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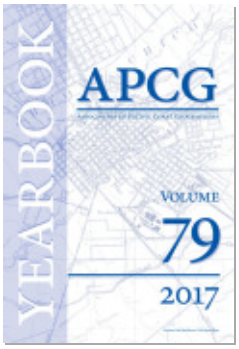

Elisa Bignante*

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Being Amerindian Today: Livelihoods, Technology, and Dynamic Indigenous Knowledges

Elisa Bignante*
University of Torino, Italy

It is well known in human geography that Indigenous knowledges are often too simplistically associated with "tradition," with the risk of crystallizing alleged "traditional identities" without taking into account their dynamic nature and the historical, socioeconomic, and political processes in which these develop (Bebbington 1993; Jackson and Warren 2005). Indigenous

Figure 1.—Katoonarib, South Rupununi, Guyana. A woman roasting cassava. The Guiana Shield region of South America is largely inhabited by thriving Indigenous communities, whose knowledge and skills are indispensable for effective conservation of the region and are a great asset to world culture.

**Photography by Andrea Borgarello, unless otherwise noted.*

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knowledges have been in constant and close contact (and contrast) with Western culture and Western capitalism since at least the fifteenth century.

Figure 2.—Wowetta, North Rupununi, Guyana. Along the centuries, and through the action of missionaries, Christian religion has spread among the Indigenous communities of the Amazon forest.

Technological change and new products and ideas have long spread within Indigenous communities (Agrawal 1995), as part of a process of adaptation that is not necessarily the result of a hegemonic tendency toward modernity, globalization, and the loss of cultural identity (Briggs 2005; Belton 2010). Nevertheless, we are so used to conceptualizing the Indigenous as "traditional" that the presence of technology in Indigenous people's lives somehow looks "out of place": instead, ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) are an integral part of Indigenous communities' practices, as the pictures will show.

This visual essay explores the diffusion of technologies and new commodities within the Indigenous communities living in the Amazon forest of Guyana, South America: the Makushi people who inhabit the northern area of the Rupununi river region, and the Wapishana people who live in the southern area.

Figure 3.—Wowetta, North Rupununi, Guyana. Cars allow a faster connection between villages. In the picture a cow has just been killed and is about to be transported to other villages in order to be sold.

Figure 4.—The Rupununi River, North Rupununi, Guyana. The Guiana Shield contains ten to fifteen percent of the world's freshwater reserves and is home to an extremely rich diversity of plants and animals, most of which are unique to this region. The forests are home to more than a thousand species of trees.

It focuses, in particular, on the challenges and opportunities ICTs, new commodities, and technologies bring to Indigenous' everyday practices and on the new, evolving knowledges they contribute toward shaping.

Figure 5.—A house in Annai, North Rupununi, Guyana. New building materials, new vehicles, and new imported products and technologies are rapidly diffusing within Amerindian communities.

Pictures were shot during January 2014 by photographer Andrea Borgarello. Working with these Amerindian communities of the Rupununi was part of the European Union-funded project COBRA (Community Owned Best practice for sustainable Resource Adaptive management in the Guiana Shield, South America). COBRA aimed to understand the social, ecological, and cultural impacts of global environmental policies on the Guiana Shield region of South America—a region with the highest percentage of forest cover and lowest rate of deforestation on the planet—from the perspective of its inhabitants (Bignante et al. 2016; Mistry et al. 2016, 2015, 2014; Tschirhart et al. 2016; Berardi et al. 2015).

In the period 2011 to 2015, COBRA supported Indigenous communities to make recommendations, based on their own understanding and observations, to be used to facilitate the establishment of strong policies

Figure 6.—Katoonarib, South Guyana. The economic transformation of the Guiana Shield based on the conversion and degradation of its natural ecosystem is gaining momentum. Yet, there are also many examples of the sustainable exploitation of the region's natural resources alongside the protection of its biological and cultural diversity. For instance, the agricultural system of the Guiana Shield's Indigenous communities is based on rotational forest farming which allows forest regrowth. In the picture a portion of the forest is burned in order to be grown in agriculture.

in support of community-owned solutions for sustainable development in the Guiana Shield.

COBRA worked on increasing confidence in ten communities of the Guiana Shield by discussing the challenges facing the communities, identifying their own local solutions to these challenges, recording these solutions using participatory video and photography, sharing the solutions with other communities, and implementing emerging best practices of sustainability within these communities (for more information: http://www.projectcobra.org and http://www.cobracollective.org).

Project COBRA allowed us to explore the challenges and opportunities emerging from the incorporation of technologies within Amerindian local practices. New mediums of transport (bicycles, motorcycles, cars, lorries), new mediums of communication (radio, television, computers, Internet), new material for homes, new food, new music, new water facilities, solar

Figure 7.—North Rupununi, Guyana. The Guiana Shield region of South America is part of the world's largest contiguous block of tropical forest, ranging from dry evergreen and seasonal forests to montane and lowland evergreen rainforests. Several Indigenous communities live in Savannah areas at the margin of the forest.

Figure 8.—North Rupununi, Guyana. Kids playing at sunset.

Figure 9.—Map of the Guiana Shield Region. Project COBRA worked with ten communities across Guyana, French Guiana, Suriname, Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela.

Figure 10.—A grocery store in Annai, North Rupununi, Guyana, which shows the presence of a wide range of imported products.

panels: all these show how Amerindian communities are adapting to a changing world, by adopting non-Indigenous tools.

Grocery stores sell a variety of items, which are becoming part of the daily lives of Amerindians: we find them in greater quantity in higher-income households, but they are increasingly present in lower-income households as well.

Figure 11.—A woman sitting in her living room in Annai, North Rupununi. An increasing number of households are equipped with technological items.

The economic transformation is also changing building techniques: brick walls and tin-plate roofs are progressively substituting earthen walls and palm-leaf-thatched roofs.

Motorbikes are commonly used for transportation, being more appropriate for the roads' rough conditions than cars (and less expensive) but faster than walking or horseback, and electric chainsaws are increasingly used for logging.

Figure 12.—The interior of a house in Annai, North Rupununi.

Figure 13.—The interior of a house in Katoonarib, South Rupununi, Guyana.

Figure 14.—The exterior of a thatched roof house in Katoonarib, South Rupununi, with a satellite disk in the front yard.

Figure 15.—Annai, North Rupununi. Houses are increasingly built using imported materials.

Figure 16.—Katoonarib, South Rupununi. An old couple reaching a community meeting by motorbike.

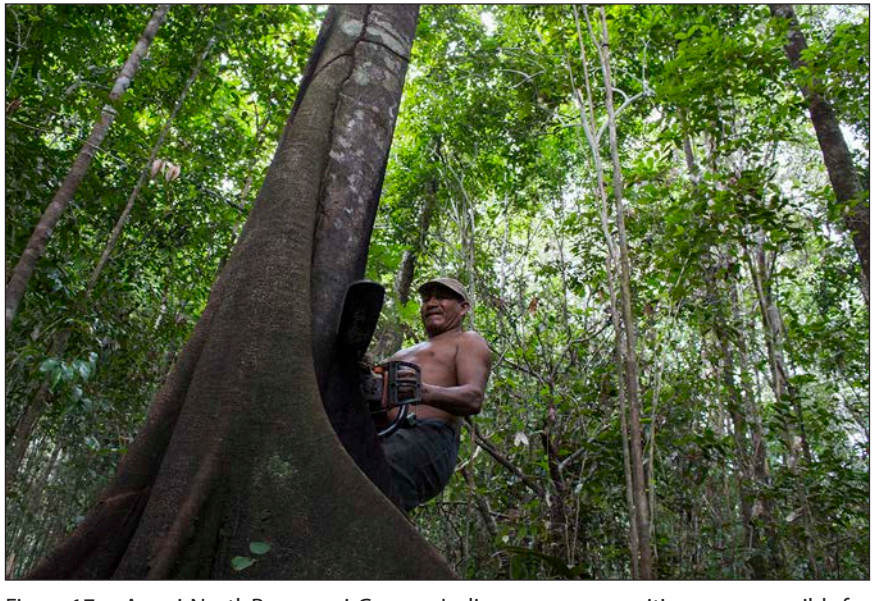

Figure 17.—Annai, North Rupununi, Guyana. Indigenous communities are responsible for the conservation of the forest. The community council decides how much logging to do.

If, on the one hand, these changes are challenging (for example, waste disposal of these products is harder to manage), at the same time technology has helped reinforce some local practices, particularly in agriculture. Manual processing of cassava (at the basis of the Amerindian diet), for example, is a long, complicated, and strenuous process that the introduction of electric engines to grate cassava has simplified, allowing Amerindians to meet more easily the family needs.

Figure 18.—Katoonarib, South Rupununi, Guyana. Petrol engines are increasingly used to process cassava.

Similarly, new processing tools have allowed peanut farmers (peanuts are one of the main crops grown in the savannah areas of the North Rupununi to earn money) to join in the Aranaputa Processors Friendly Society for the production and commercialization of peanut butter and other peanut products, giving steady jobs to more than fifty women.

Figure 19.—Katoonarib, South Rupununi, Guyana. Cassava is grated using a petrol engine.

Figure 20.—Aranaputa, North Rupununi, Guyana. Entrance of the Aranaputa Processors Friendly Society.

Figure 21.—Aranaputa Processors Friendly Society, North Rupununi, Guyana. A woman making peanut cookies.

The introduction of electric chainsaws and other imported woodworking tools hasn't increased logging within the two communities (the community council decides how much logging to do, and the Rupununi communities have been very careful in granting permits); instead it has allowed community-based logging companies to operate more efficiently and make profits in the interest of the community.

Most interestingly, the process that had probably the strongest impact on maintaining and dynamically reinforcing the Rupununi communities' culture and local practices has been, counterintuitively, the progressive diffusion of ICTs. By knowing and using ICTs, communities say they can keep up to speed and interact with the global world as well as improve and support their day-to-day life. ICTs helped to keep ties between households spread in the forest and within distant communities, and to record and share local practices within the community and with other communities. One example is the community radio, Radio Paiwomak, which has become a strategic tool to connect the different villages in the North Rupununi region—even the most remote ones—keeping them informed about local, national and

Figure 22.—North Rupununi, Guyana. In the picture, four purpleheart timber trees are cut in order to build a seating area for the community football field.

Figure 23.—Bina Hill, North Rupununi. The entrance to Radio Paiwomak head office.

international news, and promoting their culture through broadcasting in local Indigenous language, culture shows, or storytelling shows.

The radio also communicates local news, such as meetings, sports events, professional trips taken by local leaders, apprising people on different topics (health, farming, local festivities, etc.) and sharing local knowledge, e.g. sharing tips to control certain diseases affecting crops.

Figure 24.—Bina Hill, North Rupununi, Guyana. Radio Paiwomak, a radio presenter during a broadcast.

ICTs also made it possible to strengthen the internal debate within the communities, favoring the reappropriation of different institutions and local practices. This was achieved using PC, tablets, cameras/video cameras, and mobile phones to access information, and to process and weave it with local practices.

The production of videos and photos and their diffusion via the Internet platforms, in particular, has provided an opportunity for different communities to record their knowledges and skills (knowledge on medical plants, farming practices, the production of handicrafts, local ceremonies, etc.) and to share them with other communities and with the wider society, finding pride in their past history and in their knowledges and capabilities.

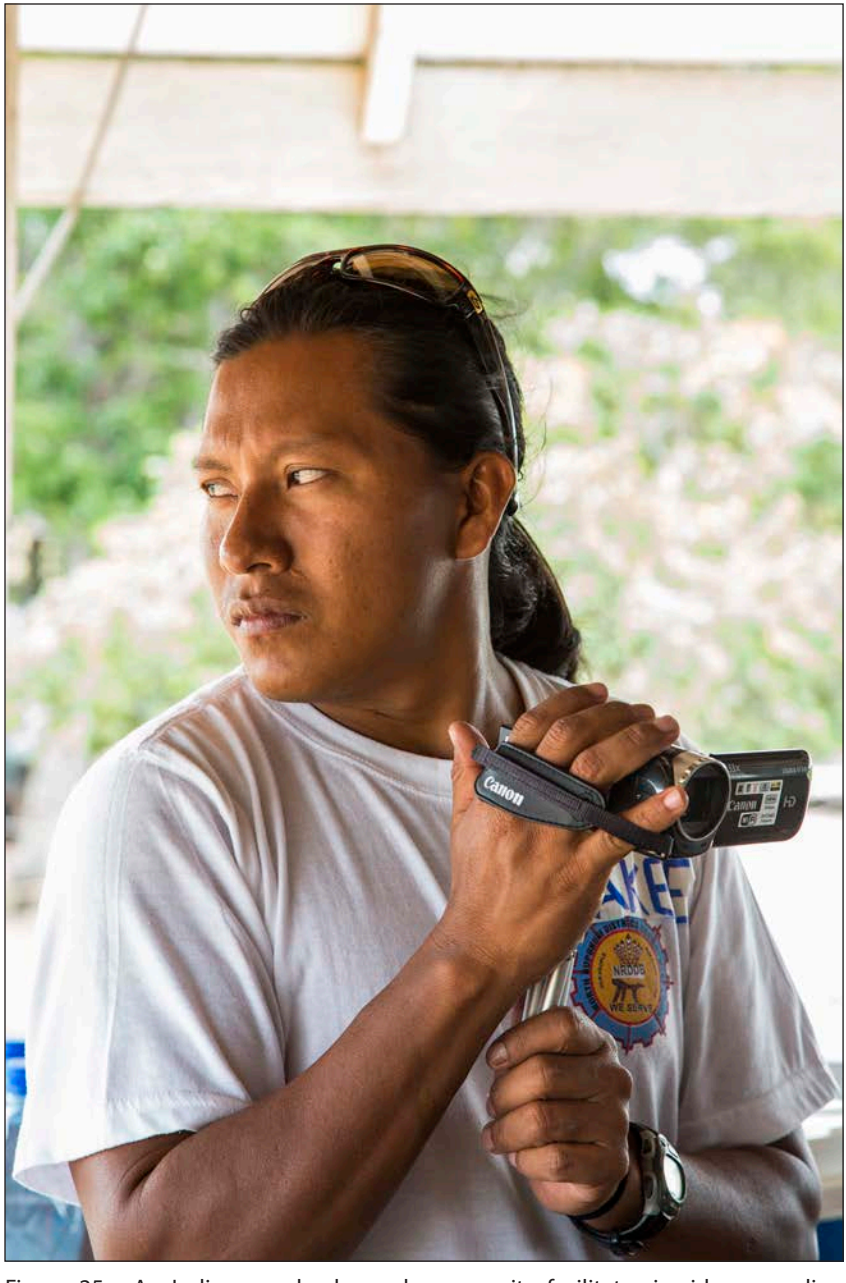

Figure 25.—An Indigenous leader and community facilitator is video recording community best practices in Rupertee, North Rupununi, Guyana.

Figure 26.—Katoonarib, South Rupununi, Guyana. A community leader is being video interviewed by his countrymen and is describing the village farming practices.

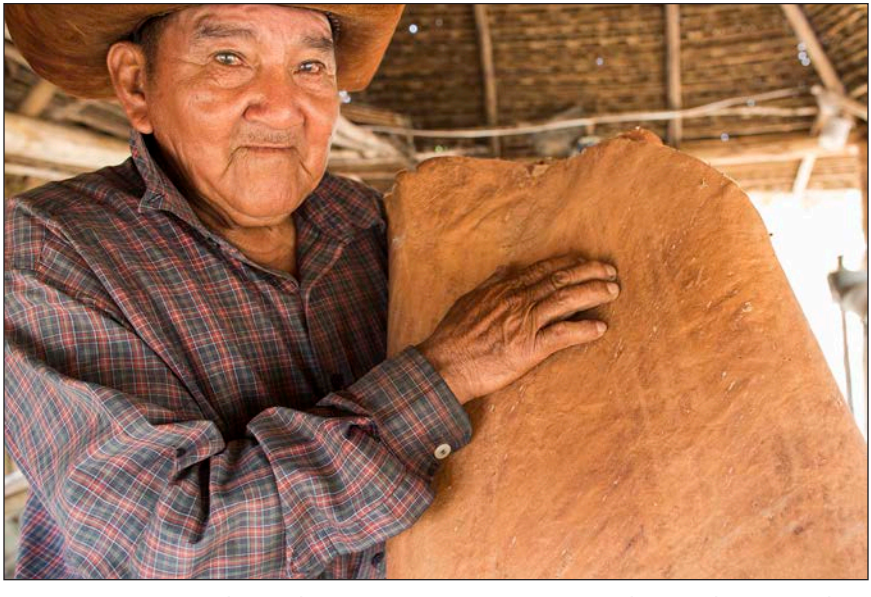

Figure 27.—Katoonarib, South Rupununi, Guyana. A man is showing how to make a handicraft using cow skin.

Figure 28.—Katoonarib, South Rupununi. A man is making a handmade basket. Baskets are make out of local plants sustainably harvested in the wild.

ICTs provided elements to integrate these knowledges in a present constantly changing, allowing the two communities to embrace new opportunities (such as community based tourism). Furthermore, at the community level, ICTs have been a powerful tool for defining, protecting, and promoting the interests of Indigenous communities and to facilitate the identification and dissemination of local development strategies.

Under certain conditions, the growing presence and action as "online communities" has allowed the Rupununi communities to generate new political opportunities to their advantage. In this direction the North Rupununi District Development Board, which is an umbrella organization committed to improving the social and economic development of the North Rupununi communities, has been able to bring several development projects and infrastructures to the North Rupununi through a consistent and continuative political networking with regional, national, and international policy makers, which was made possible by constant online communication and networking.

In this sense, the ubiquity of cyberspace may potentially allow groups that are socially, politically, and geographically distant from decision makers

to acquire more power, forming alliances, contrasting isolation, and making themselves more visible.

Figure 29.—Katoonarib, South Rupununi, Guyana. Women in the Wapishana community are skillful cotton weavers. They take care of the entire process: from growing the cotton to the harvesting, spinning, and weaving. They produce their own hammocks and dresses. Each Wapishana hammock requires more than 500 hours of work.

Figure 30.—Bina Hill, North Rupununi, Guyana. Members of the village of Maturuca, Brazil during a visit to the North Rupununi. They are video recording their village development strategies in order to share them with the other Guiana Shield Indigenous communities.

Figure 31.—Brussels, Netherlands. An Indigenous leader of the North Rupununi while presenting Indigenous community-owned solutions for sustainability to the European Economic and Social Committee. Photo by Claudia Nuzzo.

Figure 32.—Portrait of a couple from the Wapishana community of Katoonarib, South Rupununi, Guyana.

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