspirational talk with a myth about the ancient Wapishanas.

The majority of the songs and poems that the students shared in assembly throughout the year were very patriotic. These mediums would often express facts and figures about Guyana but also highlight the pride and emotional investment the students had in being Guyanese. In one presentation several of the children dressed up to portray the various 'peoples' of Guyana and they would often perform dances of these other 'peoples' of Guyana, dances that reflected Indian, African and Portuguese heritage. The assembly would also often feature songs and poems about being Amerindian. Almost every week they would sing a song called 'The 9 tribes of Guyana.' Another assembly favorite, a song entitled, Not a Blade of Grass, goes like this:

We are a peaceful people,  
Struggling, we struggle,  
And we don't look for trouble.

Just as around.  
And when outside faces  
From foreign places  
Talk about taking over  
We ain't backing down.

We ain't giving up the mountains,  
We ain't giving up the trees,  
We ain't giving up the rivers,  
That belongs to me.  
Not one blue sockie  
Not one rice grain.  
Not one charrace.  
Not a blade of grass.

This land is our land now  
We gonna make it somehow  
And we will bend like a bow  
But never break  
Our father came here.  
And they live and die here  
And we ain't moving from here  
Make no mistake.

The lyrics of the song are powerful, illustrating a resistance of Amerindian people towards colonists or coastal people coming onto their land. However, the assembly never finishes on this note. While it never ends at a predictable time, it always ends in a predictable way, with the National Anthem of Guyana sung by the whole student body. So on one hand the young people are encouraged to be proud of their Amerindian heritage, but this pride is always within the context of and subordinate to the wider identity of being Guyanese. This reinforces the aims of the wider educational project, to teach Amerindian young people how to be good Guyanese citizens, but also to understand their place within the social hierarchy of the country.

## Volunteer Teaching

On Saturday August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014 I woke up before the sun, so the cool water I drew from the well felt sharp on my warm skin as I bathed. This was the morning when I would present my research to the *tosbao* and Village Council, to see if they would approve my stay in Sand Creek. I stayed up late the night before preparing careful notes for my presentation and afterwards I still

couldn't sleep because I was feeling anxious about the outcome. I arrived at the community center at 8 am, when the meeting was due to begin, but I was the only person there. *Tosbao* Rocky, the elected leader of the village, strolled up a few minutes later. Rocky was a tall man, with broad shoulders and dark brown eyes. He turned to me as if to make small talk and said, "The weather is acting very strange Miss, very unpredictable. My people have always been able to tell what would happen with the weather by watching the natural signs, but now everything is off. The savannahs should be flooded by this time of year, but they aren't."

Slowly other men and women trickled into the community center, about 8 or 9 in total. *Tosbao* explained to me that this time of year, right before the school term begins, is when lots of families go to the farm, so he would excuse those who were absent. He began the meeting by reading aloud the letter I had sent to the village prior to my arrival. In it I explained that I wanted to study education, and I was willing to volunteer at the school in whatever capacity they preferred. Auntie Doley mentioned the night before that the school was severely understaffed and desperately needed teachers, with only five slated to teach over 200 students. That warm morning I agreed to become a volunteer teacher at Sand Creek Secondary School. An older woman asked me what subject I could teach and I suggested that since I study anthropology, I could teach Social Studies or English. Another woman said, 'We are happy to have you in the community, and the school needs teachers.' A man sitting in the back of the row of benches, with curly light brown hair asked how long I planned to stay in Sand Creek. I said, 'I plan to stay for at least the school year, but the summer too because I want to learn the Wapishana way of life. I want to learn your language and I want to go to the farm and learn to make *parikari*.' Everyone in the room started chuckling. A woman exclaimed, 'You should learn to ride a horse too!' I nodded and said, 'Sure!' as a smile slowly brightened on my face. I was finally letting myself believe the meeting was going well.

As the meeting was winding down everyone on the benches debated what they would call me. All teachers throughout the Rupunnini are called Miss, which remains the case if and when they get married or after they retire from teaching, so the community decided to call me Miss Courtney. Even after I quit teaching at the school, everyone in the community continued to call me Miss, as you will see throughout the thesis. I explained that I would have to return to Georgetown with their letter of approval in order to apply for official permission with the



Ministry of Amerindian Affairs to conduct research, and *Tosbao* responded with, 'We will wait for you Miss Courtney.' I was beaming, thrilled that they had approved my stay in the village. After everyone left, I ran back to Auntie Doley's house to pack my stuff to begin the long journey to Georgetown.

I arrived back in the village on Tuesday, September 2. Bright and early the following morning I was walking down the main road in the village towards the school. The sun was blazing hot, and the distance felt a lot longer than it looked. By the time I walked into the teacher's room with my sweat soaked hair I was looking pretty disheveled. Only a few of the desks were occupied. On one side Abbie and Samantha were sitting down, in their neatly pressed professional outfits without a drop of sweat on their skin. Abbie was even wearing heels. Abbie is a Wapishana girl from Sawarawau, a village a bit further south. Samantha is a Makushi girl from Moco-Moco, a small village further north. I met them and Samantha's daughter Adele the night prior, when I was out for a walk with Theresa. They both greeted me with the customary 'Good morning' when I walked into the teacher's room. There was one other Amerindian girl sitting at the desk in the far left corner. She didn't say anything, but she looked at me with her striking green eyes. Across a makeshift aisle in the teachers room were two British boys, both volunteers with a program called Project Trust, and both sweating as much as I was in their semi-professional outfits. I introduced myself to everyone, and then the headmaster came bustling in and greeted me.

The headmaster, Sir Kit Spencer, was a big man with a round belly, bushy black eyebrows, and eyes that were often bloodshot from his almost constant alcohol consumption. He was a very charismatic man. He spoke loudly and often, and his students looked at him with a mix of fear and respect. I sat down at my desk, and the first thing he said was, 'We are really short staffed, so you may find I'm overworking you.' He made this statement in such a matter of fact way, completely sans apology, so I responded with a small nervous laugh and said 'Ok.' He handed me the heavy teacher's lesson plan book, and explained that I would have to fill it out for each one of my classes. Just as I wondered how I would figure out what I was supposed to teach them, HM handed me two flimsy notebooks where the curriculum for English grade 8 and grade 9 were handwritten, respectively. He gestured to a shelf filled with all sorts of textbooks, and stated that there were not enough textbooks for each student to have one, so they would

have to share. He pointed out which books I should use for each class and said if some students were having a hard time grasping the subjects it would be ok to take a few extra periods to make sure they understood the lesson. Glancing at the clock, he then suggested that I could go try to speak with my students in my first period, because I was already late. I asked if it would be alright to look through the books and get my bearings first. He said that was fine, walked back the hallway towards his office, and did not speak to me again for the rest of the day.

I glanced at the new pile of textbooks and notebooks and the huge lesson plan book and felt a bit overwhelmed. I briefly wondered if I had made a serious misstep by agreeing to do this job. I pushed that thought aside, and dove into the curriculum guide. It was broken down by week, with grammar lessons, writing lessons, and reading comprehension. I determined that reading comprehension should be easy enough to teach, so I planned that for my two remaining classes, reading through the texts and scribbling down some notes. The final period that day was free for me, and I was already looking forward to it. I could finally get some spare time to try to wrap my mind around planning lessons for the rest of the week.

A minute before the next period began I walked into the classroom, and nothing has terrified me as much (before or since) as that moment, standing in front of a class of 35 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. They were all sitting in rows of desks facing the chalkboard in the front of the room. Each desk had space for two students to sit, and in some cases they had squeezed into groups of three. The students stared at me and were clearly intrigued, and at least the novelty of me, a blonde white woman with a pronounced American accent, and I captured their attention for that first day. As I walked around the room while the students started their reading assignment, I sensed a latent energy, like the students were always on the brink of misbehaving, like they were always a second away from ceasing to listen to me and get out of hand, like they were showing me a courtesy of paying attention because it was my first day teaching. I did begin to hear whispers on the other side of the room. After reading the text, I put the students into small groups to discuss the questions. Although they made it clear with their body language that they did not want to do this, they nevertheless moved to sit in the groups and talk to one another. There were a few kids who were clearly trying to participate to the fullest, and I appreciated their effort, although the majority were not. Shortly afterwards I heard the loud, clear ringing of the

cow bell which dismissed the students and signaled the start of lunch. I breathed a huge sigh of relief, as I had officially survived teaching my first class at Sand Creek Secondary.

## Anthropology of Education

Teaching and learning have always been central to anthropological inquiry, within a classroom or otherwise. The transmission of knowledge is crucial for the ways in which values and beliefs are constituted, communicated and transformed. The early approach in the anthropology of education was based on an ethnocentric, evolutionary framework that implied a hierarchy of knowledge, and schooling and literacy were seen as ways for lesser societies to overcome 'fundamental' difference (Pelissier 1991). The approach to the anthropology of education mirrored wider shifts in the discipline that moved away from classifying people as 'primitive' or 'civilized'. However, as I plan to draw out shortly, some elements of ethnocentrism remain embedded in the anthropology of education. Rather than attempt to summarize all aspects of the far reaching sub-field, this section will explore certain aspects of the anthropology of education that engage directly with the experience of indigenous schooling at Sand Creek Secondary.

To first touch on the ethnocentrism still embedded in the anthropology of education, there is a continued focus on dysfunctional dichotomies that reflect an 'us' and 'them' mentality. These dichotomies inherently imply a value judgement. This is reflected in the definition of terms like 'formal' and 'informal' education and their relation to ideas of 'literate' and 'illiterate' societies, which is detrimental to a holistic understanding of what education achieves. While Western 'literate' societies are credited with the creation of 'formal' education practices, this disregards many examples throughout history of illiterate societies with formalized education. Akinnaso argues that limiting comparisons to 'formal' and 'informal' education styles is a result of a dual assumption—first that schooling does not exist in the institutional sense in non-literate societies and that all learning in non-literate societies must occur in a non-institutional setting(1992:72). He provides two primary examples that highlight the error in this characterization, navigation in Micronesia and divination in West Africa. In both cases the learning process, despite a lack of literacy in the narrow definition, is highly formalized. He

argues that indeed these types of formal and informal learning have distinct characteristics, but they do not exist in a rigid dichotomy (1992). Jean Lave also comments on this ethnocentrism inherent in the search for formal or informal education. She highlights the fact that this approach treats Western kinds of education as a 'gold standard' while everything in contrast comes up lacking. She suggests a way through this with a focus on the ethnography itself, and an understanding of how relationships work to inform ways and kinds of learning (2017: 4).

While teaching, learning and education are all interrelated concepts, interrogating a definition of education is useful in itself. Emile Durkheim in *Education and Sociality* provides one definition:

Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life. Its object is to arouse and to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are demanded of him by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined. (1956:71)

Durkheim identifies the intricate relationship to both wider society, and the 'special milieu' each person finds themselves within, however, this definition reflects a misstep often found in early studies of socialization. The assumption that children are not engaged with social life, and that adults impart the capabilities of engaging in a wider social world is highly problematic. An influx of studies that focused on language and culture 'acquisition' encouraged researchers to dispel these assumptions and acknowledge the dialectic between agency and structure (Pelissier 1991). These studies do not assume that cultures are static or given and simply transferred to youth. On the contrary, they acknowledge the active role that people play in their own development (Heath 1984:252). Ochs and Schefflin state, 'the child or the novice (in the case of older individuals) is not a passive recipient of sociocultural knowledge but rather an active contributor to the meaning and outcome of interactions with other members of a social group (1984: 165).'

Paulo Freire rejects a characterization of education that goes along with the early socialization studies, what he defines as the 'banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only so far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits (1972: 72),' and goes on to argue that 'Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in

the world, with the world, and with each other' (1970:72). The idea that children are taught how to be social fails to acknowledge the fact that children are always engaging in social relationships, and it is precisely through these relationships that they are able to negotiate their understanding of the world around them (Toren 1993, 2009, 2012). These studies also fail to acknowledge the agency of youth and the two-way nature of knowledge production within adult-child interaction. Children do not simply take knowledge on board without active engagement and the space to transform this knowledge, and just as children learn from adults, adults also learn from children (Toren 1993, 2009, 2012, Ingold 2007). Culture is produced in the space in between, in the intersubjective relationships that are unique to each person in each moment of their lives. Another fault of early socialization studies is the assertion that the production of knowledge ceases to occur once children become adults, when in reality teaching and learning are life-long pursuits (Toren 1993, 2009, 2012, Ingold 2007).

The acknowledgement of intersubjectivity as the space for learning, and the emphasis on social relationships informing knowledge, are far more salient in the context of Amerindian ways of learning than the socialization approach. Amerindians recognize different kinds of knowledge, particularly embodied knowledge. As illustrated in Chapter 2, the body is the space where a person interacts with, understands, and mediates the world. Laura Rival indicates this in the wider Amazonian context, stating, "...persons are produced, social groups made and differences created through the body (2005:105)." Amerindians do not make the same separation of mind and body common in Western thought and knowledge is mediated directly through the body. Proper knowledge can only be acquired through sensory perception and bodily experience. Lagrou illustrates this among the Cashinawa, stating, "For something to become embodied, and *therefore* adequate knowledge, the other senses have to help root this perception of the surrounding world through the skin, the ears, the hands, the body (2000:158, my emphasis)." Knowledge is born from affect and greatly influenced by social relationships.

This relates to traditional Amerindian ways of learning. Knowledge can only be legitimized when it's rooted in direct perception and bodily encounter of the world. As a child becomes a full person within a community, they slowly acquire different skills and knowledge through experiencing the world directly and watching their elders. Explicit instruction on how to do something is rare. I definitely found this to be the case in Guyana. I was unskilled at doing a

lot of daily activities in Sand Creek, so I would occasionally find this lack of instruction frustrating, as those close to me would never explain directly what I was doing wrong. Since knowledge is acquired through the body, it is also inherently gendered knowledge (McCallum 2001). Men learn to hunt and women learn to garden, weave and cook, which all act as building blocks that make up aspects of personhood (Lagrou 2000, McCallum 2001). I will explore gendered knowledge and knowledge production in more depth in Chapter 6.

Beyond this, there are many incongruities between the form and structure of classroom education and traditional Amerindian ways of learning. It is noted throughout Amazonian literature that indigenous communities emphasize the collective over the individual. School structures, however, require the students to act as individual learners (Rockwell and Gomes 2009). They sit in separate desks, raise their hands to answer questions, and receive separate grades. Beyond this, the coercive power structure built into the authority of the teacher is a foreign idea to many indigenous children, as oftentimes even their parents will never explicitly instruct them to do anything (Rockwell and Gomes 2009, Rival 1996). The curriculum itself creates a new social context, as literacy and math are not a feature of typical Amerindian life (Rival 1996). Classroom knowledge is impersonal and static, which differs dramatically from the concept of embodied knowledge central to Amerindian communities (Rockwell and Gomes 2009).

It is clear that classroom knowledge is disconnected from embodied knowledge, as rote memorization could not be further from a bodily experience. I am not arguing that Amerindians value classroom knowledge any less than embodied knowledge, but they do distinguish between them. Ken Kensinger notes this amongst the Cashinahua, stating, “They patiently and persistently rejected any separation of mind and body, insisting that different kinds of knowledge are gained through and reside in different parts of the body. The whole body thinks and knows (1995:244).” He goes on to connect various kinds of knowledge with different parts of the body, such as hand knowledge, which indicates a skill in working, while eye knowledge indicates knowledge of the spirit world. For the Cashinahua, brain knowledge, associated with literacy and schooling, is a completely separate kind of knowledge from traditional knowledge (1995:244).

While classroom knowledge is important for protecting communities from outsiders who might try to take advantage of them, this knowledge can also be dangerous. Gow illustrates this dichotomy amongst the Piro in his comparison of knowledgeable teachers and shamans. Both kinds of knowledge are incredibly important, as they can be used as a defense of kinship. On the other hand, those who possess either teacher's or shamanic knowledge stand outside of kinship in particular ways. The negotiation of this dangerous knowledge alienates and empowers teachers and shamans simultaneously (Gow 1991).

Another disconnect between Western forms of schooling and Amerindian understandings can be observed in the ways in which powerful knowledge can (or cannot) be communicated. The acknowledgment of different modes of knowledge communication in different cultural contexts is a central theme in the anthropology of education. For example, amongst indigenous communities and different minority groups the patterns of communication vary from the home environment to the classroom. Often this incongruity results in poor school performance. Phillips worked with Native American communities and highlights the implications of this problem, stating,

The minority students' efforts to communicate are often incomprehensible to the teacher and cannot be assimilated into the framework within which the teacher operates...As it is primarily by virtue of the teacher's position and authority that the students and not the teacher come to be defined as the ones who do not understand. (1983: 129)

Phillips' work highlights the relationship between modes of communication and power. Due to the importance of school success in the Western context, this relationship has very practical and wide reaching effects on young people's lives.

Different modes of communication are inherently embedded in the cultural context of the student's life (Pelissier 1991: 87). For example Ochs explains that in Samoa children occupy a lower status than their elders, so it is inappropriate to ask questions, and as a result students never ask questions in class (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984). Pakapukans also refrain from asking questions, because appearing ignorant is very powerful form of losing face in their culture (Pelissier 1991: 87). Native American youth have very different understandings from white American youth as to what is socially acceptable behavior, but their teachers believe their silence

in these situations indicates a lack of intelligence. Phillips argues that this becomes a social fact negotiated in the space between Native American and white culture (1983).

Since the Guyanese secondary school curriculum is designed and implemented by the state, there isn't any room for typical Amerindian modes of communication or expressions of cooperation. The form and structure of the classroom encourages the young people to engage as individuals in pursuit of individual recognition. This is not a value that is reflected amongst Amerindian elders, as illustrated in many contexts throughout my field work. In community meetings, for example, when particular people spoke out it would only be in the role of a spokesperson for a wider faction of the village, on behalf of others. Many of the students resist the individualization of engagement in school, which is reflected in their poor marks and failed exams. This individualization of young Amerindians is a step further into the experience of separation and alienation that begins with the move from a home community into a boarding school dormitory.

## Difficulties in the Classroom

Starting in the second week of my teaching at Sand Creek Secondary, my relationships with the students began to break down, and the situation only got worse with time. The students disregarded me, ignored me, and often left the room without permission while I was in the middle of teaching a lesson. All of the other teachers maintained very strict discipline in their classrooms, with an underlying threat of corporeal punishment. I knew I would never hit any of my students, and I think they knew that as well, which may have contributed to their behavior. I also sympathized with the students, and could understand that many of them didn't want to be in school, and couldn't find value in learning a list of vocabulary words. I knew that most of the students would not go on to higher education after secondary school, and many of them would never look for a job that required any academic skills in the future.

As each day of teaching continued like this, I grew increasingly frustrated. The students would talk while I was talking and ignore the lesson. Some students would mime the way I walked behind my back and the whole class would giggle when I turned around. One day one of



my classes told me they didn't feel like doing an assignment I had written on the board. I said, 'You will do that assignment, I am your teacher.' One of the girls said, 'No Miss, we won't.' I slammed my book down on the desk and said, 'Fine, teach yourselves,' and walked out of the room. At one point I discovered that all the students were cheating on their homework by copying the answers from the one girl who knew them.

I explained the students' misbehavior to the other teachers, and Sir Eddie mentioned that kids were misbehaving in his class as well, but that they have improved since he started punishing them, and giving them moral talks more frequently. Samantha explained that she would make her students kneel in the front of the class while holding books on their heads when they didn't listen. All of the students were terrified of Nikita due to the strict level of discipline she maintained in her classroom. At one point Abbie commented that I didn't know how to discipline the kids, which I knew was accurate but wasn't sure how to remedy. She was the discipline officer of the whole school and went to one of my classes to speak to them. She raised her voice and walked up and down the aisles between the desks and the students were scared straight. They were on their best behavior for a few days after this. Slowly but surely they resumed their disrespectful attitudes and activities.

I brought up this topic at the next staff meeting, and many of the other teachers also explained to the headmaster that the students were misbehaving, not paying attention, and disrespecting them. His response was that we need to be motivators to the children. He stated in his booming voice,

We need to maintain and sustain. This is down to our professional development. We need to tackle these students with those learning behaviors, and cater to students who have different learning abilities. Some students learn better from listening, some are tactile learners, some need to be active, especially boys. We have to find the ways and means. They are not self-motivated or self-disciplined. We have to inculcate these things into them. We need to go on the net to find out how to deal with disruptive students and classes. We need to do some reading. I'm sorry we don't have the resources here. We need to know when to draw the line. Children will be children, especially boys, boys will be boys. Teaching is a nice challenge. You don't get your reward the same day. You may not know what impact you're having on the child's life.

Later in the meeting he said,

There are three types of teachers: One type that just comes to school for money. They dress up like teachers but their hearts are not there with the children. The second type are the professional teachers. They are always on time, their schemes are up to date, they follow the codes of conduct, and they leave when the bell rings. And the last type are vocational teachers. They are dedicated, beyond the call of duty.

He asked us, 'What kind are you? You don't have to answer me- we have to answer ourselves, we have to reflect every day, not just coming and doing one thing every day. We have to be creative, patient, innovative and versatile.'

While the headmaster's comments did sound good, he did not offer any practical recourse for me in dealing with my students. They were crystal clear about their disrespect towards me, and they would find new and inventive ways to show it. All of this culminated in one morning while I was teaching class 8B. The other teachers continued to say that I was too lenient and that's why the kids were torturing me so much, but I couldn't bring myself to threaten to beat them like the other teachers would. I had injured my toe about three weeks prior playing football. It was severely infected, and had turned an odd color, almost black. I couldn't wear shoes anymore, so I was walking around the school and teaching barefoot. Everyone in the school—everyone in the whole village—knew how much it was bothering me.

While I was writing homework on the blackboard one of my students came up and accidentally stepped on my toe. I squeaked out an exclamation of pain, but I knew it wasn't intentional. Directly afterwards, another one of my students, a boy who was generally pretty well behaved, got up in front of the whole class, walked directly towards me at the blackboard, and stomped on my toe on purpose. The searing pain shot through my body and tears slipped out of the corners of my eyes. I was stunned. I stormed down the stairs and straight into the HM's office. Through my tears I told him I was finished teaching at the school. I explained what happened and then said I would finish out the end of this term, but could not continue to teach any longer. He and the other teachers were furious. HM grabbed a switch and stormed up the stairs and gave the boy several lashes in front of the other students.

I took the rest of the week off school. After the initial shock and pain of the experience wore off, it was easy for me to decide what to do next. I had not enjoyed teaching in the school, but more than that I hated what being a teacher had done to my relationships with the students. My research plan focused mainly on finding out how the children experienced school, and what

they thought about it. The power relationship that was created through my position as teacher was incredibly detrimental to that task. I didn't want to be in a position of authority over the students—not that they respected that authority. I wanted to be someone they could trust and talk to. It was an enormous relief to realize that I would no longer be teaching. After quitting, my relationships with the students transformed dramatically. In the months following, when I could associate with the students freely, without caring whether they had done their homework, I got a chance to really know them. In fact, some of the closest relationships I developed with students were with those I had struggled the most with in the classroom.

I was still involved in the school after the incident, though in a much less official capacity. I attended all extracurricular activities, visited the dorms often to play sports and games with the students, and I eventually spent a week living in the dormitory. I was at all of their culture shows, and many of the students would stop by my house in the village on their way home. We would play cards, or cook, or just chat. My relationships with the students were completely transformed from something toxic into something positive and enriching. On the last day of school the students invited me up to the buildings to say goodbye, and I was sad to see them climb onto the tractor that took them to the river. There was a deafening chorus as many of the children shouted, 'Bye Miss Courtney!' as they drove off across the savannah.

The work of Evans and Willis on class and schooling in the UK offers a distinct framework to examine the misbehavior of the students and the disrespect I experienced during my time teaching at Sand Creek Secondary school. There are many salient parallels between working class children in the UK and Amerindian children in the Rupununi.

Evans engages with disruptive children in her work in schools in the UK, and notes that through misbehavior and 'lack of discipline' the children are embodying certain forms of masculinity that can be associated with violence outside of the school. She argues:

'...children's appropriate participation at school depends, firstly, on them learning to accommodate themselves to what is considered to be a correct bodily disposition for formal learning. This disposition, which signifies that the child has internalized the teacher's authority as a form of bodily self-control is what teachers take as the sign of children's readiness to concentrate....Disruptive boys, in contrast to 'good' children, constantly resist the bodily constraint that appropriate participation requires of them.

They rebel continuously, asserting their own form of participation, which challenges the teacher's authority... (2006:91-92).'

While the misbehavior I encountered was not gendered in the same way, the young people in Sand Creek Secondary were still illustrating a particular kind of resistance to the constraints associated with a boarding school that imposed individualization, authority and a rigid structure on their lives.

Similarly, in Willis' work amongst working class youth in the UK, he highlights the fact that schools present the attitudes that support individual success as necessary for each student, when the reality is that not all students will have access to this kind of success in their futures. Willis argues,

A few can make it. The class can never follow...The refusal to compete, implicit in the counter-school culture, is therefore in this sense a radical act: it refuses to collude in its own educational suppression...To the individual working class person mobility in this society may mean something. Some working class individuals do 'make it' and any particular individual may hope to be one of them. To the class or group at its own proper level, however, mobility means nothing at all. (1977:128)

With access to jobs in the Rupununi very limited, particularly in smaller villages and communities, these same questions arise in the Guyanese context. While the students with the highest scores on tests and in classes at Sand Creek Secondary may be able to look for higher education opportunities or jobs in the future, the overwhelming majority will not have these options. All of these factors, combined with a suffocating school structure that fails to allow for Amerindian ways of learning and of being, result in unsuccessful classrooms and unhappy students.

As illustrated throughout this chapter, state run educational projects implemented in indigenous communities have brought about a lot of complex social processes and impacted various aspects of indigenous life throughout lowland South America. Classroom education has been changing the ways communities live together and modifying traditional social relationships, particularly intergenerational relationships (Rival 1996, Rubenstein 2001). The time that young people spend in classrooms vastly diminishes the time they would spend with elders and parents, and this time restriction is obviously even more severe if they are attending a boarding school. Also, after completing school, the educated youth often assume leadership roles because they

have more access to knowledge of the wider society, when elders of the village would have been leaders in the past. Both changes result in a new and complex relationship between youth and elders (Rubenstein 2001, 2012, Rival 1996).

Strathern, building on Wendel's work (2007) in boarding schools in Chuuk, Micronesia, describes the concept of 'borrowing persons' in situations where parents can be rendered irrelevant. She explains that students cannot go back to who they were before they were educated in this format, as they are now, 'dependent on the school and on the school teachers for inducting them into a new world (2011: 36).' She illustrates that these boarding schools fail to acknowledge what might be at stake in displacing parental nurture rather than 'traditional culture.' Finally she asks a question that is also relevant to the situation in the Guyanese hinterlands, '...whether the students are going to find a world ahead of them that is going to live up to world they have left behind. Will these borrowed persons be able to share in the fruits of that new world or were they stolen from other kinds of lives to no purpose (2011: 37)?'

Schooling in lowland South America interrupts the youth's relationship to traditional knowledge, but does not provide assurance for another way of life. Educated indigenous youth can become professionals, but the number of jobs available to them are limited in their communities. In order to secure certain jobs they will have to leave their homes which presents them with a contradiction between working and honoring their commitments to their communities (Rockwell and Gomes 2009). As Rockwell and Gomes argue schools "...are succeeding to a greater extent than ever in reordering the parameters of space, time and labor of the younger generations often without guaranteeing them either equal access to academic knowledge or the continuity of their own cultural heritage (2009: 107)."

These changes are enabling a new social configuration. We see families experiencing separation and longing for one another as they are being broken apart by monetary pressures and obligations. The current education system is only one place where we can see how and why the structure of these communities are changing, and the state's influence in these shifts. In one sense, the value placed on formal education seems to be ever increasing in Sand Creek and throughout Guyana. A tension nonetheless remains between this value and its costs. These costs appear to take the form of the absence of the kind of care that only familial co-residence can provide, the inability to form the memories that are created in the process of being cared for, and

diminished spiritual wellness, illustrated by *the sickness*, which will be explored in the following chapter.

# Chapter 5:

## ‘Granny Got her’: *the sickness* in Sand Creek Secondary

### Chapter Outline

Building on the two previous chapters, the third which provided a context with a description of the vibrant Wapishana spiritual world, and the fourth which describes the school, the location where *the sickness* takes place, in this chapter I will explore this emergent form of spirit possession in depth. Through an exploration of the ethnographic material directly related to the phenomenon, including some accounts of *the sickness* that I witnessed and the only discussion I had with the girls about their own experiences, I want to place *the sickness* in contrast with three other situations. First of all, I will illustrate how *the sickness* stands apart from other spirit attacks, spirit wandering and spirit loss in a wider Amazonian context. Next I will put *the sickness* in dialogue with other spirit possessions or episodes of ‘mass hysteria’ in other schools and institutional settings throughout the world, to draw out the parallels and differences between the two. Finally, while spirit possession is an expected and embraced experience in Afro-Caribbean contexts, I will illustrate the ways in which the experience of *the sickness* is a distinct phenomenon, as it does not foster the same kind of positive or welcome relationships with spirits that are typically found in Caribbean contexts.

### ‘Granny got her’: Sickness and Agency in Sand Creek

As soon as I arrived in Guyana, I began to hear hushed discussions and whispered warnings about something the locals were calling *the sickness*. When people first started telling me the girls in the school were sick, I foolishly assumed that they were referencing something like malaria or the flu. I rapidly discovered, however, how wrong I was. It wasn't until my second night in Sand Creek, however, that I heard the first full account of what being sick truly entailed.

That evening Etta wanted me to accompany her to a party in the center of the village. She insisted I wear a pair of her jeans as all of my fieldwork trousers, according to her, 'were not looking nice'. She also brushed my hair and refused to let me tie it up. We donned our Havanian flip flops and got ready to walk across to the shop. The sound on the savannah carried far and wide and the loud *forro* and soca tunes were calling to us. It was dark outside and I had no sense of direction yet in the village but the batteries in my flashlight were brand new. The light was bright, the music was guiding our way and of course Etta knew where we were going.

Azad had a huge shop. Built of wood and painted a shocking mint green, it stood out from all the other homes in the village. There was a bar and a shop in the front with a little patio for drinking and dancing and Azad, his wife Angela and their children lived at the back. There were plenty of men sitting on their motorbikes and 'gaffing'—chatting and laughing—just outside the reach of the shop's light. Etta introduced me to all of them and they insisted I try my first taste of Sand Creek *parakari*—cassava beer. They quickly explained the method of drinking. You cannot sip *kari* since everyone shares a single calabash bowl, so you must 'drink it out' in one gulp, refill the bowl and pass it to the next person.

Even though I had to strategically avoid many drunk old men who were intrigued by the idea of dancing with the *parangaruu*—the white girl—I found myself enjoying the party and meeting many new people. Etta introduced me to her friend Immaculata. She was a very thin woman, around Etta's age of 24, with huge eyes, long dark hair falling past her waist and a baby that appeared to be permanently stationed on her hips. She had two other children—a son and a daughter, 2 and 3 years old respectively, who clung to the bottom of her skirt. When they saw me, they would only let go briefly to come over and claim a biscuit I was offering them.



Immaculata was curious about me and asked what my plans were for the rest of my time in the village. Once I mentioned that I would be volunteering at the school, her expression turned serious in an instant. She said,

Miss, I am trying to get in touch with my father in law. He is a *pia'man* in Brazil and he needs to come to Sand Creek to rid the school of the bad spirits. One day I saw a school girl get sick, Miss. I invited her over for lunch and she was just eating and drinking, like normal. Then the spirit came in her. She jumped up and she ran straight towards the mountain. I tried to run after her Miss, but she was running faster than any human could run. When we nearly reached the school I started shouting, "Help! Help! Help!" Two men came out of the school and caught her before she could make it to the mountain. Once they had her I just started crying. I couldn't help it, watching her get taken over like that. After an hour she caught herself, but if you ask her- the spirit is always lurking there, ready to take her again.

Immaculata was very emotional as she relayed the story to me. Her words were powerful and I admitted to her that I had heard something about the possessions and I was a little afraid. She assured me that as long as I rubbed my body with garlic and slept with a Bible under my pillow, I would be safe.

This form of spirit possession, not exclusive to Sand Creek, has affected young women of Amerindian heritage in boarding school dormitories throughout Guyana. Although it has been known to occur to young women of Amerindian descent who are living in boarding schools in other regions in Guyana, to my knowledge, it began in Sand Creek in March 2013. While all accounts vary to some degree, the girls and members of the community agree that a 'Granny spirit' is the cause of the possession in Sand Creek. There is a mountain directly behind the school dormitory and the people of the community explain that someone climbed the mountain, disturbed a sacred cave, and released the spirit of an old woman, who comes down from the mountain and enters the bodies of spiritually vulnerable adolescent girls. *The sickness* is characterized in Sand Creek by young girls, nearly every night, going into fits that can last anywhere from 20 minutes to several hours. When the girls eventually 'catch themselves', they have no memory of the events that took place during their fit.

*The sickness* was sometimes mentioned explicitly and other times only alluded to in conversation but it was an ever present undercurrent during my time in Sand Creek. I encountered discussions about it throughout the community—at the shop, the farm and also

while working as a voluntary teacher at Sand Creek Secondary school. One sweltering morning in September, when I entered my classroom, I immediately noticed something was different. The 8th grade students normally greeted me with wide smiles, but this morning I looked onto a sea of frowns. I asked the students how they were and they quietly said, 'Miss Courtney we are sad.' Concerned, I asked why they were feeling that way. They all began speaking at once, repeating that they had lost their friend. My mind jumped to the blank row in the attendance book—a young lady named Anna had yet to make it to a single class that whole term. One of my particularly precocious students, Justus, spoke up to confirm my suspicion. He said, 'We lost our friend Miss. We lost Anna. Granny got her.' Later that afternoon, my colleagues explained to me that Anna was suffering so badly from *the sickness*, that her parents came to pick her up to take her back to her home village.

Anne Christine Taylor describes the relationship between sickness and selfhood amongst the Achuar of Ecuador, which sheds light on the ordeal of the young women experiencing *the sickness* in Sand Creek:

'Sickness, in Jivaroan terms, is the suffering experienced by individuals when they become overwhelmed by the ambiguity of the social environment and thereby lose a clear sense of their identity; that is when their perception of self is clouded by uncertainty (1996:207).'

Drawing on the Amazonian literature discussed in Chapter 2, theories of conviviality posit the notion that selfhood is created and recreated in embodied ways, through the sharing of substance with kin and community. The separation inherent in the boarding school system could be jeopardizing the sense of self for these young women, resulting in their spiritual vulnerability.

Homesickness has been noted as a physical sickness throughout Amazonia. Building on the theories of Amazonian kinship noted in Chapter 2, people experience the connections they have with kin and other members of the collective in physical ways (McCallum 2001:136). Naturally, the idea of physical separation from a home community interferes with this manifestation of social relationships, and as Gow describes it, the want to be near real kin that is not satisfied becomes an existential problem (1991:167). This powerful and physical experience is illustrated by Lagrou's informant who states, 'He who doesn't miss his kin in the same way

one craves water when thirsty is not a person, but a *yuxin* [a rootless, kinless, wandering spirit] (2000:152).' Homesickness can manifest in many ways, but often the person becomes despondent and unable to eat or move (McCallum 2001:32). McCallum argues that village endogamy is directly related to the pining associated with missing kin (2001:32). The Trio call this particular sadness *emure*, and to be closer to kin is often the most common motivator for moving somewhere (Riviere 1984:260-1). Not exclusive to the Trio, missing kin is one of the major motivators for mobility amongst indigenous people in lowland South America (McCallum 2001). It is worth noting that the two other major motivators for movement in Southern Guyana, looking for paid work and knowledge production—within schools and otherwise—often makes movement away from kin necessary. This will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

As illustrated in Chapter 3, spiritual vulnerability and sickness go hand in hand in Amerindian cosmology. Although illness is not always understood as a wandering spirit, nearly all sicknesses are understood in Amazonia in terms of agency, conscious or unconscious, of another being, human or spirit. Anne Christine Taylor, who works with the Achuar people in Ecuador, articulates this clearly:

In their view, illness and death are, invariably, the outcome of an act inspired by deliberate homicidal intentionality, operationalized through recourse to the invisible machinery of bewitchment caused by invisible blow darts (1996:203)

This idea, not exclusive to Jivaroan groups, is evident throughout Amazonia. Belief in the relationship between intentionality and sickness, and biomedical diagnosis or treatments, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, this understanding acknowledges simultaneously the physical illness, and the agency behind it, which explains why one person gets sick rather than another. Oftentimes in Sand Creek sick people would receive treatment from the Medex and at the same time take bush medicine and say ancient prayers. When faced with a very serious illness they will leave the village to visit both the hospital and a *pia'man*.

Michael Heckenberger describes the intertwining approaches of medical and spiritual analysis of illnesses in the upper Xingu region in southern Amazonia. He states,

There are various medical techniques, esoteric knowledge, and specialists to treat illness, many of which are put to work, often repeatedly, when someone is not well. Regardless

of diagnosis and treatment, however, all agree that the root of the illness, what causes it, is spiritual not biological in nature. Cures are naturally spiritual, first and foremost, although practitioners- shamans, herbalists, and today, health monitors (indigenous 'nurses')—treat both the symptoms and the cause. Thus, while many Kuikuru who have been exposed to Western medical practitioners and ideas for over half a century have a good notion of the epidemiological theory of disease transmission, they believe that witchcraft lies at the heart of most illnesses and death. Why one person gets sick and recovers while others die, or why one person gets ill, or their house gets struck by lightning, or they get bitten by a snake and others don't, is because they were targeted by some evil force, usually witchcraft (2004:188).'

Whitehead and Wright acknowledge the widespread understanding of this perspective throughout Amazonia, stating,

In fact, many scholars have written about the healing systems of indigenous peoples showing how no one becomes ill and dies without human agency. That agency is evil, and it comes from spirit attacks direction by a shaman or attack sorcerer (2004:14).

While this is very much the case in Sand Creek, as illustrated in Chapter 3 in the discussion about envy, *kanaima*, illness and death, this perception of agency is more nuanced. Neighbors and other community members can send sicknesses to others even when they are not consciously aware they are doing so. Typically this is a result of feeling envy towards others. Unintentional sorcery has been documented elsewhere in Amazonia as well, and can often be the unwanted result of extreme emotions, or can happen in dreams (Peluso 2003).

While the interrelation of illness, death and human agency is present in Sand Creek, the experience of *the sickness* stands in contrast to these other examples, as it does not constitute human on human violence. Anne Christine Taylor, when touching on the intentionality behind illness, describes an attack by invisible 'spirit arrows', which lies squarely in the realm of dark shamanism. This kind of attack forces a person's spirit vitality out of their body, and is a result of another human person sending their ill will to the victim in the form of 'breath'. While this attack is carried out through an invisible medium, shooting a spirit arrow is an equivalent action to shooting a physical arrow from a hunter's bow. As will become evident throughout the course of this chapter, the granny spirit, the cause of the possession, is not a human, and thus cannot attack the girls in the same way.

## The dormitory: a space of separation

Typically, *the sickness* affected the girls more powerfully at night time. Because I lived in the center of the village with my Wapishana family and was not encouraged to go walking long distances at night, I was never in the school yard around this time. Even months into my fieldwork, although I had heard quite a lot about *the sickness*, I had never witnessed it myself. I went one afternoon to interview the dorm parents and asked if they would be comfortable talking about *the sickness* with me. When I explained I had never seen it, Auntie Ethel and Uncle Joe invited me to spend a week living and sleeping in the dormitory to observe *the sickness* and to help prevent the girls from running up the mountain.

On the following scorching afternoon, I rode my yellow bike up the dusty, ruddy road towards Sand Creek Secondary school. My backpack was strapped to my back and filled to the brim with clothes, coffee, board games and playing cards; all the essentials I would need for the week-long stay with the students in the dormitory. The two-story pale yellow building stood in sharp contrast to the deep green of the mountain behind it. It was around 4 pm when I walked up a few stairs that led to the front patio and entered the concrete building through the massive double front door made of heavy wood. I found Auntie Ethel, the dorm mother, and Abbie sitting on threadbare couches in the foyer of the dormitory. I only realized later that this was a rare occasion, as I never encountered anyone sitting or spending time in this room before or after this afternoon. On seeing me, Auntie Ethel exclaimed, 'Hi, You're welcome!' I thanked her and asked her where I could put my belongings. She motioned to the room on the right and called to a few of the girls to set up a bed for me.

I had been in the dormitory on a few occasions prior to this but I had never spent an extended period of time here. I took a closer look at the foyer. The walls were lined with a few bookshelves and tables were covered in an odd assortment of random things. A prominent wooden bulletin board hung above one of the blue armchairs. The dorm parents would write the number of students in each section of the dorm, in blue chalk directly on the wood. It was broken down by gender and by floor. This number fluctuated often the year I lived in Sand Creek, since the only consistently successful way of treating *the sickness* was to send the students home.

The Sand Creek Secondary Dormitory had a two page document, with a long list of rules, pertaining primarily to discipline, tidiness and school work. One rule in particular jumped out at me: 'Students must render assistance to others in need, especially in times of illness.' I was soon to discover that the note found at the bottom of the document declaring that, 'ANY student who willfully or continually breaches the rules of this institution will be EXPELLED from the dormitory' was not strictly enforced. Many of the rules such as 'Boys are not allowed in the girls dormitory and vice versa' and 'All students must be in bed by 22 hours' were consistently being broken due to *the sickness*.

The dormitories were divided by gender and clearly labeled with black permanent marker scrawled on the door jams: the door on the left was the boys' dormitory and the door on the right was the girls. The boys' dorm was filled with rows and rows of bunk beds, organized in orderly rows. Each of the beds was made up with mismatched sheets, and red and blue checkered blankets. There were rows of wardrobes running along the walls in between the windows, each corresponding to a bed. Mosquito nets hanging from the ceiling, were tied up neatly for the day.

Walking into the girls' dorm, however, was a different story. Many of the beds were unmade or were without sheets, blankets or pillows. The black metal and wooden bunkbeds, far from being organized in neat lines, were arranged in a way which appeared to have no rhyme or reason. Upon a closer look the logic behind this became evident—the beds and wardrobes were placed to block the windows or at least create a serious obstacle course between the center of the room and the windows. I noticed that each window had many of the louvers missing, providing a beautiful view of the green valley and the village but also creating massive open gaps large enough for the girls' small bodies to fit through.

Responding to Auntie Ethel's directions to set up a bed for me, Abigail and one of her friends pulled a wooden bunk bed out towards the center of the room and placed it directly in front of a row of bare mattresses. There was one petite girl lying on top of one of the mattresses with a fan blowing cool air in her direction. Her long dark hair was catching in the breeze but in contrast she herself was completely motionless, and her big dark eyes were clearly distressed. I deduced that these mattresses must be in place for the *sick* girls.

Behind the dorm, Auntie Ethel's garden is right at the foot of the mountain, which is not particularly steep or tall. On the lower levels it's rather bushy, but the farther up you climb, the more trees you encounter and there are massive black rocks dotting the side at random. The landscape changes so gradually that without warning a climber suddenly finds themselves in deep rainforest. There are small footpaths but no proper trails. People climb the mountain often for a beautiful view of the whole village nestled in the valley. The members of the community say there is a cave up on the mountain. Etta told me her friend climbed up and looked into the cave and it was full of bones: human bones. This is the cave that many say the Granny spirit originates from. While the accounts of why the bones were there or where the spirit comes from vary, they all seem to agree that the cave was a sacred space and someone disturbed it, enraging the granny spirit and inspiring her to come down the mountain and take the girls as victims.

So what is it about boarding school dormitories that makes them harborers of this alien form of spiritual suffering? Is there something specific about the space or the type of sociality or behavior it is designed to produce? Although the organization of the dormitory space cultivated an institutional environment, in this case it was marred with this emergent possession that resisted rational and physical explanation. As this kind of sickness only occurs within or around boarding schools and their dormitories, it appears that the place and space are significant when exploring this kind of spirit possession.

Schools, and boarding schools in particular, have been the location of various episodes of what have been called hysteria or madness throughout the world. In 1637, at a school in Lille, France, the historic records indicate there was an episode of 'epidemic mass hysteria' where each of the students confessed to being witches, and were nearly burned at the stake (Bartholomew and Sirois, 2006). Another notable example is the laughing epidemic in Tanzania 1962 which resulted in the closure of the school as the pupils could not physically stop laughing for over a month (Hempelmann, 2007). Episodes of 'mass hysteria' have also been noted in Uganda, Malaysia, London, Zambia, the US, among many others (Dhadphale and Shaikh 1983, Bartholomew and Sirois 2006, Kokota 2011). Although each of these instances reflect regionally different experiences, they all occurred in a schooling context. What is it about these places and spaces that foster this kind of emotional and spiritual crisis?

In her work on factory girls in Malaysia, Aihwa Ong explores some of these same questions about what a certain kind of space can produce and why it does so. She describes the experience of young women, who typically come from *kampung*, countryside or village communities, who enter the work force in a factory setting. In the midst of a work day, it was not uncommon for one or more of the young women to experience fits of sobbing, laughter and shrieking as they became violent to those around them (1987). Part of the discourse surrounding this experience has to do with the place, as many agreed that several of the factories are haunted by *hauntu*, or demon spirits. Women reported being constantly harassed by these spirits, not only on the workshop floor but also in ‘places of refuge’ like toilets and prayer rooms (1987: 209).

Traditionally in *kampung* spaces, there are many taboos about particular kinds of movement for young women mediated by spirits. These restrictions are put in place because young women are believed to be ‘weak in spiritual essence’ and as a result vulnerable when travelling even short distances alone at night. It is particularly dangerous for young women to explore forbidden places (1987: 88). Ong uses the appearance of these *hauntu* spirits in factories to explore the complex interaction between the acceptance and resistance to rapid industrialization of the way of life in Malaysia. Ong questions, ‘Are the *hauntu* hallucinations a residual image of remembered village, a present shadow of their industrial life, or both?’ (1987: 9).

The change in the way of life in the village to rigid, structured experience of factory work was drastic and unavoidable. Ong asserts that the experience of working within factories itself is a kind of trauma for women who were used to a radically different way of life, where they acted as their own boss and worked on their own volition. She argues that ‘...spirit possession episodes, in which women become violent and scream abuses, are to be deciphered...as a protest against the loss of autonomy/humanity in work’ (1987: 8). She highlights what the shift from *kampung* life to factory life entailed for these women in two particular ways. First they were now working within a hierarchical structure, and secondly, this move meant they no longer had autonomy in work, but on the contrary, they were subject to ‘the oppressive compulsion of labor discipline’ (1987:151). These shifts were experienced in three important ways, ‘...in relation to the self and to other workers, as well as to work within social relations organized by the factories, and between the industrial system and local communities (1987: 151).’



Ong further argues that the factory work introduced and enforced practices and concepts of male domination and female subordination in factory spaces. She states,

In transnational corporations, we see that relations of domination and subordination, constituted in scientific terms, operate not only through the over control of workers' bodies, but in the ways young female workers come to see themselves. In their changing positions within the family, the village, the labor process, and wider society, they devise counter tactics for resisting images imposed on them and come to construct their own images. (1987: 4)

Several parallels jump out in relation to young women in factory work in Malaysia and the situation that young Amerindian women find themselves in when attending boarding schools. Amerindian girls are also facing a shift in power and knowledge relations in the school, through their relationships with teachers, but also in the coercive power hierarchy that is inherent in the Western school structure itself, as described in the previous chapter. The fact that these girls are also so far from home and family, removes any way for them to attempt to renegotiate the terms of the power relations within the comfort of communal space, with familial and community support. Indeed, the village children are so much more resistant to *the sickness*. The experience of *the sickness*, almost exclusive to young females, could also be a way for them to articulate the ways in which they see themselves and their changing positions in families and communities.

Similar to the way in which the *bantu* spirit possessions in Malaysian factories shed light on the experience of rapid social change amongst young *kampung* women, possessions by the granny spirit of young Amerindian girls, illustrate the ways in which the expectations for young people to attend boarding school, is experienced in a vastly different way for young men and young women.

### *The sickness*

On my first night in the dorms, the cooks mentioned that all the sick girls had eaten dinner, which they implied was a good sign. Although I thought my first night in the dorms might be uneventful, I soon discovered I was wrong. About an hour after dinner, I was standing out on the front patio chatting with Sam, another volunteer at the school, when Uncle Joe came

out to get me. He said, ‘If you would like to see what the sick children do, they are doing it now.’ We went to the door leading to the girls half of the dormitory. It took a while for them to open it for us.

There were three school girls writhing on the row of bare mattresses, throwing their limbs out and slamming them down in every direction, arching their backs and rising off the bed. The room was filled with the echo of their moans and screams and the sound of their breathing resembled maniacal laughter. A few of the other girls were surrounding the beds and either hitting at the girls lightly with coconut brooms or just swinging the brooms in their direction. Auntie Ethel was standing over and observing the situation but no one did anything to restrain the girls while they rolled around in what looked like great pain. Not one of the sick girls got up to run up the mountain, however. Auntie Ethel explained that she had seen the Granny spirit before in photographs and asked me to take photos of the girls to see if we could spot any traces of her. I took some photos but even after careful inspection by both of us, we couldn’t spot anything—only the images of young girls in great distress.

Shortly afterwards, the three girls ‘caught themselves’<sup>26</sup>. The sharp movements decreased slowly, and then stopped altogether. They remained on the mattresses, breathing slowly and heavily, and then quietly opened their eyes and started speaking like themselves again. After I realized the girls were ok, I went across to bathe in Abbie’s apartment in the teachers’ quarters. As I was leaving, the girls were pulling down more mattresses to put in the middle of the room. Sam walked with me over to the teachers’ apartments and I told him that I had never seen anything like that before. I had heard so much about *the sickness* since first moving to Sand Creek, but it was still a shocking experience to witness it myself. Sam assured me I hadn’t seen anything yet as what we had just witnessed was a very mild showing of *the sickness*.

Later that evening, I discovered that Sam’s comment, was at best, an understatement. When I returned from Abbie’s house about an hour later, I walked into the foyer and the door to the girl’s side of the dorm was locked and barricaded. I knocked and I heard the eerie sounds of the girls muffled by the wood. When a school boy finally let me in, I noticed that they had

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<sup>26</sup> This is the terminology the girls themselves and members of the wider community use to describe the moment when a fit of *the sickness* ends.

wedged a chair against the door, preventing it from opening. There were about eight mattresses lying on the floor in a row and there were six girls in the beds, all flailing their body parts violently in every direction, arching their backs and tossing and turning. In the instance earlier that evening, the three girls were left alone while they rolled around- the only interaction they had with the other students was when the girls were hitting them with coconut brooms. This time it was different. There were boys from the dormitory creating a perimeter around the mattresses, and many of them were lying on the beds to hold different girls down. The girls would often arch their backs so severely that half of their body would rise up off of the mattresses. Whenever this occurred, one of the school children observing would push them over onto their sides. I asked Lucy why they do that, and she explained it was because they were worried the girls would break their necks.

Each of the girls attempted to run. Since the doors were barricaded and guarded by several students, they started running towards the windows. No one got very far though—the boys always stopped them before they broke the windows, with one exception. Abigail got away and managed to smash one of the louvers, but the other students caught her before she wiggled through the window. Maria also ran, but she climbed up to the top bunk and on top of the wardrobe, trying to break the louvers up there. Some of the boys caught her and pushed her body back onto the mattress before she could break any. Many people had described to me in the past the fact that when someone apprehends one of the sick girls, she becomes incredibly strong and violent. This was certainly the case when I was there, as the girls were kicking, punching, biting, scratching and inflicting any pain on whoever was holding them back, trying desperately to get free so they could run up the mountain.

During my interview with Auntie Ethel before I moved into the dormitory she explained that the boys were their ‘helpers’—they were crucial to ensuring the girls didn’t run up the mountain. With only two dorm parents, when many girls were affected at once, trying to keep them inside the dormitory could be very challenging. I found the boys behaviors and attitudes towards the sick girls to be mixed. There were many who looked genuinely concerned for the girls, especially those who had close relationships with the girls, like John and Penelope for example. He was constantly by her side trying to make sure she didn’t hurt herself, run or jump out the window. Some boys, on the other hand, had enormous grins on their faces as they

restrained the girls on the mattresses and seemed to enjoy holding them down. I witnessed one boy, Marco, as he roughly dragged a girl back on the floor after she tried to run to the windows. He was immediately reprimanded by Auntie Ethel and afterwards she announced to the room, 'Boys, these girls are sick so they can do anything to you, but you cannot hurt them. Don't hurt my girls.' Lucy whispered that he always hurts the girls when they are having their fits.

The students who were not actively restraining the girls, were all just watching them get sick. They were sitting around on the bottom bunks, and sometimes talking quietly amongst themselves. Some of the students looked scared, while others looked bored and exasperated. There were a few groups sitting together on bottom bunks, ignoring what was going on and having what appeared to be a normal conversation, despite what was taking place in the center of the room. There were a few students still using the coconut broom to hit the girls. Lucy told me that they couldn't lose the brooms though- or then Granny would take them for herself and start to beat the girls with it. Lucy kept finding pieces of the brooms on the floor, and scolding the girls who were being careless.

Maria rolled over next to Abigail and grabbed her hand, having 'caught themselves'. While they didn't say anything yet, they seemed much calmer. Their breathing gradually returned to normal and they looked at each other. They remained quiet but sat up slowly. A few of their friends came over with combs to brush their hair and plait it. Franz sat down with the girls and asked if they would like to pray. They quietly agreed. We sat in a circle, and many of the students pulled out their Bibles. Franz encouraged the girls who had just had the fits to read various passages and we all prayed together.

After it was established that the girls had caught themselves, most of the students got ready for bed. There was a pet show taking place the following day at school, so some of the girls were dressing up a parrot, a chicken and an agouti in miniature dresses and hats they had made. I asked one of the girls to help me find a mosquito net and they found one. Marianne tied each corner into the top bunk and ensured each corner was tucked in. Although I was obscured a little by my net, I was still quite aware of the strange sensation of sharing a room with 40 other people. The *sick* girls were still lying on the mattresses in the middle of the floor right in front of

me, where they slept throughout the night. At this point they were quietly chatting, telling stories and giggling amongst themselves.

Around 10:30 pm, I was woken up by some commotion. I forced myself to get up for a few moments and quickly identified where the sounds were coming from. Lorien, one of the sick girls, who had not been affected earlier that evening, was rolling around, shouting and gasping for breath and she kept trying to run for the windows. She was kicking and contorting her body in ways I hadn't seen the girls do up until this point, throwing her body violently in many directions, rolling off the row of mattresses several times. Uncle Joe and a small group of boys were ensuring she didn't climb out the windows or seriously injure herself. I was falling in and out of sleep at this point, jarred awake every few moments by Lorien's cries. She eventually caught herself, a little after 11.

Spirit possession in its many expressions has long been a topic of interest for social scientists. Early approaches were more concerned with the causes or functions of this phenomenon. Much of this work either recognized a correlation between possession, hysteria and madness or understood possession as a way to renegotiate power and marginality. I.M. Lewis' early work on spirit possession amongst the Somali people is a classic example of this approach. He categorizes possession as an 'ecstatic religion' and claims that:

...the use of spirit possession, by means of which women and other depressed categories exert mystical pressures upon their superiors in circumstances of deprivation and frustration when few other sanctions are available to them. (1966:318)

He continues, explaining that this is a way for them to manipulate their husbands and family members to harness some temporary agency and power. His approach has been criticized countless times, indeed as he not only tries to isolate this phenomenon from other aspects of daily life, but also draws these distinctions as an outsider, failing to acknowledge the complexity of gender relations within the community.

More recent work on spirit possession has focused more on the overall structure and context that spirit possession occurs within (Lambek 1988,1993, Boddy 1989, Masquelier 2001). Lambek describes it as a 'coherent symbolic structure' (1981) that fits within a particular cultural context, in his case in Mayotte. Janice Boddy, in her work on spirit possession in Sudan, urges us to recognize that:

...possession is a holistic social reality. It penetrates all facets and levels of human life, resisting analytic reduction to a single component dimension, whether psychological, aesthetic, religious, social or medical. Studies that focus on one of these to the virtual exclusion of others cannot but derogate the complexity with which such factors interweave...ultimately they impoverish what they seek to understand. Possession has numerous significances and countless implications: it defies simple explanation... (136)

Masquelier, in her work in an Islamic town in Niger, asserts that as spirit possession is a part of everyday life, these experiences work to 'construct and act upon the world' but she is clear to express that meanings are not always coherent, predictable or static (2001: 124-125). While these approaches allow for a deeper understanding of the ways in which spirit possession functions in daily life, they still understand possessions as a response to hegemonic power, and emphasize possession as resistance.

As the relations between people and the social context shift from region to region, the nature of the kinds of possession in various regions are inherently different. For example, Lambek describes possession in Mayotte as a way to articulate social and kinship relationships and the succession of possession by the same spirit works towards the reproduction of family. In this case, possession works to maintain social continuity. While Lambek's account draws out a complex and vibrant social world, I find that the strict functionalist approach tends to confuse causes with outcomes.

So while I would not approach *the sickness* along the same lines as Lambek, I would, however, argue that the method of understanding possession within the wider, holistic, social life of Amerindians in Guyana is a more productive way to understand why *the sickness* is occurring and in what ways it is affecting not only the children but also the wider community, than simply classifying it as a form of resistance. I will rely on this approach in the following chapter, as I explore the various causes of sickness, that the people suggested throughout my time in Guyana.

Although I use the literature on spirit possessions in other contexts, such as Ong, Boddy and Lambek, to explore this phenomenon analytically, there is a drastic difference between these circumstances and *the sickness* in Sand Creek. In all of these various examples spirit possession is not abnormal or unusual in the wider social context, but spirit possession is not a common phenomenon that occurs in other kinds of spaces in or around Amerindian villages. There is a

significant difference between *the sickness* and the bulk of the literature on Amazonian notions of spirit and embodiment. There are many various forms of spiritual vulnerability discussed throughout the literature, given the widespread understanding that the body and spirit are not permanently intertwined, and that the spirit can wander and become lost. While not necessarily a problematic thing—spirit wandering is a vital aspect of shamanic healing and dreams are often explained in terms of the spirit wandering while the body sleeps—certain categories of people are especially vulnerable to forms of spirit loss that can become permanent and thus result in death, such as newborns, young children, and those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Many Amazonian peoples have specific rituals or everyday practices that are intended to prevent the wandering of souls (Conklin 2001a, Vilaça 2002). Problems of a spiritual nature in Amazonia tend to center around this difficulty of keeping the spirit within the body, given their propensity for detachment. These views are well documented in Guyana (Butt-Colson 2001, Mentore 2005). In a unique divergence from this model (if not inversion of it) my informants describe *the sickness* as a case of foreign spirits entering the girls' bodies rather than their spirits wandering.

### 'You lose your sense'

The following morning I flopped down on the line of mattresses with the sick girls. They were all smiles, brushing each other's hair and eating their breakfast. It was hard to reconcile these girls in such good moods with what I had witnessed the night before. All around us the other girls were getting ready to go to school, but the sick girls were making no moves in that direction. I asked them a few questions. In my experience, the girls were clearly very uncomfortable talking about anything to do with the experience of *the sickness* and would either change the subject, or just respond to my questions with silence. This morning, however, was the first, and the only time, the girls talked to me directly about what it was like to be sick.

Me Ok, So you guys feel much better today, in the day time? Or you could still feel it?

Girls: Yes Miss.

Me: So you can still feel it, but it's just not as strong? It takes you much stronger at night?

Girls: Yes Miss.

Me: So you won't go to school? You haven't been going to school, huh?

Girls: We stay here whole day. [girls laugh]

Me: Maybe you could go for the pet show, still, right? We could go across and watch the pet show?  
[No response]  
Me: So what does it feel like?  
Girls: Pain, in the back, and the belly.  
Me: Pain in the back and the belly?  
[Long silence]  
Girls: Miss, you'll take breakfast Miss?  
Me: Yes I already did. The tea was lovely.  
[Silence]  
Me: Your belly hurting now? [She nods] Oh no.  
[Long silence]  
Me: Playing with my iPhone? Turn up that tune ladies. Turn it up.  
[The girls getting ready for school flip through the songs on my iPhone, and Taylor Swift plays in the background.]  
Girls: Miss, you going and see pet show, Miss?  
Me: Yes I'm gonna go see the pet show. They have a parrot in a dress, man. That's pretty cool. And a little agouti.  
Me: How long have you guys been feeling sick?  
Girls: Saturday  
Me: All three of you since Saturday?  
Girls: Yes Miss.  
Girls: Miss, when will you go back home, Miss?  
Me: In August. You guys get to go home for summer?  
Girls: What Miss?  
Me: You get to go home for summer?  
Girls: Yes for the summer.  
Me: For the summer? Where are you from dear? Monkey Mountain? And you are too Abigail? [She nods] And where are you from Maria?  
Maria: Kamana.  
Me: Kamana, is that in Region 8? [She nods]  
Me: So you guys all knew each other before you came here?  
Girls: What Miss?  
Me: You guys were all friends before you came?  
Girls: No Miss.  
Me: No? You weren't friends? Or you didn't know each other?  
Girls: No.  
Me: Have you guys ever felt sick before? Have you already had *the sickness* before?  
Maria: Yes  
Me: Last year you had it?  
Maria: Yes Miss.  
Me: And you girls too?  
Abigail: Yes Miss  
Me: You had it before?  
Penelope: No Miss I never had it before. This is my first time.  
Me: You never had it before? This is the first time you've had it? Oh my.



Me: But it always starts with the belly pain? That's how you know it's coming, huh?  
 [They nod]

Me: So when you get really sick, and you're shaking around, what does that feel like?

Penelope: Miss, you lose your sense.

Me: You don't know your sense? So you don't even know what's going on huh?

Girls: No.

Me: When they hit you guys with the brooms- does that help? It helps you catch yourself?

Maria: It helped, ummm, yesterday, it helped yesterday only Miss. But then after she hold it- last night- now she hold it.

Me: She? Granny?

Penelope: Yes Miss.

Me: So she got a hold of it?

Maria: Yes Miss. It can't do her anything, now. And when she, when she hold it, it can't do nothing.

Me: It can't help anymore?

Girls: Yea.

Me: You can see the Granny?

Girls: Yes Miss.

Me: What's she look like?

Girls: Miss, she fair. She white like, in a white dress. She wearing a white dress only.

Me: Really?

Girls: Yes Miss.

Me: And she's very fair?

Girls: Yes Miss.

Me: Wow. And she's the one—she makes you want to run?

Girls: Yes Miss.

Me: Does she want you to run to her, or are you running away from her?

Girls: To her, Miss.

Me: To her? Cuz she's controlling you?

Girls: Yes Miss.

Me: Are you flirting with a boy Abigal? I see you.  
 [All the girls laugh, especially Abigal who is gesturing at a boy standing in the lobby.]

Me: Is that your boy?

Abigal: No Miss.

Me: No? Who is it?  
 [Girls laugh some more]

[One of the girls getting ready for school was walking around in a pair of black high heels with big white bows on them. The shoes were far too large for the tiny girl.]

Penelope: Miss you could wear that kind of shoe?

Me: Yea let me see. I think they are too big for her, let me see if they fit me.  
 [I got up, donned the heels and pranced around the center of the room in them, as the girls descending into fits of giggles.]

[Auntie Ethel, in the background, tells the girls cleaning up and getting ready for school—  
 'You take the sick girls' containers and wash them out.']

Me: So have you guys ever actually run up the mountain?

Abigail: I don't know Miss.

Me: You don't know?

Maria: NO Miss!

Me: You never ask afterwards? No?

Maria: They lie Miss. First time I didn't have, they used to run up...

Me: But you can't remember?

Maria: The last time I had it, no.

Me: What's it like up there? When you get up to the top?

Maria: Ya'll picked up the orange cup for Abigail? The cup burst...

Me: So when you catch yourself again, what does it feel like then?

Maria: Not really, not really catch up good like, Miss. But after a minute, no maybe after a few.

Penelope: And after you catch up then you does feel the pains, like if you fight up, and your belly hurts, its pains all over.

One of the main aspects of this conversation that stands out is the fact that the girls themselves do not remember what takes place with their physical body when they experience these fits. The girls expressed that they cannot say if they run up the mountain or not. The fact that they do not remember when they 'lose their sense' was also reflected in their curiosity with my camera. They would look through the pictures and videos repeatedly of their fits after 'catching themselves', giggling, seemingly with disbelief.

I got ready to head over to the pet show and when I was leaving all the sick girls were sitting on the front patio. I asked if they were coming and they said no—people didn't understand them. All the other students would watch at them if they got sick and they don't like it. After the pet show, I went back into the dorm briefly to check on the girls. They were in good spirits—they had just bathed and didn't look so sick. They were picking up all of the mattresses off the floor and stacking them into a large pile in the center.

Around 3pm, only an hour after I had spoken with the girls, I was sitting in Abbie's apartment in the teachers' quarters sipping instant coffee. I happened to glance out the window to see Maria running up the mountain at break neck speed, followed by a large group of boys in their school uniforms. Shortly afterwards I saw April run in front of the teachers apartments and hurtle up the mountain on the other side, also pursued by a number of school boys. Auntie Doley shouted, 'Miss! Miss! They're running!' I hurried out the front door and saw Abigail dart up the side of the mountain. After the boys caught her and tried to hold her, she began contorting her body, aiming kicks and punches at them. They also caught April on the other

side, and she was fighting more intensely- kicking, punching and screaming. There must have been at least 8 people holding her- boys and girls- and she was landing some brutal attacks on each of them. Judith started running from the front of the dorms, but she didn't make it past the side before she was apprehended by Uncle Joe and a group of boys. Although she was wriggling in all directions they managed to keep hold of her and started to carry her back into the dormitory. At this point, the boys caught Maria and were carrying her down the mountain. She was moaning loudly as if in terrible pain, and there were many boys carrying her through the front door as she was the heaviest of the four. The boys and girls were still wrestling April inside.

Back in the dormitory, the students dropped the sick girls onto the line of bare mattresses on the floor where they thrashed back and forth, and interchanged loud moans with labored breathing. They weren't finished running, evidently. First April went for the window, but they grabbed her. Maria was next. She was out the door like a bullet but she was stopped by Uncle Joe and another boy in the foyer. She hit the ground hard. It looked like she twisted her arm in the wrong direction and the sounds of sobs mixed in with her moans. Despite this she kept throwing her limbs in every direction, including the injured arm. She stayed there in the foyer though—she didn't attempt to run again. Some larger students eventually carried her back in to the mattresses. Then April ran again, but this time she ran up the stairs and my stomach sank in fear. This wasn't the first time the girls tried to break the windows on the second floor, and I doubt anyone could survive a fall onto the concrete below. By the time we ran up the stairs April had climbed up on to the top bunk and then onto the wardrobe and was preparing to break the glass. Luckily Reynolds grabbed her forcefully around the waist and pulled her down. Slowly, the fervor of the fits decreased; the girls were clearly worn out. They didn't try to run again but continued to writhe around on the mattresses for a while until they caught themselves.

When they would 'catch themselves' it was quite startling. Within 10 minutes they were typically giggling and denying what anyone told them about what just took place. In this instance Angel yelled 'April you owe me a new eyeball!' and April just looked at the other girls and started giggling. And then a few of the other kids showed off the injuries they had incurred trying to carry April down the mountain and back inside. Maria was complaining about her

injured arm, the one I saw her twist in the wrong direction, and the ankle she injured the night before. During her fit she was running on it at full speed and it became very swollen. The other girls came out with brushes and combs to brush their hair and they sat and laid around on the beds together.

After it had all calmed down, I walked across back to Abbie's to type some more and Danielle, a girl in her school uniform, was being carried across from the school to the dorm. In the middle of a lesson, she suddenly got out of her chair, left the classroom and ran as fast as she could towards the mountain. A group of male students ran out of the classroom after her and managed to catch her. She was struggling, trying to kick and punch everyone. When they carried her in and put her down on the bed she got right back up again and tried to run to the mountain. It was as if she was running into a wall of boys—they stopped her quickly—and carried her right back to the bed. She just writhed around on the mattresses in her Sand Creek Secondary school uniform.

As I noted above, this kind of spirit possession is not a common phenomenon that occurs in other kinds of spaces in or around Amerindian villages. This is not because the body is understood to be a closed, bounded entity. There is a general understanding that bodies are porous and that spiritual vitality regularly enters and exits from the body. Sickness is often understood in terms of a prolonged loss of spirit vitality—as in a 'wandering spirit'—which requires treatment in the form of shamanic interventions that 'call back' the spirit to return to the body. In these cases, the body is weakened by its lack of vital energy that the spirit provides.

The interview with the sick girls illustrates that this is not how they are experiencing *the sickness*. In fact, the way that the girls speak about *the sickness* seems to stand in sharp contrast to how it is discussed by other members of the community and in local discourse. Turning back to the first account I heard about *the sickness* in Sand Creek, Immaculata describes it in ways that invoke spirit possession, using phrases such as 'the spirit came in her' and 'taken over like that'. However, the way that the girls speak about it raises questions about whether or not it is in fact spirit possession at all. They say they can see the granny during the fits, rather than asserting that they become the granny. They describe her appearance and her manner of dress; and say that when they run up the mountain, they are running towards her. If her spirit was in their bodies,

they would be seeing the world through her eyes, but from what they said to me, this does not seem to be how they experience the fits. It does not sound like she is within them and inhabiting their point of view, but on the contrary she is a separately embodied person that only they can see and only when they enter their fits. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the girls also see the ghosts of the recently deceased during their fits. It would be consistent with their comments that they see these ghosts alongside seeing the granny. So once again, the experience of *the sickness* stands apart from other characterizations and descriptions of spirit possession.

### Creole and Amerindian Spaces Collide

In keeping with Boddy's argument that all aspects of the complex social world are contributing to any form of spirit possession, it is important to think through the unique convergence of Amerindian and Creole understandings of spirituality in Sand Creek. Ritual possession is a central feature of Afro-Caribbean life and relationships between humans and spirits are prevalent. In Huon Wardle's discussion of Revivalists in Jamaica, he describes one of his main informants, Janette's, relationship with a spirit. In one vignette, she explains that the spirit told her to walk downtown, and despite refusing this request repeatedly, she later found herself downtown (2017:412). Spirits can motivate behavior in this context, even against the person's will, much like the situation in Sand Creek. Wardle states, '...angels and other spirits act in the social field like human beings; albeit that they are non-temporal and not human (2017:414).'

While relationships between spirits and humans are a significant feature in Afro-Caribbean religions, once we explore how these relationships are encouraged and manifested, a sharp difference emerges between the experience of *the sickness* in Sand Creek and other forms of possession in Creole religions. In Zion Revivalism, rhythmic dancing is crucial for opening 'the portal to the spirit world' and for bringing about the right conditions for a collective trance (Fernandez Olmos et al, 2011:177). Also the people who go into trance cultivate close relationships with their spirit guide over time (2011:177). Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert comment on this in the wider Caribbean context, stating:

Afro-Caribbean religions are centered on the principle of contact or mediation between humans and the spirit world, which is achieved through such numerous and complex rituals as divinatory practices, initiation, sacrifice, spiritual possession and healing. (2011:12)

So, while spirit possession is not out of the ordinary in the context of Creole understandings of the spirit, the experience of *the sickness* is divergent from these norms. In the Afro-Caribbean context spirit possession is desirable, intentional and ritually controlled. The girls in Sand Creek Secondary, on the other hand, experience *the sickness* as just that, a sickness, and they do not desire it. It is a form of suffering, that they cannot control and do not purposefully induce. Unlike Afro-Caribbean forms of ritual possession *the sickness* is not a desired form of communication with spirits and does not result in receiving wealth, prosperity or advice from spirits.

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated the ways in which *the sickness* deviates from other forms of spiritual vulnerability in the Amazon, other episodes of ‘mass hysteria’ in schools and other institutional settings, and typical spirit possessions found in the Afro-Caribbean context. In the following chapter, I will use the stories and comments relayed to me, to tell the social history of *the sickness* in Sand Creek—when it began, what it looked like then, and when it was at its height in the village—in order to demonstrate some of the characteristics that set this phenomenon apart. I will discuss the various treatments attempted to alleviate the crisis, affecting young women, their families and their communities, since it began in 2013. Then I will explore the various causes that people suggested to me throughout my time in Guyana, and use these to discuss the embodiment of gender, the importance of intergenerational relationships, and the history of gendered knowledge production in the area. Through this discussion I will shed light on the perception and experience of rapid social change for Amerindian youth, their families and their communities.

# Chapter 6:

## Social History, Causes and Treatments of *the sickness* in Sand Creek

### Chapter Outline

The first part of this chapter draws on ethnographic material that illustrates the ways in which the people of the Rupununi speak about the possible causes of *the sickness* and attempt to explain and understand this traumatic phenomena. The second part explores various treatments the administration of the school and the leadership of the community have employed, which had little to no success. The following section describes the causes that people of the community suggested, and draws on Amazonian literature to discuss the role of gender in *the sickness* and every day Amerindian lives, with a particular focus on menstruation, gendered personhood and knowledge production. Finally, the chapter engages with the local history of gendered mobility and movement and asserts that it is in this space where the vastly different gendered experience of boarding school emerges.

### “So I can’t say is what, really” Explanations of *the sickness*

One afternoon in May 2015 I walked down to Sand Creek Secondary for an interview with the ‘dorm parents’. This couple lived full time in the dormitory and were responsible for the pastoral care of the residents. I planned to inquire about the school in general and the responsibility of looking after over 100 students at a time. As this was still before I had witnessed *the sickness* myself, I also asked if they would be comfortable speaking with me about

*the sickness*. The dorm parents, Auntie Ethel and Uncle Joe, have had the most firsthand experiences of witnessing and dealing with *the sickness*, along with the sick girls themselves. Here is an excerpt from our discussion about the topic, which reflects the ways in which many people of the Sand Creek community discuss and strive to understand how and why this phenomenon is occurring.

UJ: March 11<sup>th</sup>, it started March 11<sup>th</sup> last year. First girl catch it.

CSW: That was the first girl? Just one at first?

AE: Yea one at first. She did not pass urine. Eventually it gone to next girl. It turned I don't know what, it turned neurotical and from there they start rolling [on the ground or on the mattresses they lie on the ground for this purpose]. They, the pain started. They start rolling. They roll and they roll and eventually it comes to their back [the pain moves to their back]. They start, how you call it, they start fighting up [they begin flinging their limbs violently]. With the pains making them, like when they feel the pains, their sense now, they lose their sense. Eventually they run up.

CSW: And they run up to the mountain, right?

AE: Yes, they run up to the mountain. Especially at nights. It is very strong for them at nights, like attacking them, mostly at nights. You see them good in the day, but they are feeling pains, but they are overcoming it in the day, but not at night. At night it is very strong for them.

CSW: So it just started with one girl, but in the end it ended up being quite a number of girls right? Miss Abbie was telling me it was a lot of girls, last year.

AE: Last year there were 40 something, 40 something were affected. This time, this year, last two weeks ago, 20. But like it most of them ease up from it and now there are 6. One ran up yesterday. New ones who never get it before are now getting it.

CSW: And the girls who did have it already last year – are they getting it back? Is it happening [to them] again?

AE: Yes.

UJ: And only one boy.

CSW: One boy? It's Ryan, isn't it?

AE: Two boys. Two, three.

CSW: So it mostly affects the girls – do you have any thoughts as to why it only affects the girls?

AE: I don't know. I don't have no idea why. I don't really know why it's affecting mostly girls.



CSW: So when it first started happening, how do you even deal with it? Especially as dorm parents, when 40 girls are having these problems. When you have to look after all these girls and they're all having these problems?

AE: Well it's very difficult to look after them – this one's getting it, this one, this one. I tried all my best, I really tried all my best. At first I cried, I cried Miss Courtney. I didn't know what to do, but then some people decided to come visit, church people and we pray, stand firm and pray to the Almighty. So from there I start, I don't really cry but I pray to the Almighty.

CSW: Has it been helping? When the church people started coming did that start helping? A little?

AE: A little bit.

CSW: And the doctors, they came too right?

AE: Yea, they came. Two times I've been to the hospital with them. But we when gone there, nothing. Nothing, nothing. No sign of *sickness* or what in them. They were normal when we carry them out.

CSW: Really? So it's almost like they only have the problem here in Sand Creek?

AE: Yes, they were good. They overnighted. We overnighted there [in the hospital]. The doctors were observing them and everything went well.

CSW: Wow, so they couldn't find anything wrong?

AE: Nothing. The doctors came right in here to test them out. Nothing.

CSW: And the doctors they saw them having the...?

AE: Mhmmm. Right here when they came they saw them, they saw what was happening. Nothing. They test them and they don't find nothing in them.

CSW: Is there anything that helps to ease them when they are having *the sickness*?

AE: There is nothing, like I don't know how they feel when they ease up, like, maybe after it work all in them now and they fight up, fight, fight, fight, until they are tired maybe, and then they will catch up their sense – slow. They feel weak, and then they will catch back.

CSW: Auntie Doley said sometimes you would burn some peppers – does that help?

AE: Peppers, garlic skins, garlic, yea just smoke up the place, the evil spirits according to our belief, I tried, but it didn't work. I tried pepper, one person from Shulinab [A Makushi village an hour to the north of Sand Creek] told me try pepper, so when they kicking up, bathe they with pepper, I'm trying pepper now. Indeed it happened, when they want to run up I just wet them with pepper right now and it ease.

CSW: It eases? That's great.

AE: But like now we don't really have peppers, at this point in the weather.

CSW: It's not bearing [seeds] right now. HM told me that a *pia'man* came to see the place.

AE: Yes, he came to see the place.

CSW: Did that help?

AE: Yes it ease, it ease. But like I don't really know what is wrong with this place but according to our belief, now, the Amerindians, the Wapishanas, it is the mountain. It's what we were told. Evil spirits are there and then come into the children. So they said, the *pia'man* said.

CSW: That the mountain has the spirits? And we're right next to the mountain?

AE: Especially the girls, what we believe is that when we get our monthly menstruation, the spirits are there and they smell us.

CSW: And you are vulnerable during that time? Auntie Doley said I can't go to the farm, I can't go to the Creek, all that when I have my flow.

AE: That is what we believe.

CSW: So maybe that's why the girls...

AE: Most of the girls are affected.

CSW: The boys don't have that same problem.

AE: It's when they get their flow it abducted them more, mostly. But still my little girl, the primary girl, that's going to primary school, she's not with her young lady [i.e. first menstruation] as of yet – it attacked her.

CSW: It attacked her too? Oh my! The same symptoms?

AE: The same thing.

CSW: Oh my, and how old is she? She's young.

AE: She's 11.

CSW: She's 11 – oh my!

AE: But she's feeling alright, last two weeks ago, she had it then. She wake up, she beat me up, she burn my eyes with pepper. I tried to beat her with pepper and she just took the pot with the pepper and the tower and dash it on me. And she gave me one punch in my eye. She was really strong. Strong, strong, Miss Courtney you alone don't able them. One here, two here, two here, one pressing down. Strong, strong, strong. See our louvers now – you can see there were louvers before, nothing, nothing, jumping out.

CSW: They knock them out? And jump out? And run? In the middle of the night?

AE: Mhmmm, 11 o'clock, 11:30, 12:30, through there.

CSW: Oh my, so it's dark on the mountain and you have to catch them?

AE: You have to catch them, Miss.

CSW: Oh my. That is just crazy, they just don't remember. So there was one year that you guys were here before it started happening, is that right?

UJ: Yep.

CSW: Like a full year – it was only the second year when this started happening?

AE: Only in the second year, because in the first year, when we barely get children, nothing happened. We enjoyed the one year with them. We just had 24 children and for the whole year we enjoyed ourselves with the children.

CSW: Oh, that must have been nice!

AE: YES!

CSW: 24, cuz then you really get to know them and you get to spend a good amount of time with them. And now you have over 100.

AE: 118 now – how many we had?

UJ: 159.

AE: 159 we had, so when *the sickness* started they started going one by one. And leaving us with a total of 118 now.

CSW: So a lot of them went home? The kids that were sick?

AE: They were sick, they gone home, mostly they gone home.

CSW: So you guys have had quite the year, trying to deal with this. But this year, it wasn't as bad as last year?

AE: It was worse Miss Courtney! Cuz of the louvers, cuz they were not jumping through the louvers the first year. This year, now it's in the second year, and they get it more worse, they are just breaking up our louvers and jumping out. And more worse, what do they call it? They want to choke themselves.

CSW: They want to what?

AE: To choke themselves.

CSW: They start choking themselves?

AE: Yes, choking themselves. And last year – the first year they were just running up, just running up. They didn't want to do nothing but this time – it's nothing for them. Jumping through the louvers, breaking the louvers, all kind of thing happening.

CSW: Oh my. What do you think causes it?

UJ: I don't really know. Probably something is bothering them.

AE: Maybe, I just see them, they maybe miss their families, you know, I does see. Miss home. But still though I was studying, how they affected my daughter, I'm with my

daughter, you know? She don't really miss no body. With me here. Two of my daughters – the big one and the small one even though I am here. So I can't really say is what really.

The following passages will use this interview as a starting point to explore the kinds of reactions people of the community had to *the sickness*. First, it will examine the various treatments of *the sickness* that Auntie Ethel and Uncle Joe describe: calling the doctors, turning to the churches, and inviting the *pia'man* to the village. I will then consider the causes that Auntie Ethel suggested, such as menstruation and homesickness, and use Amazonian literature to analyze what their interpretations and explanations illuminate about the role that gender plays in knowledge production and everyday life.

### When *the sickness* first began

Uncle Joe and Auntie Ethel were neither the first nor the last people to describe the baffling onset of the *the sickness* to me during my time in Sand Creek. Miss Abbie, one of the teachers in the secondary school, and I were sitting together discussing it one day in the dining room of the dormitory. She confirmed that *the sickness* began during the first term of the second year after the school was open. Since no one had seen anything like it before, they didn't know how to deal with it when it started happening. The girls began to feel the pains, and then they started rolling on the floor.

She explained that at first she thought maybe the girls were faking it. Her opinion changed when one of her students, Regina, developed the symptoms. Abbie and Regina were very close, and Abbie insisted that Regina would never lie. After witnessing the effects of *the sickness* on Regina, she began to believe that whatever was taking place in the dormitory was beyond the girls' control. Abbie did explain that her niece was living with her at the time in the teachers' quarters and attending school. She never got *the sickness*, and was actually upset with several of her classmates who were sick. Abbie's niece told her that she never thought the sick girls were faking it entirely, but she did feel that some of them might have been 'playing it up' or exaggerating their symptoms, since most of the sick girls were eventually sent home.

Abbie described the beginning of *the sickness* as follows:

They would indeed run off, run up that mountain. The school never experienced anything like that before so everybody was curious, and everybody was just running out of the school to see what was happening, running behind them, the boys were running

up the mountain, anyone who could get up there was going up there to see what was happening. And we were, like, trying to get back the school in order but it was, like, really hard because they wanted to see what was happening. And after that – the two days after that we couldn't teach cuz then they started being suspicious and say what they think it was and parents started to come and collect their children or just to see what was happening and to ask to take home their children. They didn't want to leave them in the dorms because it [the sickness] was attacking the dorms, and then it started with the village children. You would be sitting in class and you just waiting there for someone, for the next person to start shouting. You just sit there... if they do happen to run away then the whole class would have to go out.

The girls who ran up the mountain were always pursued by other school children, most often by the boys. They would attempt to catch them and carry the girls down, but as I mentioned in the previous chapter, the girls would become tremendously strong and extremely violent while experiencing the fits. Although they often needed five or six boys to help, on most occasions, the boys would overtake the girls, grab them and carry them down the mountain. When I spoke to the sick girls themselves, they said they would run up because the 'Granny spirit was calling them to her', but none of the girls would ever run to the cave where Granny is said to have originated from. The members of the community explained that the reason the girls were always chased and hopefully apprehended, was because the adults were worried they were running up to throw themselves off the cliff located on the other side of the mountain. This never happened though, as the boys would either catch the girls, or the girls would 'catch themselves' while on the mountain and willingly return to the dormitory. There was only one night when it was so dark on the mountain that a girl managed to lose the boys. The dorm parents went to the *toshao* in the middle of the night for help, and he woke up members of the village council and they all rode on horseback to find her. As they came around the mountain with the sun coming up they spotted her running. She had climbed up and over the mountain, and was now sprinting across the open savannah towards another, larger mountain in the distance.

Abbie explained that these fits were happening every day when *the sickness* began, often while she was teaching and it was difficult to squeeze a lesson in between all the commotion. Finally, after a week of this happening every day, most of the sick girls from the neighboring villages went home. The girls from Region 8, however, had to stay in the dormitory as it is very expensive and logistically challenging to organize travel to their home communities, and many of

them continued to suffer from bouts of *the sickness*. It is important to note something about the village girls that Abbie mentioned as well. For the most part, the girls who were affected by *the sickness* were those living in the dormitory, although when *the sickness* reached its height, there were some occasions when village girls would also experience some of the symptoms, but only when they were at school.

Shortly after *the sickness* began, it reached its peak. Abbie described this to me as well:

When *the sickness* was at its worst, around 40 girls were affected. They had to move down to the community center because the *pia'man* came to treat the dormitory, so the students couldn't stay overnight. HM asked me to go over to the community center, and Neil went with me as well. All night, all night, the girls were running and the boys were trying to chase them. They were trying to run all the way from the community center to the mountain, right down the main road. On the same day the representative from the Ministry of Education came to investigate; and the welfare officer too. The representative from the MOE started asking me if we were even still having classes. I said yes, because the village kids weren't affected, but that none of the dorm kids could come because the girls were sick and the boys were exhausted from chasing the girls all night long. I was annoyed with the representative. The welfare officer didn't know what to do. She stayed in the dorms for two nights after the *pia'man* treated the place, and she witnessed the kids getting sick. She asked for a few teachers to go stay with her as well. I think Neil or Johnny went to stay.

The way the teachers, the dorm parents, the members of the community and the students described *the sickness* is characterized by confusion and bewilderment. This further reinforces the fact that this kind of spiritual sickness was bizarre and unprecedented in this social context. It is important to note that in the overwhelming majority of cases, the girls who became sick were living in the dormitory, and the only form of treatment that consistently relieved the symptoms was sending the girls back to their home communities.

## Treatments

### Doctors

As Abbie mentioned, the school eventually called the *pia'man* out to 'treat the space', but this was only one of the various treatment approaches the leadership of the school and the community employed to try to address this crisis. The first person the headmaster called was the doctors from the hospital in Lethem. I was originally surprised, since *the sickness* was usually

discussed in terms of spiritual vulnerability, so I assumed it would be likely for the community to turn to the *pia'man* for intervention right away. Upon further reflection, however, the motivation to first consult the doctors became clear. As discussed in Chapter 4, in everyday rhetoric of the community, the space of the school is often related to ideas about development, modernity and the state; it made sense that they would first approach it in a way that reflected these ideas, to rule out *the sickness* as a possible biomedical ailment.

When *the sickness* was at its height, the headmaster called the doctors and requested they travel to Sand Creek to examine the sick children. Paul, the British man who was flying the medical plane in Region 9 at the time, brought the doctors down to the village. During my time in Guyana, he and I became friends. One evening he told me what he had witnessed that day in Sand Creek. He showed me some videos and pictures he took while in the village. The footage showed rows and rows of bare mattresses on the grassy area in front of the community center and countless girls and one boy writhing back and forth in the hot sun. I recognized several of my students. From the location of the students in the video, it was clear that the sounds of their moans, groans and screams must have been ringing hauntingly throughout the whole village.

Similarly to what Auntie Ethel mentioned in her interview, Paul explained that the doctors decided to bring a few of the students out of the village to the hospital, to give them a full checkup and some tests. According to Paul's account, some of the stronger villagers began to carry the students, who were kicking and screaming, to the plane. Some members of the community expressed concerns that the students would go into a fit on the plane, and it would be dangerous for the pilot and the doctors as well as the students. As they were waiting to board however, Paul took each of the sick children's hands, one by one, and told them they would be ok – that he was taking them on God's plane, which seemed to have a calming effect on the children. Paul then shared what he thought was the problem and the solution to *the sickness*, which reflected his evangelical belief system. He asserted, 'No one was taking charge of the village. The real solution is Jesus. It's the evil spirits causing this. They take the children because they are scared, bullied and in a foreign environment. The boarding schools are the problem.'

The doctors did administer several tests on the children, and kept them overnight in the ward. They did not have any fits or present any of the symptoms in the hospital, and the doctors were unable to diagnose any physical illness. .

### Churches

Although pilot Paul's analysis of the causes and appropriate treatment of *the sickness* gives away his British background and his evangelical beliefs, he was not the only person I spoke with who shared these views. Others also connected this kind of spiritual crisis with demons or evil spirits and turned to God, Jesus and the church for solutions. As Auntie Ethel made clear in her interview, the people of the community often requested the advice and support from preachers and priests. It did not come as a surprise then that some members of the community believed the sickness was caused by the fact that the dormitory building was never blessed during its construction.

One afternoon, when I rode my bike up to the main school building, one of my students, Ryan, the only boy to experience *the sickness* in the same way as the girls, came running towards me from the dormitory. He said, 'Miss Courtney, are you here for church?' I was surprised by this question as it was the middle of the week. I knew that the students often have time devoted to religion in the dormitory, like daily morning prayers, but I didn't realize they had full on church services. Curious, I walked with Ryan over to the dining hall, where everyone was preparing for worship. A few of the other teachers came over from the teachers' quarters to join me.

It was an evangelical service conducted by a group of people from the Assembly of God church located across the Brazilian border in Bonfim, intended to save the possessed children. It was full of songs and charismatic preaching, but it was given almost entirely in Portuguese. Neither of the two preachers could speak English and only one of them asked to have her talk translated by one of the bilingual cooks. I asked Auntie Doley later if any of the students could speak or understand Portuguese. She said that maybe some of the students from Region 8 could, but she wasn't sure. The members of the church did bring fruitcake and cheese treats, and although those snacks did not alleviate any of the symptoms of the possession, they delighted the students.



The charismatic preachers' jubilant Portuguese crashed over the crowd of dormitory students and a few staff members. The preachers would occasionally shout 'Amen!' and everyone in the crowd would follow that with their own 'Amen!' Abbie whispered under her breath that we could have been saying 'Amen' to anything, since we didn't have any idea what was being said. I could understand bits and pieces, and it was clear that the theme of the sermon involved Jesus and the devil. As I looked around the room during the sermon, some of the kids were really engaged and participating, while others were asleep in the back. After the preaching portion of the sermon drew to a close, the church members encouraged the kids to come up and sing hymns in English, while one of the men from the group played the guitar. After the service the two preachers offered to bless all of the students on their way out.

Although the dorm parents, the afflicted girls, and the members of the community continued to turn to the churches and prayers for comfort and support, the various denominations coming to pray over the school and the children didn't seem to have any effect on the sick students. They continued to have their fits. One of the other teachers once told me she witnessed two girls getting sick in church during service. They fell to the ground and began rolling before running out the main doors and towards the mountain, with several men of the congregation running after them.

The reading of scriptures to sick girls was attempted over and over again, and towards the end of the school year, Auntie Ethel began using the Bible as a tool to ease the girls during their fits. She would place it directly on their writhing bodies, and it would calm the girls. When they 'caught themselves', they would explain that the Granny was afraid of the Bible, and could be injured by it.

One of the teachers, Samantha Jonas, spoke to me about *the sickness* one afternoon. She said,

Um I didn't know what to think when it first started happening but then, when I was in Georgetown, I went to a church and like the people would sing and, at the highest [point of the mass], they would just, like, start speaking in tongues and they would start falling and lashing out and screaming and jumping and all sorts of things. And then my father, I asked my father why they are behaving like that. He told me it's because they are so evil, they're evil, that's why it happening. Some people are just weak so they get affected, because they think, something about spirits, about the holy spirit and evil spirits and

when I saw it here, the thought just struck me that it's evil spirits. And then when they brought in the umm, the *pia'man*, the *obeah* man, whatever he is called, then everyone said it was the evil spirits attacking. And then I was confused because they, *obeah* people, or the *pia'man* people, they just pray to the devil, they pray to the devil to get rid of the evils, and it just isn't making sense to me. So why, one thought struck me, why pray to the devil to get rid of the devil?

When I asked her about the church treatment, however, she said, 'Yea, some people from different denominations came and tried to pray, but it didn't have any effect on the children.' Although Samantha expressed that she didn't know why they would call the *pia'man* to help treat the children as well, calling on the doctors, preachers and the *pia'man* is consistent with the 'eminent pragmatism' that Whitehead and Vidal noted amongst Guyanese Amerindians, discussed in Chapter 3 (2004:72). The people of Sand Creek were willing to employ any and all magical action that could provide effective treatment. This 'eminent pragmatism' extends to the tendency noted in the previous chapter, that Amerindians will often go to the *pia'man*, the doctor, and pray in church when faced with illness. In the case of *the sickness*, when the doctors could not diagnose the girls and the intervention from the churches did not prove successful, they turned to the *pia'man*.

### *Pia'man*

Unlike Samantha, many members of the community believed that calling a *pia'man*, or shaman, was the only proper way of treating this kind of spiritual sickness. Although in many day-to-day contexts, Christian Amerindians would deny the skills and efficaciousness of *pia'men*, many of them would not hesitate to turn to these healers when their children were sick.

At the end of September, there was a Parents Teachers and Friends Association [PTFA] meeting at Sand Creek Secondary. Parents travelled from many surrounding villages, leaving as early as 3am to walk, bicycle or ride their motorbikes to Sand Creek to attend the meeting and see their children. The assembly room was packed to the brim with Makushi and Wapishana parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents and siblings. The meeting began with a prayer in Wapishana followed by the Guyanese pledge, and then the secretary read the minutes from the previous PTFA meeting, which focused on two specific items. The first topic concerned the ways in which the secondary community could raise money to pay the *pia'man* to treat the children and the dormitory building due to *the sickness*. The second topic pertained to the fact

that enrollment in Sand Creek Secondary had dropped. I had a feeling that these two were interrelated.

Although the community was only able to raise half of the money required to cover the treatment cost, one evening at home, over a bowl of oatmeal porridge, Auntie Doley mentioned that there would, in fact, be a *pia'man* coming to the dormitory to work with the sick girls, and to clean the space of the bad spirits. The following day, several of the students from my class were missing because the *pia'man* was treating them. As I had only spent a short time in the village up to this point, I was worried that this matter was too sensitive for an outsider to ask questions about, so I didn't venture over to meet the *pia'man*.

Besides sending the sick girls back to their home communities, the *pia'man's* treatment was the only treatment that actually worked, albeit temporarily. During the three months leading up to Christmas break, both the number of girls affected and the frequency of episodes associated with *the sickness* were diminishing at Sand Creek Secondary. The girls were still feeling pain in their backs and stomachs, but the pain never prompted any fits. Things seemed to be, in the words of the Guyanese, 'Easing up, for true.' When I left the village at the end of Christmas term, none of the girls were feeling sick. When I was travelling back down South to Sand Creek in January, however, Etta sent me a Facebook message telling me, 'You know *the sickness* is happening back in Sand Creek. Right now. 20 students are sick.' In the same way members of the community discussed possible causes of the sickness, they also surmised several possible reasons why this treatment was only effective for a short time. Some thought maybe it was because they only paid half of the money the *pia'man* had requested, while others suspected that it was jarring for the students to return to the dormitory after Christmas break. Through the exploration below, it becomes clear that even this form of treatment could not address all of the suggested causes.

## Causes

Throughout my time in Guyana, even before I arrived in Sand Creek, I heard speculation from various people about what was causing *the sickness*, but, there was never a consensus about

the actual root cause. Frequently, a single person would offer several different reasons for these events, as illustrated by the interview with Auntie Ethel at the beginning of the chapter. In that conversation alone, she gave several different and interrelated reasons why this could be happening. She cited evil spirits from the mountain, the vulnerability associated with menstruation, and homesickness. It's important to note the complexity of the causality she suggested—and she highlighted the exceptions to the rules as well, particularly her young, premenstrual, living-at-home daughter. She concluded this discussion by saying, 'So I can't really say is what really.'

Many people within the community and outside of Sand Creek were keen to offer several different and related causes for the events. I would like to once again invoke the argument of Janice Boddy that I employed in the previous chapter. She asserts that possession is a 'holistic social reality' (1989:136) and I argue that when this position is taken seriously, it is not surprising that there were several, simultaneous and interrelated causes suggested that could bring about this kind of spiritual crisis.

### Gender

Any approach to analyzing this phenomenon must recognize the centrality of gender. *The sickness* predominantly affected adolescent girls, with very few exceptions. Throughout all the accounts I heard of *the sickness*, there were only three boys who were affected by it.

For one of the boys, *the sickness* was manifested in the exact same way as for the girls. Although I had not witnessed it, many people throughout the community told me he had full-blown fits on the mattresses alongside the girls, writhing, flailing, and screaming. It is important to note that this young man was not always accepted by the other boys in school, and he would regularly choose to spend time with the girls dancing in the assembly room rather than join the boys in a game of football. Many of the students called him 'auntie man' which is the term they use for homosexual people throughout the Rupununi. I cannot say what the young man's sexual orientation was, but his behavior definitely set him apart from the other boys. I'm not sure if the fact that he experienced *the sickness* in the same way as the girls contributed to the motivation behind calling him an 'auntie man', as I'm not certain which came first.

In the case of the other two boys, *the sickness* was manifested in a drastically different way than in the girls. Rather than experiencing fits or running up the mountain, they attempted to hang themselves in the dorm. Both boys were sent to their home communities after these incidents. The people of the community asserted that *the sickness* among the boys manifested itself in suicide attempts.

In the following discussion, I will focus on the much more prevalent manifestation of *the sickness* that I described in the previous chapter, and the only one I witnessed during my time in Sand Creek—the female expression in the form of violent, traumatic fits.

### Menstruation

From very early on in my stay in the village, when people discussed *the sickness* with me, they often linked it to menstruation. One afternoon during my first month in Sand Creek, Auntie Doley sat down at the kitchen table with me, to talk about *the sickness*. She knew many people had been mentioning it to me, and that I was confused about the matter. She explained that many of the girls in the dormitory were being affected by *the sickness* since the building was never blessed. She also explained that these young ladies were getting their monthly ‘flow’ [period] and not disposing of their pads properly. Auntie took this opportunity to explain to me what places I needed to avoid when I was on my period. I could not go to the creek, the river, the farm or even the garden during that week, without putting myself and whoever was with me in danger. She also instructed me to properly dispose of my sanitary products by burning them, rather than dropping them into the long drop, as the smell of the blood is very attractive to the spirits.

Many months later, I ran into Auntie Dorothy, one of the most prominent Sand Creek women, in Lethem. She was a very wealthy woman by village standards, owning and operating a large cattle ranch with her husband. She also ran a ‘culture group’ for young people in Sand Creek. The group was composed of about 20 boys and girls from Sand Creek Secondary who learned to do traditional dances and performed regularly in Guyana and internationally. She told me that while I was in Brazil, they had a meeting with all the girls in the dorms to talk with them about going to the river with their flow. She said that many of the girls were lying, claiming they

were not menstruating when they actually were, and then going to swim, wash and bathe by the river. She explained that this was a very dangerous practice because river spirits find menstrual blood to be disgusting—it makes their homes dirty and they wake up very angry and take revenge on anyone in the water—not exclusively the girls with their periods. Auntie Theresa reported some whirlpools in the water in the few weeks prior, which indicated that the spirits were waking up. Auntie Dorothy exclaimed angrily, ‘So these children are not only endangering themselves but also anyone else who goes to the river!’ She claimed the girls were lying on purpose and they had to know and honor these traditions, and asserted that the girls from Region 8 and Shulinab were the worst offenders. She expressed her fear that one of the girls might die, and as a result, the Patamona would send *kanaima* against Sand Creek, even though the girls knew they were doing something wrong.

It is important to note that the girls from Region 8 are primarily Patamona, and the girls from Shulinab are Makushi, while most of the other girls living in the dormitory are Wapishana, like Auntie Dorothy herself. It is not a coincidence that Auntie Dorothy was concerned the Patamona would send *kanaimas* to Sand Creek. As discussed in Chapter 3, according to the Wapishana and Makushi people, the Patamona are the most spiritually powerful group of Amerindians in that area of Guyana. Sometimes Wapishana will go as far to say the Patamona are all *kanaima*. Although they state this fact in a joking manner, their fear of Patamona’s spiritual prowess and knowledge is very real throughout the Rupununi. Young Wapishana and Makushi people grow up hearing these beliefs in their home communities, but in the dormitory they are often sleeping in a bed next to a Patamona girl, which may also contribute to their experience of being spiritually vulnerable.

Auntie Dorothy went on, first reiterating what Auntie Doley had told me—that women need to wait two days to a week after their periods before going out to the river or the farm. She then talked about recent traumatic events that took place in Sand Creek. A couple years ago a fifteen year old girl waited merely one day after her flow ended and crossed the creek with her friend on a small boat. All of a sudden, the boat stopped; they could neither go backwards nor forwards. A water spirit had caught them and held their boat still. Soon after, whirlpools surrounded the vessel and the boat tipped over. The spirit pulled the one girl down and carried her towards the rocks while the other girl managed to swim away. They searched for the girl for

two whole days but they couldn't find her body anywhere. Finally, Auntie Dorothy lit a candle on a plate and put it in the river. The current carried it directly to where her body was found. Auntie Dorothy asserted that the only way to avoid another similar tragedy would be if Auntie Ethel made a calendar of when the girls were on their flow, and she could regulate when they were allowed to go down to the creek to wash and bathe or go to work on the school farm.

I suggested that maybe the girls needed to talk about these things with someone since they were living so far from their mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers. Auntie Dorothy said she tried to teach the girls in her culture group about 'things like safe sex'. Once, she noticed one of her girls was acting funny so she took her aside to ask her what was going on. The girl said she was very ashamed but that she had a discharge and it was burning when she urinated. It turned out that she had an STI that she contracted by having unprotected sex with her boyfriend, back in Region 8. Auntie Dorothy urged her not to be afraid of Medex—'He's not just a doctor for men!' Auntie Dorothy added that the girl had just turned 15 and did not know much about reproductive health issues. She also said that none of the girls knew about menopause.

When the people of the Rupununi would speculate about causes of this spiritual crisis, they would more often than not draw connections between menstruation and *the sickness*. Once I was speaking with one of the teachers, Samantha Jonas. She explained to me what *the sickness* was and that it would happen sometimes to the girls in her class. I asked her how many girls became sick and she said,

One time all of them were sick. It could be because Amerindians have very strong beliefs. One is that if a girl bathes in the river when she is menstruating a spirit could take her. I don't really believe in these things, so that's why I'm not susceptible. Amerindians believe you can't eat any fish that have been caught in a net when your baby is just born, a month old. I ate some and my baby is just fine.

I said, 'Oh you're brave. I don't know if I would take the risk.' She explained that she didn't know they had been caught in a net until after she ate them.

I first heard about the connections between menstruation and spiritual vulnerability long before I moved to Sand Creek, in the first village I visited in the northern Rupununi, Surama. In this Makushi village, some of the women told me about *the sickness* in Annai Secondary school,

another boarding school in the north Rupununi. They also explained it by drawing connections between menstruation and the possession. So when Immaculata gave me the first full account of *the sickness* I heard in Sand Creek, I asked her if she thought these factors might have been related. She replied,

Yes, the girls don't know how to deal with it. They just flush their pads down the toilet or drop them in the long drop instead of burning them, and that makes them vulnerable. In St Ignatius, a woman I knew found a snake covered in menstrual pads. These demons are attracted to these things.

When drawing these connections between *the sickness* and menstruation, it's important to note how practices surrounding menstruation and particularly the 'young lady', as they call menarche, in Sand Creek have changed due to the boarding school system. Auntie Doley explained that when she was young, whenever a girl got her first 'young lady', she would undergo a period of semi-seclusion by being removed from the home area for a few days, to spend the time away from men. She would be surrounded by the women of her family, her grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and older sisters for the short experience of her first period. It was there where their older female relatives would explain the taboos associated with menstruation; particularly that they were to avoid the creek, river and farm while experiencing their 'flow'.

Throughout the Amazonian region, the first period of an adolescent girl signifies a very important transition, from childhood to young womanhood. It also marks the capacities and abilities of the young woman's body, indicating that she can now begin women's work in earnest (Conklin 2001b:153-4). While the spectrum of marking this event is broad in Amazonian indigenous groups, the kind of semi-seclusion that Auntie Doley described has been observed by ethnographers in other communities. As Conklin noted, Albert describes a similar practice amongst the Yanomami of Brazil and Venezuela. When young girls first get their period, they also observe a semi-seclusion as well as dietary restrictions, and if she fails at observing these practices, she runs the risk of aging rapidly into an old woman (Conklin, 2001b:164). The severity of the restrictions vary from community to community. Yolanda and Robert Murphy in their work about gender amongst the Mundurucú, explain that girls are restricted from bathing during their first period lest a particular bird find and consume their blood, which would not



only cause their skin to turn yellow but also suggest impending death (1974:176). Cecilia McCallum describes the practices around this occasion amongst the Cashinahua, stating,

First menses occasions a small ritual, involving a period of semi-seclusion and dieting. At this time, a girl must stay close to home and work on her newly acquired skills, under the tutelage of her maternal grandmother, for menstrual blood is offensive to the forest and river spirits. The smell draws the attention of the spirits to the presence of human beings, alerting them to possible danger and causing them to interfere in their activities. One reason, then, that a girl must stay at home is to protect her from these spirits, who would be angry at their intrusion into their domain. Menstrual blood, like other bodily substances, links humans to spirits, because it makes the separation between human domain and spirit domain begin to break down. Its smell 'makes a path' from one domain to the other and makes normally invisible humans visible to the spirits. This is why men may not sleep with menstruating women, for they become bad hunters as a result. The blood clings to them and they may only be rid of it through dieting. (2001:53)

In this short passage, McCallum highlights the importance and centrality of female relationships during this ritual. She also illustrates how menstruation foregrounds not only the relationships between men and women but also between spirits and humans.

Conklin explains that the practice of Amazonian seclusion rituals, including those for menstruation but also for childbirth (or, in the case of the Wari', enemy killing), is to 'achieve the formation or re-formation of the individual's body and of spiritual or psychological capacities linked to bodily states' (2001b:151). Building on the discussion of the Amerindian body explored in Chapter 2 and how it is constructed and reconstructed by other members of the community, it follows that these rituals are vital to the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Currently in the Rupununi however, where most young Amerindian girls are living in a boarding school dormitory when they have their first 'young lady', this practice of semi-seclusion is no longer observed. As the dormitory is filled with boys, the girls are unable to avoid interacting with males. They no longer experience this crucial moment of solidarity with their female relatives; nor do they have the opportunity to review the taboos associated with this time of the month to avoid danger throughout the course of their lives. Let me be clear: this is not to imply that the girls aren't aware of the taboos associated with menstruation. In fact, I have no doubt that they are well aware of them prior to experiencing a period, through interacting with their mothers, aunts, grandmothers, older sisters, and female friends throughout their youth. However, this very specific experience that entails the separation from men, a connection with

the important women in their lives and their explicit instruction, is no longer available to them. And without this ritual, girls are struggling with re-forming their bodies into young women.

I encountered these beliefs that McCallum describes above—that females attract spirits while menstruating, in many different contexts throughout my time in Guyana. Once, while I was spending the weekend in Lethem, I was out washing my clothes in the yard of Mrs. Foo's house and one of her lodgers, a Wapishana man from the Deep South named Perry, came over to introduce himself. He asked me about my project and I explained I was studying boarding schools, and specifically the school in Sand Creek. He explained he has two younger sisters attending boarding school in Aieshalton, the southernmost boarding school in Region 9. He said,

Funny things have been happening to them. They have fits, and become very strong, and see and hear things. These things have even happened in Georgetown [to other young girls in boarding school dormitories]. These girls have Amerindian heritage somewhere down the line. Amerindians don't like to be in enclosed spaces.

I inquired as to why it wasn't happening to the boys.. He explained that some people thought it was related to pap smears or medication. I said I had also heard that there was a connection with menstruation.

Perry replied with a story about a Catholic sponsored youth trip he went on years before. He explained that they were in a smaller village a bit further south, and they were planning on playing some water sports. He said,

The female elders said no girls who were menstruating could go to the river because it would anger the spirits. They were to bathe and wash elsewhere. We planned a canoe race, and one girl stood on the rocks on the river bank to watch, but didn't go in the water. Some of the local girls saw whirlpools in the water. They ran to get out and told me, and I stopped the games at once. If a girl bathes in the river while she's issuing blood [i.e. on her period], it may attract things that enter you, grow and kill your insides. What you Americans call cancer. Just think about all the things attracted to rank blood, and this is much ranker than animal blood, which is already rank.

The views Perry expressed, about the danger of menstrual blood, has been noted time and time again throughout the literature on lowland South America. As Conklin notes, for example, the Yanomami believe the blood of the first menstruation to be the most dangerous, and the threat does not dissipate after menarche (Albert 1985, 574), stating, 'Menstrual blood is

considered to be dangerous, imbued with a harmful odor, and polluting to others, especially men' (Conklin 2001b:164). While there are certainly some indigenous groups that do not share these beliefs, such as the Wari' (Conklin 2001b), this is a view observed in several different communities. Ken Kensinger notes this among the Cashinahua, stating,

Menstrual blood is dangerous. At worst, it can cause a man's death through a slow deterioration of his strength and energy. At the very least it results in a loss of his hunting ability by infusing him with a substance, *yupa*, that causes him to miss his shots, makes him inattentive to the dangers of the forest while engaged in sexual fantasies, or gives him a strong odor that drives animals away. The debilitating effects of menstrual blood can be counteracted through a month-long fast that requires abstinence from meat or fish, sweet gruels, any seasoned food, and from sexual activity, followed by a brief but highly purgative purification ritual. (1995: 35)

Kensinger also says that the smell of the menstrual blood attracts spirits who will harm or kidnap menstruating women in the forest, which is why they never enter the forest on their periods, and seldom enter it even when they are not bleeding (1995:35).

These beliefs inform where a woman can go and what activities she can perform while menstruating. Janet Siskind notes that amongst the Sharanahua, menstruating women cannot go on the fishing expeditions, particularly the ones that employ poison. If she or anyone she has had sexual relations with in the past three days does join the expedition, the poison will not affect the fish (1973:115). When I was back in Sand Creek for a visit in the summer of 2017, Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram took me fishing with this kind of poison, and one of our neighbor's daughters was tagging along. Auntie Doley sent her back to the house, however, after deeming it had not been long enough since her 'young lady' for her to assist us with the fishing. She mentioned to Auntie Helen that if the young girl did accompany us, that we would not catch any fish. This poison was a very popular way to fish throughout the Rupununi, and as you have to grow the plant to make the poison, then dry it out and pound it down into a powder, the people in the village did not want to risk wasting it if it would not work.

## Gendered Personhood and Knowledge Production

Menstruation marks the move from girlhood into womanhood (Conklin 2001b, McCallum 2001) and, as such, is an important aspect of what it means to be female in

Amazonia. However, female agency, and how it works alongside and complementarily with male agency, cannot be reduced to only the physiological experience of being a woman. Gender is central to the production and reproduction of personhood; it informs actions in everyday life, as well as dictates how the Amerindian body mediates and engages with the world.

While very young children are treated the same regardless of their gender, the distinction between males and females emerge as they grow older (Fisher 2001:120). McCallum notes that gender differentiation begins between the ages of 7-11 amongst the Cashinahua (2001:41). These differences are linked closely to the economic process, reflected in not only what the young people learn, but also where and with whom. McCallum notes that girls are taught to cook and to weave by their female elders, in many cases primarily by their grandmothers, and until a young woman is able to grow, cook and serve food well, she is not considered a real woman. Most of these activities take place within the home or the garden.

Young boys on the other hand, do most of their learning outside of the home. Janet Siskind notes this amongst the Sharnahua, stating that '[b]oys hunt and fish together, leaving their households most of the day, by the time they are about ten[...] For most boys the companionship of their youth falls away as they search for wives in other villages, hunt by themselves, and live with foreign women surrounded by foreigners' (1973:142). Murphy and Murphy also note this difference amongst the Mundurucú, explaining that boys experience estrangement from their homes, and this prepares them for the task of leaving the village for marriage when they become men. In contrast, young women remain at home and reinforce and strengthen the bonds with their female family members (1972:175).

McCallum highlights that gendered learning and the space where it takes place is reflective of an underlying dichotomy that gives pattern to daily life, stating:

The opposition is reflected in the way that agency is formally acquired. Women's learning takes place, socially and geographically, on the 'inside' while men's learning often involves relationships with beings and spaces linked to the 'outside'. Women learn in a relation of kinship [...] men learn in relation of affinal kinship [...] Finally men learn by moving away from the village, travelling in the forest and the city whilst both conscious and otherwise, whereas women learn when relatively immobile, staying, for example, in their *chichi's* house (their maternal grandmother and namesake). (2001:48)

I will now explore how this inside-outside dichotomy structures village life, and how it reflects the deeper ethos of sociality in Amazonia.

This inside/outside dichotomy informs the division of labor. Women's activities take place within the home or within the village, while men's activities take place primarily outside of the village. Mentore articulates the reason why Waiwai women of Southern Guyana remain outside of the forest, stating, 'Women's bodies [...] being more open—indeed more vulnerable—to the loss of bodily substances, can only be protected from the possibility of vitality loss by reducing their contact with the forest and the acts of killing in the forest' (2005:251). As women are associated with the space inside the village, they exercise their agency by transforming forest products into useful products that can be consumed. This typically includes growing and harvesting food in the garden, cooking food, weaving, and raising children, amongst other things. Men, on the other hand, are aligned with predatory relationships with outsiders, be they animal, human or spirits (Descola 2001, McCallum 2001). Descola points out that these distinctions are not always clear-cut, as Achuar women sometimes go hunting with their partners and even occasionally without them (2001:96), but, typically, Amerindian women would not leave the village without a male accompanying them (Kensinger 1995:51).

Feminine agency that takes place in the village is important for a number of reasons, primarily as a way to transform 'raw' things into items fit for human consumption, or in the case of humans, proper sociality. McCallum explains how the linguistic structure of the Cashinahua language illustrates this transformative power, stating:

The term for 'cooked' is *ba*, which in verb form means 'to create', 'to procreate' and 'to be born'. Cooking food (*bava-*) is analogous to making babies. Similarly pots are analogous to wombs. Women are responsible then, for transforming raw substance (meat, fish, vegetables) into cooked and edible substance, just as they are responsible for transforming raw semen into 'cooked' babies in their wombs. (2001:52)

And, by performing this very important transformative work in daily lives, women 'stand at the center of the production of what constitutes Cashinahua cultural and social identity' (McCallum 2001: 53).

The two aspects of gendered production are reliant on one another. For instance, a man cannot cook and consume the meat he hunts, but a woman cannot hunt, so both men and

women depend on one another's agency to consume food. It follows that these complementary relationships also work to form the basis of sociality through marriage. Marriages not only sustain the economic system, but also form the basis for bringing new life into the communities, and as such are some of the most important relationships in Amerindian social life. Ken Kensinger describes this mutual dependency amongst the Cashinahua, stating:

Both male and female informants agreed that husbands give wives gardens; wives give husbands cooked food. Husbands give wives a house in a peaceful village; wives give husbands a tranquil, orderly household. Husbands give wives meat; wives give husbands sons, a matter of no small importance in a patrilineal system. Husbands give wives sexual pleasure; wives give husbands sexual pleasure. (1995:45)

Steve Rubenstein also notes the material exchanges associated with marriages amongst the Ecuadorian Shuar, stating, 'Husbands and wives are joined to one another by economic need: the sexual division of labor requires a man to find at least one woman to cultivate and prepare food, and a woman to find a man who will clear gardens and hunt or manage cattle' (2004a:1047). However, his discussion is more nuanced, and he highlights that these exchanges are also related to the notion of desire, and that the lines between desiring another person and desiring their objects can be easily blurred (*ibid.*:1061-2). This is related to the idea noted in Chapter 2, that through providing or processing food and sharing it, a person is actively showing and embodying mutual care.

McCallum also describes marriage amongst the Cashinahua, noting that these relationships are meant to be 'affectionate and lifelong partnerships' and are usually arranged when a young woman is around the age of 15 while her young husband would be about the age of 25 (2001:59). She notes that it is only through these relationships that members of the community can become 'complete persons', and that marriage allows for the creation of life: 'as parents, as grandparents and as members of a community of kinspeople' (2001:63).

The fact that female agency focuses on the inside while male agency functions on the outside points to something deeper that Anne-Christine Taylor notes in her work with the Achuar—that women work within the realm of consanguinity, while dealing with affinity is left to men. She states, 'women act on certain relations as operators or transformers, whereby affinity is constantly absorbed and transmuted into postulated consanguinity' (1983:335). This is reflected in the division of labor as women stay within the village, focusing on raising children, and men

are responsible for all the relations with outsiders, navigating political and trade relationships (Murphy and Murphy 1974:180), and, as such, women create kinship while men mediate relations with affines. McCallum sums this up succinctly, stating:

In the Cashinahua case, gendered knowledge, when put into action, may be said to encompass the set of operations that converts (virtual) potential affinity into (embodied) actual kinship. Thus the relationships that are set up sequentially in the making of sociality are inflected with gender [...] Thus the transformation of the external to the internal, or affinity into kinship, is made possible by putting male-male affinity into interaction with male-female affinity. These are vital stages in the processes that work by the logic of 'constituent alterity' to produce, but (differently from bridewealth systems) not transact, persons. (2001:180)

Gendered production does not only encompass the relationships between humans and other humans, but also structures the way humans interact with animals, plants and spirits. Descola demonstrates this through the interactions between human and spirit in gardening for women and hunting for men, amongst the Achuar. Amerindians, due to their perspectivist cosmology, understand that plants are persons, and when gardening, an Achuar woman often refers to the plants she is growing as her children in songs and stories, effectively aligning herself with the mother of the plants, a garden spirit. This practice forges and strengthens ties of consanguinity, and creates kinship with the plants. Laura Mentore documented this in Guyana amongst the Waiwai, where she has outlined how learning to garden and raise and care for cassava is also the embodiment of motherhood (2012). On the other hand, Descola shows that with the practice of hunting amongst Achuar men, there appears to be a triangular interaction between the hunter, the spirit of the animal he is hunting and the guardian spirit who protects the animal being pursued. The hunter interacts with both of these spirits as if they were affines (2001:99).

Descola urges us not to take this dichotomy lightly, and emphasizes the fact that it forms the basis for the structure of everyday life and all social interaction. He states:

...sexual dichotomy seems to be subordinated to, and instrumentalized by, more encompassing social patterns and relationships. One is the opposition between consanguine and affine that, as we have seen, structures every level of relatedness from Ego to the outer rim of the tribal social space. Gender contrasts are subsumed under this elementary opposition in such a way that women are first and foremost defined as signifiers and operators of consanguine links, while men are perceived as signifiers and operators of affinal links...consanguinity and affinity cannot be reduced, in the

Amazonian context, to mere labels subsuming kin terms and marriage categories. As I have tried to make clear, consanguinity and affinity are far-reaching and versatile intellectual templates that may be used to structure every conceivable form of mediation within the sphere of Achuar social life. (2001.:101-2)

Social life, as the primary concern of daily life for Amerindian people, is constantly structured and defined by this 'intellectual template' and thus all action is informed by these dichotomies: inside/outside, consanguine/affine, and 'self/ 'other'. The interactions between these two distinct groups provides the foundation for the complementary gendered social processes and knowledge production that sustains everyday life in Amazonian communities.

## Gender, Mobility and Movement

The social history of movement in the Rupununi also reflects this structuring of Amerindian social life. While movement has been central to indigenous Guyanese peoples' way of life throughout history (Rivière 1984, Overing 1975, Whitehead 1988), this particular understanding of gendered agency informed mobility in the not so distant past. Reflecting Amerindian ideas about relationships with the outside and production of knowledge and kinship, even before the widespread attendance of boarding schools, young Amerindian men would still be expected to travel around the same age as they now attend school, in order to forge relationships with outsiders and to return to the village with new knowledge. Young women, on the other hand, would leave their home community on rarer occasions, focusing on the work of maintaining kinship ties and sociality within their villages through spending time with their grandmothers, aunts, mothers and siblings.

With the relatively recent shift in the amount of young people attending boarding school, however, there is a record number of young women leaving their home communities to attend a boarding school in a different village. In other words, young women are moving from the inside to the outside in unprecedented ways in the Rupununi, and, as a result, these young women are disconnecting from these vital female relationships with their kin. These historical gendered expectations of mobility shed light on the sharp difference between the ways young women and men experience boarding schools. In other words, young men are still leaving the village to acquire new forms of knowledge, but young women are left without the constant production



and reproduction of the intergenerational relationships that promote embodied knowledge of kin and community. As men are still able to build relationships with outsiders, but young women are no longer able to produce sociality as they would in their home community, the gendered difference of experiencing the separation of boarding school emerges.

I believe this movement has fundamentally changed the way young women engage with the world around them. I turn back to Descola's discussion to explore this more deeply. He states:

The Achuar sexual division of labor is thus based on the idea that each sex reaches its full potential in the sphere befitting its symbolic area of manipulation and in the kinship regime preferentially assigned to its range of social competence. **Each gender deals with humans and non-humans alike according to its particular abilities:** women convert affinity into consanguinity within the nexus and treat their plants as children; men are in charge of affinal relations and treat the beings of the forest as in-laws. (2001:99, my emphasis)

Young women living in the dormitories struggle with reaching their full potential as they have been removed from the inside of their social networks and disconnected from their female relatives. McCallum notes that, 'Grandparents assume greater responsibility for the corporeal production of adulthood in adolescents' (2001:49) amongst the Cashinahua. This is important to bear in mind as I argue that the spirit that invokes the sickness does not coincidentally take the form of a Granny. It is exactly that absence of these vital intergenerational relationships with female kin that leaves the girls in a spiritually vulnerable state. As the young women of the dormitory attempt to forge the kinds of relationships they are used to producing with the spirits in Sand Creek, they are violently possessed by the Granny spirit, and fall victim to the sickness.

As the female experience of the sickness begins with pains similar to menstrual cramps, this first stage of the fits follows the lines of female agency. The following two stages of the sickness, however, could be seen as a dramatic enactment of male adolescence. The young women develop incredible strength, and while random violence is expected in young men, as illustrated by my experience with my infected toe and my young male student, it is shocking in females. As Gow describes, male Piro adolescence involves the search for human 'others' (1997:15), and in the case of the young women experiencing the sickness, they run outside, perhaps in pursuit of spiritual others, although these lines blur in the end as the spirit takes the form of a Granny.

In the conclusion that follows, I will examine the ways in which the relationships between consanguines and affines inform the relationships between 'self' and 'other' so often noted in Amazonian literature. I will use this as a basis to approach social change as transformation, not only in the context of boarding schools in Sand Creek, but also to explore other transformations taking place throughout Amazonia. I will identify the interplay between change and continuity and explore how this particular instance of spirit possession may shed light on the greater experience of rapid social change in lowland South America and the resilience of Amerindian lifeways.

## Conclusion

### The Story of Subrin

One sunny afternoon Ken Feria pulled his motorbike over on the side of the main road in Sand Creek. I was walking along heading to a friend's house and he stopped me so he could regale me with stories about the ancient times. He explained that what we call Sand Creek, the creek itself, is actually translated to *Kativau* in Wapishana, and no one called the community that before the village was named in English. The proper name of the village, *Subrin*, refers also to the mountain behind the dormitory, the same mountain that the dormitory girls run up when they have their bouts of *the sickness*. Translated into English *Subrin* means Howler Monkey Mountain. Ken also mentioned that the village used to be located much closer to the mountains where Auntie Doley's farm now is. He proceeded to tell me the story of *Subrin*:

At one point in these ancient times there was a famine in the village and no one could find any food. There was a young man, whose father had died, so he was the man of the house. He was responsible for hunting and providing food for his mother and younger brother. Due to the famine, and the fact that he couldn't bring any food home, in desperation he walked all the way to *Subrin*—Howler Monkey Mountain. There were plenty of Howler Monkeys living on the mountain and the young man, who was very hungry, began to hunt, roast and eat these monkeys. Then *Subrin-tau*, the god, or owner of all monkeys, came to the man and told him he was eating too many and he if didn't stop then he would be cursed. Despite *Subrin-tau's* insistence, the man disregarded this warning, and continued to feast on the monkey meat. He even carried some home for his family. When he returned to his mother and brother, however, he found he could no longer speak with them. The only sounds he could make sounded exactly like the howls of the monkey. He also began to sprout hair in unusual places, all over his body. Shortly afterwards the man returned to the mountain, and no one ever saw him again.

#### Alterity in Amazonia

This Wapishana myth highlights an important aspect of Amazonian cosmology so often noted in the literature: that the transformative Amerindian body is in a constant state of 'Other-

becoming'. It also touches on many of the themes that run throughout the thesis; foregrounding the importance of kinship relationships and community; how the act of producing food is crucial for fostering and maintaining these relationships and demonstrating mutual care. The myth also demonstrates that both humans and non-humans have the agency to effect change in the world. Finally, it alludes to the gendered aspect of movement, as the young man leaves the center of the village to find something from the outside, and bring it back to his family. He makes a critical error, however, by failing to moderate or control what comes into his body, a behavior that is crucial for highly transformative bodies. He accidentally becomes the other, and the myth beautifully and deftly illustrates not only the creativity but also the danger of becoming the other, of drawing the outside into the inside.

Transformations underline Amazonian life in a myriad of ways. We can see this in the interplay between self and other, consanguine and affine, inside and outside, safe and dangerous. In the last chapter I illustrated the gendered realms of engaging with consanguinity and affinity, and the distinction between inside and outside. Consanguines are safe, while affines have the potential for danger (Mentore 2005, Conklin 2001a). However, affines can and must be transformed into consanguines for the continuation of life and the perpetuation of community. This is exemplified in Mentore's discussion of the transformation of yucca from a poisonous tuber, which like human and animal predators has the potential for violence, into cooked bread or *farine*. The Waiwai recognize a similarity between relations with this major staple food source and marriage. Mentore notes, 'Indeed, like the known affinal relations between humans, the cultivating and detoxifying relations between farmers and yucca have to be established in order to avoid the dangers of the potentially lethal Other' (2005:277). This transformation from dangerous affine into safe consanguine also takes place amongst newly married couples, as the transfer of sexual substance gradually transforms each person's blood until they share one body (Conklin, 2001a:119). Without marriage and the resulting transformation of an affine into consanguine there would be no new life, no new kinship relationships and the community would become stagnant and ultimately disappear.

This wider framework of alterity structures social life in the Amazon. In Amerindian thought, the interaction between conceptions of the self and other are integral and intertwined. The self and a 'community of similars' may be safe but it is simultaneously

unproductive, just like the relationships between consanguines. Recognizing and incorporating aspects of the unpredictable other are crucial to reproducing communities and social life. Joanna Overing articulated this understanding, stating, ‘...these societies are characterized by the subtly achieved mixture of dangerous but fertile difference with safe but sterile sameness’ (1983-84:333). This need to interact with and incorporate the dangerous other is reflected on the collective and personal level. McCallum describes how this creates a constant instability between sociality and asociality in Cashinahua communities due to, ‘...their [societies] fundamental need to plunder or milk that which is different and dangerous in order to regenerate and create that which is similar and safe (2001:1257).’ This is exemplified in the myth above. The young man was starving and needed to consume the monkey meat in order to survive, but due to his gluttony he crossed a dangerous and blurred line, incorporated too much of the other and transformed himself into a monkey.

Conceptions of self and other are not static or bounded, but located on a continuum with different levels of sameness and difference (Lagrou, 2000:164). McCallum describes this complex continuum amongst the Cashinahua,

...‘otherness’ is not seen as an essential attribute of bodies or as an inescapable physical condition. Other beings may be made into humans or kin or vice versa. This is not to say that alterity is rendered impotent or that differences are fuzzy...having raised dualism to an art form, the Cashinahua live it in the spirit of an apparent gradualism, where boundaries may be shifted or crossed even as they must always be re-erected. (2001:66)

And these boundaries, although they can be fluid, are incredibly important. As Overing and Kaplen argue, ‘Ultimately the dangers to the convivial sociality prove to be the very forces through which it is created...’(24). Indeed, without the incorporation of the dangerous other, there is no creative power to sustain the safe mutual self.

While the idea of incorporating the other is a common thread woven throughout Amazonian indigenous communities, it is a distinctly Guyanese notion to diminish an acknowledgment of the original difference. This is not to say that difference is not necessary, as George Mentore highlights amongst the Waiwai community that the ‘duality sustains the unity’ (2005:58) in reference to self and other. It is important for oppositions to be maintained by placing them in a dialectical interaction as the dynamic between opposites keeps the community functioning (Mentore 2005:220-21). However, Laura Mentore explains that Waiwai agricultural

techniques and cultural techniques both focus on 'blending, mixing, and incorporating in order to produce a form with no traces of prior differentiation' (2012:152). The diminishing of difference has also been noted amongst the Makushi in the fact that their language does not have any purely affinal terms, as they all can also refer to consanguines (Riviere 1984:47-48).

Amerindians, including the young man in the myth and the young people attending Sand Creek Secondary school, are constantly experiencing the never ending process of 'other-becoming'. In order to avoid a shift in perspective, as has been noted throughout the entire thesis, they must actively work to reconstruct their identity as human persons (Rival, 2005:106). Santos-Granero uses this praxis to redefine the way anthropologists approach cultural change, stating 'Thus, from a native point of view, cultural change is not only the consequence of external pressures or coercive socioeconomic structures but also the result of a conscious indigenous attempt to incorporate the Other into their sphere of social relations' (2009:479). The reproduction of social life is based in a recognition and incorporation of the other which leads us into an exploration of social change in general, and the changing landscape of villages including Sand Creek and those like it in particular, through the lens of transformation.

## Social Change and Transformation

Transformation as a framework to explore social change provides a good alternative to the historical approach where changes in an Amazonian context were seen through the prism of cultural loss. While indigenous cultures in the Amazon were often described as 'victims' of 'acculturation' in the past, this understanding implies that their cultures are fragile and easily broken, that indigenous lives change only as a result of outside forces, and that 'traditional' practices cannot maintain in the face of Western individualism (Vilaça 1999, Gow 2003, 2007, Santos-Granero 2009). All of these assumptions are highly problematic. Why are these ways of life understood to be inherently fragile? Assuming that change is always a result of outside pressure fails to allow for any indigenous agency, and using the word 'traditional' in contrast to something like 'modernity' disregards indigenous understandings of concepts like tradition and history (Gow 2003, 2007, Santos-Granero 2009). Acknowledging that Amazonian communities

are not bounded or static, and rejecting acculturation as a framework to analyze social change, allows for a exploration of the interactions between these communities and outsiders that have been taking place over a vast period of time.

Transformation as a way to assess cultural change is a more productive way to explore social change in lowland South America, as transformations are mirrored in every level of Amerindian cosmology. Starting right from birth, transformations begin as the biological body of the baby is molded and shaped. Through interaction with kin and community and consubstantiality, the sharing of substance, the body of the baby transforms into a human body. The basis of conviviality itself is rooted in the transformation of negative emotions such as stinginess, anger, and jealousy into positive emotions like generosity and love (Belunde, 2000:209-19). Transformation is also at the heart of the relationship between kin and affines. Gow describes this amongst the Piro, "...real affinity is consistently erased in these systems, by its assimilation to consanguinity—over time, real affines are consanguinized (2007:207)." This idea stretches beyond the everyday life of people, as transformation is the main theme of many myths, but also, as Echeverri argues, "Myths derive their power from always being susceptible to multiple interpretations, transformations, displacement, lack of closure (2000:39)."

Transformation forms the underlying philosophy of the Amerindian world view. Lagrou eloquently articulates this:

An acute awareness of the interdependence of all living beings is effectively translated into a cosmology that sets transformational processes at the center of philosophical reflection. Thus the question of what it means to be similar or different is transformed from a classificatory device into a philosophical paradox. All categories or concepts that refer to 'others' are convinced in a way that they always end up referring as much to the category of otherness as to that of self. (2000:164)

And this is also clearly reflected in instances of social change, such as wearing Western clothing and attending state run boarding schools.

The adoption of Western dress, as a function of perspectivism, is the visible manifestation that maps the transforming social relations indigenous people have with white people (Gow 2007). As illustrated throughout the thesis the body is central in an Amazonian world view (Vilaça 1999, Gow 2007, Santos-Granero 2009) and as such a change in dress can

function as a change in perspective and a change in identity. Several ethnographers have noted that Amerindians who wear Western clothes are able to maintain a dual identity of being Amerindian and white at the same time (Gow 2003 2007, Vilaça 1999, Santos-Granero 2009). Through this partial transformation they redraw the social relationships they have built with the powerful 'other', white people.

This marks a very sharp change in the exploitative relationships the Amazonian people had before with white people, and rewrites the social relationships into ones of mutual respect (Gow 2003 2007, Vilaça 1999, Santos-Granero 2009). Santos-Granero exemplifies this with the story of Pa'yon, a Yanesha girl, who worked as a maid in Lima. Returning to her village in a mini-skirt, heavy make-up and high heels, she did not simply 'assimilate' to the culture in Lima. Through the sharing of space and substance in Lima, she transformed in a very indigenous way. After consuming real food amongst kin in her home village upon her return, she was able to transform once again into a Yanesha person (Santos-Granero, 2009).

These transformations are never complete. Vilaça illustrates that the Wari', through wearing Western clothes and sharing space and substance with white men, are not attempting to erase the difference between being Wari and being white, but rather highlight it through embodiment. Gow describes this Amazonian tendency to maintain the tension between self and other, same and different, by stating, "A proper social life is constituted by the safe mixture of these dangerous differences. But mixture of differences does not equate with erasure of differences for these must be maintained on the edges of the system to generate its ongoing dynamics (2007:208)." So not only is dual identity possible in Amazonia, it is actually necessary, to define the self through incorporation of the other.

### Schooling as Other-becoming

Schooling has become so important to the people of the Rupununi in the same way that wearing Western clothes, eating Western foods and spending time with outsiders allows other Amerindian groups to navigate between various perspectives. Wapishana, Makushi and Patamona parents send their children to school with enthusiasm so their young people can



understand and interact with the ‘enemy’ other in productive and necessary ways. The readjusting of expectations and relationships between the uneducated elders and the educated youth follows into daily village life. Days before I left the village in 2015 the community elected one of the youngest *tosbaos* in Sand Creek history. Several people explained to me that they had voted for him because they had high hopes that he would be more effective in Georgetown, particularly in regards to land titles and procuring funding for important village projects like the building of bridges to make it more accessible. When I visited the village in the summer of 2017, I crossed into the village on one of those bridges.

However, as schooling is one effective way of incorporating the other and their knowledge, the experience of this long-term separation is very clearly gendered in specific ways, demonstrated by the traumatic experience of *the sickness*. As illustrated in the previous chapter, young men have more training and practice for becoming others than young women do, historically and through their varied ways of learning during childhood. As a result, young women find it more difficult to experience the separation of boarding school. However, while *the sickness* is one traumatic and extreme example of how young people are experiencing social change brought about by the practice of living in a boarding school, I believe these things are impacting all of the young people at Sand Creek Secondary, boys and girls alike. The distance between young people and their kin and community continues to put strain on relationships and create vulnerabilities in young people. As this thesis has illustrated, kinship and gendered knowledge production continue to form the basis for Amerindian lives, and the experience of boarding school is putting pressure on both.

This kind of dedicated Other-becoming does not come without its dangers, as illustrated by the fate of the young man in the myth. Incorporating too much of the other, for too long a period of time, can change someone into the other. When elders in these Rupununi communities told me that their young people were leaving and forgetting them, rather than actually asserting that none of their young people would ever return to the village, they were constantly rearticulating the danger of transformative Amerindian bodies. As far as I could tell, by speaking to the people of Sand Creek and other parts of the Rupununi, and despite the fact that indeed more and more people are moving away to Lethem, Georgetown, and Brazil, that many young people do return to their villages after secondary school. However, as they have

spent such a long period of time away from their home communities, they do have to relearn to be kin, and consume the right food and share the same space in order to do so.

This discussion is not to discount any real social change that is undoubtedly taking place in the Rupununi boarding schools. Young people are spending more and more time away from home, and the expectations of educated youth are shifting in their communities. The landscapes of these young peoples' imagined futures are changing, while options for lucrative jobs in the vicinity of their home villages are not increasing with the same speed. Despite these realities, the centrality of affective kinship and community are still important values in their everyday lives, demonstrated by my time with Etta, Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram . While the boarding school educational experience may be fostering a series of very real transformations, and young Amerindians may be incorporating coastal perspectives—other perspectives—they are doing so in a very Wapishana way.

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