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Lost and found Contesting isolation and cultivating contact in Amazonian Ecuador

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In May 2003 a group of Waorani men in Amazonian Ecuador led an attack against their “uncontacted” Taramenani neighbors, resulting in a massacre that has fueled ongoing debates about the rights of indigenous people living in “voluntary isolation.” In this article I consider how Waorani understandings of the attack point to indigenous formulations of alterity that challenge what Lucas Bessire (2012) has described as the contemporary *politics of isolation*. I draw on recent discussions of kinship as a form of mutual belonging that extend beyond common substance (Sahlins 2013), and consider how, in the aftermath of the killings, many Waorani came to see spatially distant others as kinsmen who became disconnected from Waorani in past times. Understood by Waorani as kin of victims, the Taramenani have become both a source of desired relations and a potent image of indigenous strength and autonomy in the context of social and economic transformation.

Keywords: alterity, politics of isolation, kinship, mutuality, violence, Amazonia, Waorani

In this article I consider the indigenous logic and social implications of a massacre carried about by Waorani men against their so-called “uncontacted” Taramenani neighbors in Amazonian Ecuador in 2003.¹ I suggest that, beyond revealing the ways in which Waorani understand and interact with outsiders, local responses to the attack demonstrate an Amazonian formulation of alterity that challenges the notion of “lost people” in Western social imagination and the contemporary poli-

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1. I hope to make clear in this article that typical descriptions of the Taramenani and other indigenous groups as “uncontacted people” are misleading. Their relative isolation is in many ways the product of wider social, political, and economic processes involving other groups and the state, rather than a “natural” or primordial condition (Kirsch 1997). I use the terms “uncontacted” and “voluntary isolation” in reference to current discussions of the Taramenani in Ecuador, while at the same time critically analyzing the assumptions often built into these categories.

tics of isolation in debates about indigenous rights. In contrast to the emphasis placed on isolation and segregation in attempts to protect people living in “voluntary isolation” (Bessire 2012), in the aftermath of the 2003 killings many Waorani insisted on their social and historical links with the victims and devised strategies to cultivate social bonds with their uncontacted neighbors. In this context Waorani people conceive of relations of otherness not merely in terms of exclusion and enmity but also in terms of potential social connection and intimacy (Stasch 2009). The ways in which they construed their relations with the Taro-menani after the attack in reference to mutual experience and belonging points to how, for many Waorani, what is at stake in this context is not merely a politics of isolation but more centrally a question of kinship.

In recent years Amazonia has gone from being a relatively unknown and radically other ethnographic region to being an almost obligatory reference point in anthropological discussions of how alterity operates in different cultural worlds. Whether in studies of “tribal warfare” (Chagnon 1968), cosmologies of predation (Viveiros de Castro 1992; Fausto 2007; Bonilla 2005; Taylor 2000; Vilaça 2010), or indigenous understandings of shamanism and assault sorcery (Whitehead and Wright 2004; Fausto 2012; High 2012), the dangers of potentially violent others appear to encompass and permeate social life in this part of the world (Viveiros de Castro 2001). As everyday life involves an ongoing struggle to incorporate or transform various kinds of others into people or kin (Vilaça 2002; Gow 1991; McCallum 2001), Amazonia presents to us new ways of thinking about social othering and relatedness that depart in significant ways from conventional Western concepts of *society* and the *individual*. Only relatively recently, however, have anthropologists considered how these cosmologies relate to wider political and economic processes that are themselves part of the transformation of Amazonian lived worlds.² In the Waorani communities of Amazonian Ecuador, the speed and scale of economic development and the intensification of intercultural relations in recent years have brought these processes into focus in sometimes dramatic ways. One of the central questions I address in this article is what indigenous Amazonian forms of alterity look like in this transformational context.

Since the establishment of the first mission settlement among the Waorani half a century ago, Evangelical missionaries and anthropologists alike have noted a remarkable transition from intergroup revenge killings to relative peace among the Waorani (Yost 1981; Robarchek and Robarchek 1996; Boster, Yost, and Peeke 2004). As Waorani settled in permanent villages within a legally recognized reserve, many embraced peaceful relations with *kowori* (non-Waorani people), whom they previously assumed to be dangerous cannibals (Rival 2002). These transformational processes, and indigenous understandings of them, emerge as an important part of social memory in Waorani villages today (High 2009a). However, we should be careful not to uncritically adopt an Evangelical narrative of change from *precontact* violence to *postcontact* peace that ignores the forms of violence that Waorani people experience today both as victims and as perpetrators. The pre-

2. Recent examples of this emerging trend in Amazonianist anthropology include Albert and Ramos (2000); Bonilla (2005); Cepek (2008); High (2010); Vilaça (2002); and Kelly (2011).



sence of multinational oil development and illegal logging on indigenous lands are among the socially disruptive forces that contribute to violent conflicts within and between indigenous communities. Rather than viewing Waorani people simply as victims of powerful outsiders, in this article I focus on how these processes become embedded in Waorani understandings of sociality, alterity, and revenge.

In a recent ethnography of Papua New Guinea, Rupert Stasch (2009) observes that his Korowai hosts “know relations by events, and . . . search for relational meanings in events” (17). In this article I argue that, for Waorani, violence appears to set off a particular kind of search for relational meanings, one that highlights the mutuality of victimhood and intimacy. While my hosts and neighbors were generally critical of the killings that occurred during my fieldwork, these events caused people to imagine and desire new kinds of relations in a society where victimhood is a key marker of social proximity. This becomes clear in Waorani speculations about people living in voluntary isolation within the Waorani ethnic reserve (Cabodevilla and Berraondo 2005). Typical Western understandings of uncontacted or isolated people conjure an image of wild and primitive populations, untouched by the corrupting influences of history and civilization. In contrast to this enduring image, Waorani people understand their uncontacted neighbors to be both fierce warriors reminiscent of their ancestors and kinsmen who became disconnected from other Waorani in past times. These enigmatic “lost people” have become both a valued source of potential relations in the aftermath of violence and a potent image of indigenous strength and autonomy.

The Taromenani massacre of 2003

In May 2003, after having spent most of the previous year in Waorani villages along the Curaray River, I was visiting the frontier city of Puyo when a group of young men from the official Waorani political organization (ONHAE)³ approached me at an open-air restaurant. They told me the latest news: a group of Waorani men had attacked the longhouse of an uncontacted group living in voluntary isolation within the Waorani reserve. Visibly concerned, they explained that a large but unknown number of people were killed in the raid, which was carried out by men from the eastern part of the Waorani reserve. At this point they did not appear to know many details about the attack, but shared with me a letter from the organization’s president to the local military authorities estimating that around twenty-five people described as “Taromenani” had lost their lives in the massacre.

In the days that followed, news of the killings spread across Amazonian Ecuador; before long the news became a headline story in the national media. I soon found myself sitting in the homes of Waorani officials in Puyo, listening to their accounts of the killings between news reports on the television about “tribal violence” in the Amazon with chronological lists of past Waorani spear-killings. It was during one of these visits that a Waorani acquaintance showed me a necklace that had been taken from one of the bodies at the scene of the killings. It was made of a dozen or so palm fiber strings tied together to form a single, thick necklace.

3. The Organization of the Huaorani Organization of Amazonian Ecuador (ONHAE) has since been replaced by a similar organization called NAWÉ, which stands for the Waorani Nationality of Ecuador.

Around the moist and pungent-smelling strings were many small pieces of colorful plastic, rubber, and aluminum strung up as beads. Some of the beads were made from chopping up plastic tubing into small pieces, which were placed in alternating colors alongside bottle caps and peccary teeth. For me, this chilling object conveyed powerfully its owner's social isolation from and material coexistence with the oil camps that surround many of the most remote parts of the Waorani reserve.

Sometime later, amid growing gossip and speculation about the attack, another Waorani man in Puyo invited me to his home to show me a video he recorded at the site of the massacre a few days after it occurred. He had joined a group of Waorani men from ONHAE and Ecuadorian soldiers on a trip in a military helicopter to investigate the scene. I sat with him, his wife, and two small children as we watched the footage of ONHAE representatives looking through the contents of a burnt longhouse that was ignited by the attackers during the struggle. It looked very much like a *durani onko* (traditional Waorani house) in size and shape, and the blowgun and spears recovered from the scene appeared similar to those used by Waorani. Keenly interested in these objects, my host pulled down from his wall a blowgun he found at the scene, comparing its likeness and specific differences to one made by his uncle.⁴

The video then focused on the bodies of several victims, which were riddled with spears. My host explained to me that the men at the scene were fearful, knowing that survivors could be hiding nearby, waiting to take revenge. He and his wife then explained to me the further danger that any contact with blood spilled in killings can cause sickness, as touching the blood of a person who is killed causes wounds to form on the surface of the skin. The man was concerned that his trip to the site of the attack might affect his infant son and other members of his household. In order to prevent becoming sick from contact with the blood, he explained, he would need to be whipped with a vine by an elder—and preferably someone who has killed in the past.

The man who recorded the video was one of many Waorani who expressed deep concern about the killings and curiosity about the victims. Both in Puyo and upon my return to Waorani villages, I heard varied accounts of the attack from Waorani people. In the months that followed, much of the gossip, conversation, and reflections on the past that I heard around the cooking hearth in the evenings turned specifically to this event. Some explained that nine men from Waorani villages to the east carried out the attack, shooting scores of victims with rifles supplied by mestizo loggers operating along the Tiguino River. Others explained the attack as an act of revenge for killings carried out by uncontacted people decades earlier. Some described how the killers decapitated their victims after spearing them, placing their heads on the ends of spears left protruding from the ground.

Now, a decade later, the series of events that preceded the attack have become somewhat clearer, as have some of the motives of the killers. The 2003 massacre

4. See Cabodevilla (2004a) for a comparison between the objects recovered from the scene of the 2003 attack and Waorani material culture. In addition to the spears, blowpipes, and other traditional items, a number of steel axes, machetes, and other manufactured goods were discovered at the scene, indicating clearly that the group's relative isolation should not be mistaken for ignorance of foreign people and technology.



and more recent killings have become a telling example of how so-called uncontacted groups are caught between processes of aggressive economic development, the indigenous rights movement, and frontier policies in present-day Amazonia. Establishing an accurate picture of what happened is important for addressing the current situation of these marginal groups and defending their human rights in the face of increasing threats to their very existence (Cabodevilla 2004a). Useful as this knowledge may be for preventing violent encounters between uncontacted people and their neighbors in the future, it is equally important to explore what these groups living in voluntary isolation mean to Waorani people with whom they share a territorial reserve and certain aspects of social organization and material culture.

Waorani, Tagaeri, Taromenani

Most of the total Waorani population—around 2,500 people—live on an officially recognized ethnic reserve between the Napo and Curaray rivers, an area covering more than one million acres in Amazonian Ecuador. Prior to their conflicts with oil companies in recent years, Waorani people were best known in Ecuador for their isolation and violent resistance to sustained contact without outsiders.⁵ Elders describe how, in previous times, they avoided contact with non-Waorani people, whom they call *kowori*, because they feared them to be violent cannibals. Waorani relations with *kowori* have since transformed in significant ways after the establishment of an Evangelical mission, decades of oil development, state schools, and sustained contact with other Ecuadorians. While in the period prior to mission settlement most Waorani lived in relatively isolated clusters of longhouses, today most live in the roughly forty semipermanent villages that spread across disparate parts of the reserve. One of the largest and most politically significant of these villages is Toñampari, one of the main sites of my fieldwork.

In Toñampari, one of the central concerns after the 2003 killings was the question of who the victims actually were. Waorani generally describe uncontacted people within their territory as Tagaeri—referring to the legendary group of Tagae, who fled into isolation many years ago when most Waorani came to live at the missionary settlements. They became famous in the region for their mobility and resistance to contact with Waorani villages, missionaries, oil workers, and other outsiders.⁶ Although “Tagaeri” is a general term for people described locally as *uncivilized* or *durani bai* (“like the ancient ones”), most Waorani are familiar with the specific story of Tagae and, in some cases, their kin relation to him or members of his following. While the Tagaeri have a prominent place in social memory, most Waorani say that Tagae himself was killed years ago and that few if any members of his original group survive today. Despite their reputation for hostility toward *kowori* and Waorani villages, my hosts identify the Tagaeri and their descendants unambiguously as Waorani people.

5. Their reputation for violence and resistance to contact with outsiders grew considerably in 1956 when Waorani killed five North American Evangelical missionaries.

6. See Cabodevilla (1999) for a detailed history of how the Tagaeri became isolated from other Waorani.

In the aftermath of the 2003 killings, many Waorani referred to the victims as Taromenani, a group they described as distinct but similar to the Tagaeri. They live in the central and eastern part of the Waorani reserve, in an area that was designated by Ecuadorian law in 1999 as the Tagaeri Untouchable Zone.⁷ Extending north from middle course of the Curaray River, the Untouchable Zone was intended to offer a degree of protection to the Tagaeri and other uncontacted groups whose lands have been encroached upon by oil development and illegal logging in recent years. While Toñampari and other Waorani villages near the headwaters of the Curaray River are located several days walk to the west of the Untouchable Zone, many Waorani to the north and east live in much closer proximity to this reserve within a reserve. The village of Tiguino, for example, is connected to the city of Coca by an old oil road (the “Via Auca”) that has become a major conduit for the colonization of Waorani lands by mestizos and the trade in hardwoods extracted illegally from the reserve. It was from this frontier village that the men involved in the 2003 massacre began their journey downriver to attack the Taromenani.

While ecological factors were a consideration in creating the Untouchable Zone, the reserve was established for the benefit of people in voluntary isolation who may in fact not be aware of its precise existence. Despite the official reserve, uncontacted indigenous groups continue to live in the path of extractive industries with few state controls. As with the Tagaeri in previous decades, who were repeatedly involved in violent clashes with outsiders and other Waorani, there were concerns well before 2003 about the Taromenani and their violent encounters with loggers, oil camps, and Waorani. In the year prior to the 2003 attack, my hosts described other encounters in which loggers and uncontacted people were killed.

But who exactly are these Taromenani people? In the weeks following the attack I heard dozens of explanations, many from Waorani who disagreed about whether or not the Taromenani victims were indeed Waorani people. Although some suggested that the Taromenani are the survivors of the original Tagaeri group, their actual identity appeared to be somewhat of a mystery. Some people insisted that they speak the Waorani language (*Wao-terero*), while others claimed that they do not and are from a completely different indigenous group. Several insisted that they are tall, have whitish skin “like gringos,” and come from far away in Peru to the east. Despite the disagreements and uncertainties, everyone attributed great strength and speed to these forest-dwelling people, much as they do to the Tagaeri and their ancestors.⁸

7. Ecuador’s Executive Decree 552 was signed by President Jamil Mahuad in 1999, and the reserve was later renamed the Tagaeri-Taromenani Untouchable Zone (*Zona Intangible Tagaeri-Taromenani*). The official boundaries of the Untouchable Zone were only finalized in 2007, in part as a result of the 2003 killings (Rival 2010: 6).

8. Rival (1996) also describes the mythical qualities Waorani attribute to the Taromenani, whether as contemporary neighbors or legendary people of the past. See Gow (1993) for further discussion of this theme in western Amazonia.



Lost people and intimate others

There is no denying that anthropologists working in Amazonia and elsewhere have at times been seduced by an image of indigenous people living in isolation from other societies, the reach of nation-states, or the effects of Western culture. Napoleon Chagnon's (1988) claim that his study of Yanomami warfare in the 1960s revealed a state of human nature uncorrupted by Western contact is a famous example of this tendency—one that has been widely refuted by other anthropologists (Albert 1989; Ferguson 1999). While anthropologists and historians have done much to counter this image, the idea that certain “lost tribes” live in a state of “primitive” isolation from outside influences remains a powerful popular media representation of indigenous people. Rarely does a year pass without a major news story about aerial sightings of an uncontacted Amazonian tribe or a dangerous encounter with people assumed to be living as if in the Stone Age.

While the myth of lost tribes presents indigenous populations as living in a “natural” state of isolation, the situation of specific uncontacted groups is invariably at least in part a result of political and economic processes that extend beyond the local (Kirsch 1997: 64). In many cases, as with the groups living in voluntary isolation within the Untouchable Zone, this isolation appears to be, above all, an active refusal to engage in unequal or undesirable relations with powerful outsiders. In this sense, they are indicative of a much wider historical process of intercultural relations in Amazonia. As Stuart Kirsch suggests, “The lost tribes of the Amazon are the product of centuries of colonial relations. Their discovery is made possible by virtue of their long history of retreat and resistance; their isolation is a social creation rather than a natural condition” (1997: 62). Even if much about uncontacted people living in the Waorani reserve remains a mystery, it is clear that the changing social, political, and economic landscape of Amazonian Ecuador contributed to their relative isolation, whether in the form of missionization, oil development, or the more general condition of frontier violence and displacement that indigenous Amazonian people have suffered for centuries. By ignoring the historical power relations from which uncontacted groups continue to emerge, the myth of lost tribes implicitly absolves Western society from responsibility for the often precarious situation of these groups (Lutz and Collins 1993: 214–15; Kirsch 1997: 59). Rather than reproducing the myth that uncontacted or “lost” tribes constitute a state of pristine nature, my aim is to illuminate how these transformative processes effect and become part of indigenous formulations of violence, alterity, and kinship.

In the contemporary world, the image of naturally isolated tribes is not merely an object of media fascination but also part of legal discussions of culture and rights on a global stage. In what Lucas Bessire (2012) describes as the contemporary politics of isolation, indigenous people living in voluntary isolation have come to be valued as the most “pure” form of multiculturalism. The politico-legal category of isolation, Bessire observes, “presumes that social relation itself is a line of exclusion cutting through the category of culture. It thus parses indigenous kinds of life into opposing regimes of authenticity based on a degree of associative relations, which are then set against one another and vertically ranked by politics” (2012: 470).

Isolation, construed as a natural state rather than a product of social relations, has become an important feature of indigenous rights campaigns. Whether in the

adoption of new national laws in Ecuador or in the UN Human Rights Council's Draft Guidelines on the Protection of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and in Initial Contact (2009), "non-relational life" has come to be seen as the ultimate expression of indigenous peoples' right to self-determination (Bessire 2012: 477). The paradox of this notion of isolation-as-right, Bessire notes, is that it "presupposes a legal subject that must remain outside the law itself" whereby "segregation is the only possible form of solidarity with isolated subjects" (2012: 477-80).

While this politics of isolation has deep roots in Western imaginings of indigenous peoples in places like Amazonia, Waorani understandings of uncontacted people suggest an alternative to our own insistence on social and ontological boundaries defined ultimately by segregation and unified collectivities. Rather than focusing on the age-old process of social "othering" by which indigenous Amazonian people have become the object of Western fascination, or the contemporary politics of indigenous identity in Amazonia, my interest is in how Waorani themselves imagine and engage in relations with their own others. The act of defining a certain person or group as "other" to oneself is not simply a statement about difference but also a boundary through which people posit and engage in relations of unity and closeness (Stasch 2009). As Stasch suggests, rather than assume other people in other places engage in these processes in ways that parallel the contemporary politics of isolation, we should be open to alternate ways of conceptualizing and organizing relations of alterity.

While anthropologists have challenged popular stereotypes about lost or uncontacted people, rarely do we stop to consider seriously what indigenous people like the Waorani have to say about their neighbors who live in voluntary isolation. This may be the result of our general reluctance to engage at all with the idea of uncontacted peoples after the self-conscious purging of the concept of isolated, primitive societies from anthropology.⁹ While anthropologists were surely right to shed this image, approaching the position of seemingly enigmatic groups like the Taromenani in terms of Amazonian formulations of alterity can open up new ways of thinking about how and why indigenous Amazonian people respond to key contemporary events in the ways they do.

The 2003 attack and its aftermath reveal the multiple ways that Waorani people conceptualize, cultivate, and in some contexts violently demand relations with their uncontacted neighbors. For many Waorani, the Taromenani are an object of social othering at the same time as they present, at least for some, an ideal source of potential relations. As Stasch observes in Melanesia, the very qualities of otherness are in some contexts a focus of social connection, such that social bonds are a synthesis of otherness and intimacy that "exist[s] through concrete channels of communicative contact and separateness" (2009: 16). In Waorani accounts of uncontacted people, however, this process of living separately and cultivating or imagining proximity involves very little in the way of communication. Whether in describing the Taromenani as long lost kin or taking revenge on them for previous

9. See Bessire (2012: 468) for a more comprehensive review of how so-called "uncontacted" or "primitive" societies have ceased to be a relevant object of anthropological study.



killings, the kind of alterity that Waorani people find in the Taromenani is one that diverges significantly from the paradigm of nonrelational life promoted in indigenous rights advocacy.

As my hosts lamented the deaths of people they described as their potential kin, it became clear that the 2003 killings contributed to a growing sense of closeness to the Taromenani. In a cultural context where people define themselves collectively as “prey” to violence (Rival 1999), the attacks were a catalyst for Waorani to imagine what they share in common with their uncontacted neighbors. For Waorani people being a victim of violence presents a contrast to the aggression associated with rival groups and *kowori* people. Laura Rival describes how, for Waorani people, killing creates otherness, both in terms of the killer’s anger transforming him from kin (*guirinani*) to nonkin (*warani*) and in precipitating future revenge killings (Rival 2002: 64). After the Taromenani attack, however, my hosts were more concerned with asserting their identification with the survivors based on a shared position as kin of victims rather than mounting a raid against the men they denounced for the killings.¹⁰

Waorani commentaries about Taromenani people after the attack allow for rethinking what has come to be known as the “moral economy of intimacy” in studies of Amazonian kinship and sociality (Viveiros de Castro 1996: 189). Ethnographies of this part of the world evoke numerous examples of how kinship is conceived as an effect of shared experience, where everyday conviviality forms bodies and makes transpersonal unities out of others.¹¹ In certain ways Amazonian concepts of consanguinity and affinity present a radical alternative to notions of biological relatedness in Western kinship ideologies. As consanguinity in Amazonia is often understood to be the result of human action or intention—rather than procreation—kinship is constituted more by memory than it is by genealogical descent, that is, “as a set of relations between living people which are actively produced in time” (Gow 1991: 288).¹² Waorani understandings of marriage, procreation, and the effects of living together evoke a sense of relatedness that is “made” through shared experience. As Rival notes, Waorani who live in the same longhouse become “of the same flesh”: “The physical reality of living together, that is, of continually feeding each other, eating the same food and sleeping together, develops into a common physicality, which is far more real than genealogical ties” (1998: 621).

10. It is important to recognize that Waorani assertions of victimhood are also evoked to legitimate future revenge killings. As Robarchek and Robarchek (1998, 2005) have noted, the notion of lost autonomy and victimhood are often the very basis of “rage” among the Waorani.

11. While we should be careful not to ignore certain aspects of relatedness that are in part determined by birth and descent (Lepré 2005) there is a noticeable emphasis on the processual or performative character of Amazonian kinship. See, for example, Gow (1991), Overing and Passes (2000), McCallum (2001), and Vilaça (2002).

12. Taylor (1993, 1996), Vilaça (2005), and Fausto and Heckenberger (2007) also contribute considerably to discussions of how memory is central to considerations of kinship and the body in Amazonia.

This emphasis on consubstantiality and conviviality as the basis of relatedness can be seen in Waorani *couvade* practices, in which a husband becomes “one flesh” with his wife and newborn by sharing specific dietary restrictions for an extended period before and after childbirth (Rival 1998: 622). A similar logic emerges when a household member falls ill—such as in cases of snakebite—when coresidents are expected to conform to taboos on eating most game meat. Waorani explain that failing to observe these restrictions collectively results in the wound growing more severe, bleeding profusely, or rotting (High 2006: 161). Whether it is through consuming the same things collectively or avoiding them, the notion that “the repeated and undifferentiated *action* of sharing . . . turns coresidents in a single, indistinct substance” (Rival: 1998: 621) has come to define the kinds of mutuality and well-being associated with the “moral economy of intimacy” in Amazonia.

In this way kinship—or more specifically consanguinity—is “made” out of an encompassing background of “potential affines” (Viveiros de Castro 2001). As a dominant relational principle in much of Amazonia, affinity is a generic or “given” potentiality often attributed to enemies and wide range of others who, as potential affines, constitute a source of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls “virtual sociality” (2001: 24). The distinction between affinity (as virtuality) and kinship (as actualization) can be seen in how Waorani men address their male *kowori* coworkers in oil camps by the term *menki* (“brother-in-law” or “cross-cousin”), while in actual marriages a Waorani man is understood to be an outsider who gradually comes to share the same substance as his affines by living with them and sharing dietary restrictions with his wife before and after the birth of their child (see Rival 1992, 1998).

Waorani concepts of consanguinity and affinity not only challenge Western assumptions about the biological basis of kinship but also illustrate the need to sidestep the traditional dichotomy between the “biological” and “social” (Carsten 2013: 249). My hosts’ descriptions of uncontacted people as their kin after the 2003 killings resonate with Sahlins’ approach to kinship as “a manifold of inter-subjective participations, founded on mutualities of being” (2011a: 12). Drawing on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean ethics* and a range of other theorists, Sahlins views kinship in terms of the “larger meanings of mutual belonging” by which people come to sense “the same entity in discrete subjects” (2011a: 10). Challenging the traditional focus on procreation in anthropological discussions of kinship, he notes that mutuality of being “encompasses and goes beyond the notions of common substance, however such consubstantiality is locally defined and established” (2011a: 14).

The comments I heard from Waorani people in response to the 2003 killings insisted on a certain mutuality of being that has little or no reference to shared substance or the conviviality often emphasized in studies of kinship and sociality in Amazonia. Rather than positing kinship only in terms of local commensality and physical closeness, they expressed a sense of social proximity and mutuality at a spatial distance. For many Waorani, the Taromenani are their kin not because they live together or even know each other in person, but because, to use Sahlins’ phrasing, they envision themselves as people who “live each other’s lives and die each other’s deaths” (2011a: 14). It was precisely the 2003 attack and the status of the Taromenani as victims of violence that contributed to this expression of mutuality between themselves and their uncontacted neighbors. While Sahlins describes



mutuality as a fundamentally human sentiment of belonging shared between people who are “co-present in each other” (2011a: 11), after the attack many Waorani expressed a similar sentiment in contemplating unknown others as their kin.

While Waorani understandings of uncontacted people demonstrate how mutual belonging can be imagined at a distance, the qualities of mutuality proposed by Sahlins, such as people seeing one another as “members of one another” or as being “joined and interdependent,” are not restricted to kinship (Bloch 2013). Nor is this mutuality always desirable to people who experience it. While Sahlins and other theorists of kinship tend to focus on the positive aspects of mutual belonging, Janet Carsten (2013: 247) reminds us that kinship also has a “coercive edge,” involving relations of differentiation, hierarchy, and abuse that people often experience as negative qualities of mutual being. This “darker” side of kinship suggests certain connections between kinship and magic (Leach 1961; Viveiros de Castro 2009), both of which can act or be imagined at a distance. Drawing on Edmund Leach’s (1961) suggestion that malicious relationships such as witchcraft can also be conceptualized as a form of mutuality of being, Giovanni da Col (2012: 13) describes witchcraft as a kind of “perverted commensality” or “uncontrolled relatedness” in which “the witch devours the vital force of neighbors and kin.” It appears then that mutuality of being is at once much more and less than the actualization of kinship.

A political economy of revenge

Both in the national media and in indigenous communities, there was much controversy and intrigue about what caused the unprecedented scale of violence in 2003. It has become increasingly clear, however, that indigenous cosmology and the changing face of economic development in Amazonia both had their part in the killings. The area around the village of Tiguino, where the killers assembled before the attack, has long since been a zone of frontier violence and tension between Waorani, oil companies, and colonists (Cabodevilla 2004b: 27). In the early 2000s, these tensions were exacerbated by an influx of illegal loggers who used the old oil road between Tiguino and the frontier city of Coca to extract timber from Waorani lands. This is the same road built in the 1960s to open the area up to oil development, which ultimately resulted in the loss of a significant part of Waorani ancestral lands to colonization, deforestation, and industrial pollution.¹³ By 2003 one of the men who led the raid was a local gatekeeper between the loggers and the village of Tiguino, receiving payment for allowing timber extraction downriver in the direction of the Untouchable Zone and the Yasuni National Park (Cabodevilla 2004a: 19–21).¹⁴ According to many Waorani, the loggers, who sought to eliminate uncontacted groups from an area they routinely

13. See Stoll (1982) and Kimerling (1996) for a more detailed historical and political commentary on the impact of the oil industry on Waorani communities in this area.

14. The Yasuni National Park, which covers nearly 10,000 square kilometers, is considered to be one of the richest areas of biodiversity in the world. Designated as a UNESCO biosphere reserve in 1989, it is also home to several Waorani communities and is a site of intensive oil production.

exploited for timber, provided rifles, ammunition, and payment to the killers in compensation for carrying out the attack. While it is difficult to establish whether or not logging interests were directly involved in the 2003 massacre, it is clear that past and present extractive economies have contributed in a major way to the tensions that persist in the area.

According to the accounts of my Waorani hosts after the attack, the external influences of money, guns, and frontier development in Amazonia were only part of the story behind the Taromenani massacre. Even as many Waorani lamented the killings, their accounts also addressed the logic that motivated the killers. They explained that the attack was carried out according to indigenous understandings of revenge, whereby the death of a kinsman should be avenged, even if decades after the initial killing. Lingering memories of absent kin evoke grief, anger, and in some cases retaliation against not only specific people but also a killer's entire household. Several Waorani explained that the 2003 killings were intended to avenge the death of Carlos Omene, a Waorani man who was killed by Tagaeri in 1993. Omene was speared on an excursion into the Untouchable Zone, where he and other men from Tiguino intended to return a young Tagaeri woman previously captured by Waorani.¹⁵ The fact that several of the men who carried out the 2003 killings were close kin of Omene indicates that the violence in 2003 was part of a series of confrontations that extends decades into the past. Memories of violence are called upon to justify and motivate further violence in addition to evoking a sense of collective victimhood. Miguel Angel Cabodevilla reports, for example, that prior to the attack Omene's widow tearfully recounted her husband's death at the hands of the Tagaeri, reminding the men in Tiguino that his death ten years before still had not been avenged (2004a: 23).

Much debate remains about several details of the actual attack, especially as this event has rapidly become part of both Waorani oral history and media intrigue in Ecuador. What we do know is that none of the killers were arrested or prosecuted by the Ecuadorian authorities. One question raised by Waorani and outside commentators alike is the extent to which guns were used in the attack. In their interviews soon after the massacre, some of the killers insisted that they only fired their guns initially to frighten the Taromenani upon entering the dark longhouse, which they set ablaze before chasing and spearing their victims outside.¹⁶ While it is difficult to confirm or deny many of the details reported by the killers and other Waorani, it appears that guns, spears, and machetes were used extensively. Regardless of these details, the dramatic economic changes of recent decades are only part of story of how and why the Taromenani massacre occurred.

Kin as victims

Given the enthusiastic use of radio communication between even the most remote Waorani villages, news of Taromenani killings quickly became a heated topic of conversation and speculation. From the beginning there was a great deal of debate

15. See Cabodevilla (2004a: 137-38) for a more extensive history of the conflicts between Waorani from Tiguino and the Tagaeri.

16. Cabodevilla (2004a: 38-39) provides an account of how some of the men involved described the attack.



surrounding the motives of the killers and the actual identity of the victim group. After hearing people in Toñampari lament and criticize past killings in their oral histories, I was not completely surprised to hear them denounce the May 2003 attack. What did surprise me was how upset and concerned they were about the fate of a reportedly hostile group living far away and in isolation from their own homes and lives. Their accounts illustrate how, for many Waorani, the killings led to a sense of shared experience with the victim group. Instead of attempting to elucidate a complete or objectively true account of what happened, I am concerned here with the particular discourses that emerged in the aftermath of the attack and what they reveal about Waorani perspectives on intergroup violence.

Although nobody in the villages where I carried out long-term fieldwork participated in the killings, this event and the fate of the victims loomed large in the following months. Some people were concerned that the surviving Taromenani would soon take revenge on Waorani villages. However, the most pressing concern was the possibility that some of the deceased may have been distant kin. Despite the debate about who the victims were, some Waorani speculated about cousins and other relatives who may have been living among the Taromenani. They explained that, although the Tagaeri fled into voluntary isolation from Waorani settlements many years ago, some members could still be alive, having been incorporated into the mysterious Taromenani after years of intergroup violence. Some even spoke of local elders weeping over the massacre of specific Tagaeri relatives. They described the Taromenani as innocent victims who, despite their reputation for hostility and isolation, were actually hoping to settle among Waorani neighbors like themselves. Much like the stories Waorani tell about their ancestors being killed, they positioned the Taromenani as targets of unjustified violence.

People in Toñampari generally described the killings in morally charged terms, referring to them as *ononki* (unjustified, mistaken) and the killers themselves as *wene* (bad, evil). They lamented that most of the victims were women and children, which for local people added to the deplorable nature of the violence.¹⁷ Many adults objected to the 2003 massacre in much the same way that they talk about killings that occurred in the distant past. Despite the different versions and details of the attack that were circulating at the time, most people could list most or all of the men who participated.¹⁸ Alongside accounts of how loggers supported the attack and descriptions of the specific methods used in the attack, some told of the dialogue between the killers and their victims and stories of children being abducted from the scene. Nearly all of the accounts that I collected in the months following the attack, however, deeply sympathized with the plight of the Taromenani.

17. It was reported that the bodies of twelve victims were found at the scene (Cabodevilla 2004a: 29). It is difficult to guess the precise number of people killed or injured in the attack, as some of those who escaped may have died later as a result of their injuries.

18. Some people were more eager to talk to me about the attack than others. Given the small scale of Waorani society, some were close relatives of the men who carried out the attack, which probably influenced whether or not and how they spoke to me about it.

I heard one of these accounts from Wakewe,¹⁹ a man who described the attack to me a few days after it happened. He explained how his uncle, a well-known elder, was one of the men who led the raid. According to Wakewe, after a journey by canoe downriver followed by a long trek through the forest, his uncle was the one who began shooting upon entering the dark interior of the Taromenani longhouse. While some of the unsuspecting victims managed to escape from the house, others pleaded with the attackers not to kill them, insisting that they wanted to live together with Waorani people in Tiguino. Since other people had told me that the Taromenani did not speak the Waorani language, I asked Wakewe about how the victims communicated with their killers. He assured me that at least some of them do speak *Wao-terero*, albeit in a different way, and that during the attack these individuals communicated a desire to end their isolation. This desire for closer relations with Waorani neighbors appeared to be the very basis of Wakewe's frustration with his uncle and the other killers. He explained, in much the same way that Waorani elders describe their own history of missionary settlement, that the Taromenani wanted to become "civilized." He also described how one of the men who participated in the attack tried to prevent the others from firing their guns on the Taromenani. Wakewe, who has many relatives who live near the Tagaeri Untouchable Zone, predicted that the survivors would go into hiding before eventually seeking revenge by attacking Waorani villages.

Wakewe was not alone in seeing the attack as a missed opportunity to bring the Taromenani into peaceful contact with Waorani villages. Kowe, another elder, expressed a similar concern about possible revenge killings. As he lamented the attack, he referred to his own specific kinship links with the Tagaeri at the point when Tagae and his followers became isolated from other Waorani decades ago. Kowe explained that Tagae himself was his cousin and listed the names of other Waorani who may have living relatives among the Taromenani. Despite the dangers associated with these uncontacted people, Kowe spoke of them with respect and admiration. He described them as physically superior to what he called "civilized" Waorani, emphasizing their strength, speed, and stamina in moving through the forest and their ability to throw spears at amazing lengths. What stood out most strongly in my discussions with Kowe after the attack was his keen interest in establishing social ties with the isolated group. He even spoke of his desire to travel personally to the Untouchable Zone with other elders to attempt to bring them into the realm of "civilization."

Both of these men not only denounced the attack but also raised the possibility of (re)establishing social ties with the uncontacted group. For Wakewe, this was on the basis that the Taromenani actually wanted to live among "civilized" people like himself. Kowe too expressed a desire to incorporate the Taromenani into his own social world and even asserted his kinship relations to members of the Tagaeri who may or may not still be alive. Whereas the men who participated in the attack apparently intended to eliminate as many Taromenani as possible, most of my Waorani hosts were more interested in them as a source of past or future relations.

This emphasis on expanding the possibilities for intergroup sociality and engaging in relations with dangerous or unknown outsiders is a common theme of

19. All of the Waorani names I use in this article are pseudonyms.



discussion in Waorani communities that often emerges in accounts of missionary settlement in the 1960s. Many Waorani envision themselves today living in a period of growth and expansion in terms of territory, population, and the making of social ties beyond local households and villages, despite the central place of violence that persists in social memory across genders and generations. Recognizing the 2003 attack as a potential threat to this period of relative peace, they denounced what they saw as the dangerous consequences of the massacre. Above all, they remembered their social links with the Tagaeri much more after the attack than they had before.

These responses to the Taromenani attack point to how violence creates new ways of conceptualizing relations and relatedness between Waorani and their many others. Such an emphasis on social closeness to victims and their kin is also extended to *kowori* people who were killed in the past. For example, the two principal North American missionaries who established the Evangelical mission settlement among the Waorani in the 1960s were the widow and sister of a missionary killed by Waorani in 1956. It appears likely that Waorani people accepted the missionaries in part because they understood them to be, like themselves, the close kin of victims previously killed by Waorani (High 2009b). Even as any interpretation of this historical encounter is necessarily conjectural, elders today remember the early missionaries in much the same way that they define themselves: as kin of victims.

Waorani people describe in a similar light some of the Catholic missionaries who have worked in the eastern part of the Waorani territory since around 1965. In 1987 the Spanish priest Alejandro Labaka and a nun (Ines Arango) who accompanied him were killed in an attempt to make contact with a Tagaeri group. They were speared soon after they were dropped by helicopter near an isolated longhouse in what is today the Untouchable Zone. At the time Labaka was hoping to negotiate a truce between uncontacted groups and oil companies after the expansion of oil exploration on Waorani lands had already led to violent confrontations between Tagaeri and oil workers. Labaka's death has become part of Waorani lore, in which the priest is presented as an archetypical victim of violence. Fondly remembered by many Waorani today, Labaka is described in much the same way as kinsmen killed by enemies in past spear-killing raids.

While Labaka, like other missionaries, preached against violence, it appears that some Waorani were intent on avenging his death at the hands of an uncontacted group more than fifteen years after he was killed. His status as kin to many Waorani appears to have had at least some bearing on the attack on the 2003 killings. One of the killers who arrived at the Catholic mission in the town of Coca soon after the attack announced that he and his group had avenged the death of both Carlos Omene and Labaka (Cabodevilla 2004c: 62). Without exaggerating the influence Labaka's death had in the subsequent Taromenani massacre, examples like these illustrate how relations with missionaries and other intimate *kowori* are interwoven with Waorani revenge killings as much as they are with kinship. They suggest that it is not only the external political and economic forces of oil development and illegal logging that produce local forms of violence but also intercultural relations that have become part of the most intimate aspects of Waorani memory and experience.

Cultivating contact

My hosts' frequent reiteration of the Taromenani as a source of past or potential relations, whether in remembering kin in the past or desiring contact with them in the future, presents a contrast to Western ideas about "lost" or uncontacted people. For many Waorani, isolation is as much about questions of kinship as it is about politics. Just as they insist on the social closeness they see in uncontacted people, outsiders tend to define and value these groups essentially in terms of segregation and the assumed cultural "purity" that isolation confers upon them in Western imagination. And yet, Waorani claims to mutuality with the Taromenani do not necessarily entail a sense of shared substance or even physical presence. As Sahlins notes in his proposal for a sociocentric perspective on kinship,

"being" in a kinship sense denies the necessary independence of the entities so related, as well as the necessary substantiality and physicality of the relationship. . . . If kinsmen are members of one another, then in the manner and to the extent that they are so, experience is diffused among them. Not in the sense of direct sensation . . . but at the level of meaning: of what it is that happens, which is the human and discursive mode of experience, and as such capable of communicating the appropriate feelings and consequences to others. More or less solidary in their being, kinsmen accordingly know each other's doings and sufferings as their own. (2011b: 227-31)

I do not know if the Taromenani share this sense of kinship with their Waorani neighbors in the way some of my hosts claim, but this is beside the point. It is clear, however, that many Waorani embraced a certain sense of mutuality with uncontacted people as they came to see their "doings and sufferings as their own." Despite the physical distance that separates them, many Waorani came to see the Taromenani as victims of violence, or more specifically, people who died their own deaths and today live their own lives as kin of victims. Both in this vision of mutual victimhood and in the killers' logic of revenge, death can be seen to rearrange relations among the living in important ways (Lambek 2011). This rearrangement is intense and potentially far-reaching in cases of violent death, which has been described in Amazonia to both produce and dissolve relations.²⁰

While Waorani ideas about uncontacted people appear to sit well with Sahlins' project of decoupling kinship from questions of biology, substance, and procreation, they also reveal something of the temporal dimensions of mutuality. Carsten, noting that Sahlins' focus on mutuality of being prioritizes the positive qualities of kinship over its negative and coercive qualities, describes how mutual belonging also "accumulates or dissolves over time" (2013: 247). This temporality refers not just to how people and relations are part of a remembered past, but also, as we see with Waorani comments on the Taromenani, how they imagine potential kinship futures that "remain unknowable" (Carsten 2013: 248). While it remains to be seen whether my hosts will someday actualize the kinship they see in uncontacted people, their status as victims of violence appears to present an opening to a potential future. As Maurice Bloch reminds us, drawing on Rita Astuti (2009), the

20. See, for example, Taylor (1993), Whitehead (2002) and Whitehead and Wright (2004). See also Harrison (1993) for an example from Melanesia.



explicit statements people make about kinship are best understood “not as ontological proposals for what is, but rather as declarations of what should be” (Bloch 2013: 255).

Even as Waorani have come to understand the Taromenani in terms of their own concepts of kinship, alterity, and revenge, the politics of isolation described by Bessire (2012), like the politics of indigeneity more generally, has important implications for Amazonian peoples regardless of their degree of integration within national societies. Like Waorani youth who wield spears at frontier folklore festivals or Kayapo elders who draw international media attention from their lip-plugs and colorful body decoration at protests in Brazil, isolation is a potent marker of cultural authenticity in the modern world. In some cases indigenous people draw effectively on this trope in their engagements with nonindigenous people. Those who fail to live up to these expectations of autonomy and authenticity risk being accused of “losing their culture” and, as a result, having their rights claims ignored in national and global political arenas (Conklin 1997).

At the same time, indigenous Amazonian perspectives on uncontacted people tend to be more complex than the Western fantasy of “lost tribes.” Whereas most outsiders view “contact” with isolated groups as necessarily degrading a *pure* or *natural* state of being, many Waorani view the isolation of the Taromenani as a tragic and dangerous situation that should be overcome. Their stories about past spear-killings describe a time when Waorani groups lived in relative isolation in distant parts of the forest, a time when confusion and fear made visits and marriage alliances between families extremely difficult. In these stories, it is not the past in general that elders lament but more specifically the sense of fear, loss, and social isolation associated with past revenge killings. While a strongly egalitarian ethos leaves considerable scope for individual and household autonomy (Rival 1996; High 2007), there is also a sense that being alone for too long can be dangerous and should generally be avoided. The association between isolation and potential violence can be seen in how Waorani people express, on the one hand, the importance of living in villages, while on the other insist on their ability to abandon villages in times of conflict. In a similar way, they embrace the Taromenani as exemplars of Waorani autonomy and strength, while at the same time recognize their isolation as a dangerous condition.

It was this concern about the dangers of isolation that my hosts in Toñampari appeared to be voicing after the attack when they identified the Taromenani as potential kin and called for their civilization and incorporation into Waorani communities. For Waorani who live much closer to the Untouchable Zone, this at least partial identification with the Taromenani can be seen as both an act of self-protection and of cultivating contact. Since the attack in 2003, some Waorani have built traditional longhouses (*durani onko*) for the first time in decades so that Taromenani in the area might recognize them as Waorani and not outsiders. The majority of Waorani houses today are similar to those throughout much of rural Amazonian Ecuador, consisting of a basic square construction of machined hardwood planks raised above the ground, with a thatch or corrugated sheet metal roof. A traditional longhouse, in contrast, can be distinguished clearly by its long, bending roofline that extends unbroken from the ground up to the apex of an A-frame structure, which is almost entirely covered with interwoven palm leaves on all sides. These longhouses, which were the mainstay of large extended families

prior to the mission, are very similar in appearance to those of the Taromenani discovered at the site of the 2003 massacre and to those seen in aerial photographs of groups living in the Untouchable Zone.

While uncontacted people are widely thought to be hostile to contact with outsiders, including Waorani, some of my hosts describe how the Taromenani are able to distinguish between Waorani houses and those of nonindigenous people. One young man explained that his relatives replaced their previous *kowori*-style house with a traditional longhouse to deter potential attacks by Taromenani. In his view, the widespread use of Western construction materials and clothing risk making Waorani indistinguishable in appearance from *kowori*, leading Taromenani to think he and his neighbors are in fact *kowori*. A similar concern about misrecognition emerged in discussions of hunting, whereby some men began hunting without clothes so that the Taromenani who see them in the forest would not mistake them for *kowori* colonists or loggers. In recent years Waorani have reported fleeting encounters with uncontacted people while hunting or traveling through remote parts of the reserve. Some of them describe Taromenani visiting Waorani gardens to gather food or even seeking shelter in abandoned houses near a village. They also describe peaceful encounters prior to the 2003 attack, in which Taromenani approached Waorani elders in remote areas and explained their tentative desire to live among the Waorani. Regardless of what actually happened in these encounters, many Waorani emphasize the need to prevent revenge attacks and to make peaceful contact with the Taromenani possible.

Since the 2003 killings, the Taromenani have become an object not only of fear, but also of respect and fascination for many Waorani, particularly young people. One young man described to me how he wished to marry a Taromenani woman and join her group to live, as he described, “like the ancestors” (*durani bai*). While in certain intercultural contexts, Waorani reproduce colonial fantasies about “wild” Amazonian warriors (High 2010), their response to the 2003 killings and their comments on the Taromenani also challenge popular ideas of what it means to be uncontacted. For many Waorani, these are not “naturally” isolated people, but instead long-lost relatives, potential spouses, and a powerful symbol of ancestral power, autonomy, and violence in the face of colonization.

In Amazonia and elsewhere, anthropologists have described how and why indigenous people have sought to establish contact with white people and other outsiders at specific historical moments. In some cases, such as that of the Wari described by Aparecida Vilaça (2010) in Brazil, these encounters presented opportunities to make or renew relations within indigenous societies. Despite the proliferation of writing on alterity among anthropologists, few consider indigenous perspectives on encounters with so-called uncontacted people.²¹ One exception is Fred Myers’ (1988) description of how, in the context of a headline story about the discovery of a lost tribe in Australia in 1984, his aboriginal Pintupi interlocutors insisted that their newly contacted neighbors in the Western Desert were in fact “relatives” who were tragically “left behind” in previous times (614). Like my Waorani hosts today, they fundamentally challenged the nonrelational status often

21. One exception is Howard’s (2002) writing on the expeditions of Waiwai people in search of uncontacted “tribes” in northern Amazonia.



attributed to so-called uncontacted people. But more importantly, in both of these cases indigenous people can be seen to draw on such encounters to insist on their own cultural autonomy. For the Pintupi, the ability to define the event of “contact” on their own terms constituted a political stance against the intervention of white people and the government. At the same time, a global politics of isolation that presumes segregation to be the will of “isolated subjects” can render indigenous leaders “inaudible in the name of self-determination” when they seek interventions that would challenge segregation (Bessire 2012: 480–81).

After the 2003 killings, Waorani political leaders drew on a combination of this politics of isolation and popular media representations of tribal violence to deter state intervention. As the massacre came to be defined as an “indigenous issue,” the national media wasted little time in presenting it as the latest outbreak of Waorani violence, reminding the wider public of missionaries and oil workers killed by Waorani since the 1940s. Stories that circulated about the attackers using traditional spears rather than guns, and images of a severed head taken from a victim, only reaffirmed the “primitive” nature of the attack. So excited were journalists about the prospect of documenting apparently genuine tribal violence that some of the killers were offered trips to the Ecuadorian coast for interviewing and sight-seeing (Cabodevilla 2004c: 62). Rather than being prosecuted for acts of murder, which some of the killers openly admitted to, they became an emblem of indigenous autonomy and exotic savagery, the “wild” *auca* warriors of colonial imagination (Salomon 1981; Taussig 1987; Whitten 1988). What appeared to be ignored in this articulation of the politics of isolation were the external causes of violence and isolation in Amazonia. Instead, the taking of a Taromenani head and the killers’ insistence that they used only spears asserted indigenous autonomy and appealed to popular imagery of indigenous violence.

The repercussions of this situation continue to be felt up to the present day in Waorani communities. As many predicted after the 2003 killings, the tensions between Taromenani and some Waorani have led to further violence. In March 2013, an elderly Waorani couple were attacked and killed in their home by an uncontacted group with whom they reportedly communicated on several occasions before the incident. It is widely reported that the couple were speared after failing to provide sufficient pots, machetes, and other goods demanded of them in previous encounters.²² Only weeks later, several Waorani from the surrounding area, heavily armed with guns, launched a revenge attack in which as many as thirty members of the uncontacted group were killed. Even as two young girls were abducted from the scene and continue to be held captive in a Waorani community, to my knowledge there has been little significant state intervention on behalf of the captives or their surviving relatives.²³ The situation of these girls is emblematic of

22. Other accounts suggest that the killings may have been an act of retaliation for the poisoning of several members of the uncontacted group who died after poisoned food was dropped by a helicopter. See Cabodevilla (2013) for a more extensive description and discussion of the most recent attacks.

23. However, in November 2013 Ecuadorian state authorities intervened to detain six of the accused killers and took custody of one of the captive girls. At present there is much debate in Ecuador about whether the recent massacre should be understood as a case of “indigenous justice” or genocide.

the precarious social place of uncontacted groups like the Taromenani in Ecuador, caught as they are between increasingly lethal frontier violence and the wider politics of isolation.

The recent killings have led to renewed tensions between Waorani families and communities, perhaps even more so than in the 2003 attack. The repeated statements of Waorani political leaders against state intervention mask what has become a potentially dangerous division between Waorani with regard to so-called uncontacted people. For some, the fact that the captive girls speak a recognizable form of the Waorani language, alongside their status as kin of victims, confirms their identity as long-lost kin. For others, they are members of an enemy group they seek to eliminate in avenging their own deceased kin. But even for the Waorani killers, vengeance is not the only kind of relationship at stake with people living in voluntary isolation. As in Waorani accounts of spear-killings in the distant past and more recent dealings with *kowori*, it appears that the recent killings and abductions were carried out with a view to incorporating certain “enemies” into their homes and everyday lives. This is to say that these uncontacted people may also be potential affines who, over time, may become familiar in the actualization of kinship.

Conclusion

Whether we consider the logic of revenge that appears to have motivated the killers or Waorani concerns about losing potential kin, the Taromenani massacre and subsequent revenge killings illustrate how violence at once creates and transcends boundaries between self and other, kin and enemy. A number of anthropologists have described how relations of enmity and revenge are an integral part of Amazonian symbolic economies, where personhood and the reproduction of society are often closely tied to ideas about killing and predation.²⁴ Yet Waorani reactions to the recent killings also reveal how indigenous understandings of violence are closely related to wider political and economic processes that extend beyond relations within and between indigenous societies. However, rather than explaining violence as simply an effect of externally-driven power relations, whether colonial history or current development agendas in Amazonia, I have focused on how Waorani people make sense of these translocal processes according to their own concepts of how relations are constituted.

Their interpretations of the 2003 Taromenani attack point to how the revitalization of so-called “tribal” violence in Amazonia cannot be simply explained as the result of either external forces or a preexisting *traditional* cosmological order. Rather than affirming, as a Western politics of isolation would have it, an artificial analytical divide between “traditional” forms of violence and “modern” processes, I suggest that these two seemingly distinct levels of analysis cannot in fact be separated. As Stasch (2009) argues, one of the key tasks of anthropology is not simply to examine how “people’s social lives are structured by non-local institutions and cultural influences,” but to study otherness “as an internal feature of local social relations and local social practices” (2009: 9). In this way, missionaries, oil companies,

24. A few examples include Viveiros de Castro (1992), Taylor (1993, 2000), Fausto (2001, 2007), Vilaça (1993, 2010), and Rival (2002).



loggers, and anthropologists all—as others—emerge as part of a Waorani lived world, whether as dangerous enemies or as kin. After the transformations of recent decades, it should not be completely surprising that missionaries and Taromenani have become part of indigenous conceptualizations of this changing social world. For many Waorani certain *kowori* appear, like the Taromenani, not just dangerous but also familiar and close to themselves.

In describing how violent practices acquire specific cultural meanings within indigenous formulations of alterity, I have attempted to illuminate how people comprehend and challenge the dynamics of intergroup relations. One of the major obstacles missionaries faced in their attempts to make peaceful contact in the 1950s was that the Waorani feared *kowori* outsiders to be cannibals bent on devouring them. As most Waorani today are confident that this is not the case, the notion that real or potential kin are victims of violence has been extended to include those *kowori* with whom they appear to share this mutual position. Both the mysterious Taromenani and particular missionaries, who at one point were identified as dangerous others, have come to be seen as socially proximate to Waorani people, as people with whom they share a certain sense of mutuality. The act of killing an enemy, perhaps the ultimate act of crossing sociocosmological boundaries, produces new kinds of people and new relations. For Waorani people, however, it is being a victim that distinguishes internal sociality in contrast to the violence of others, even if people as close as kin are always at risk of becoming others through their grief and anger.

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Perdus et trouvés. Contester l’isolement et cultiver le contact en Amazonie équatorienne

Résumé : En mai 2003, un groupe d’hommes waorani d’Amazonie équatorienne a mené une attaque contre leurs voisins Taromenani « non contactées », résultant en un massacre qui a alimenté les débats actuels sur les droits des peuples autochtones vivant dans « l’isolement volontaire ». Dans cet article, je considère comment la compréhension waorani de l’attaque relève de formulations autochtones de l’altérité qui contestent ce que Lucas Bessire (2012) a décrit comme des politiques de l’isolement contemporaines. Je m’appuie sur les récentes discussions de la parenté comme forme d’appartenance mutuelle qui s’étend au-delà de la substance commune (Sahlins 2013), et examine comment, à la suite des massacres, beaucoup de Waorani en sont venus à considérer ceux dont ils sont spatialement distant comme des parents dont ils auraient été séparés dans le passé. Désormais perçus par les Waorani comme parents des victimes, les Taromenani sont devenus à la fois une source de relations souhaitées et une image puissante de la force indigène et de l’autonomie dans un contexte de transformation sociale et économique.



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