

WORDS, PLACES AND DIRECTIONS AMONG THE TRIO INDIANS

The term for 'word' among the Carib-speaking Trio of Surinam is *kato*, but in the present context the term *eka*, 'name' and 'news', is more appropriate. At one level these two terms are contrasted as the abstract to the concrete, but at another level they are both contrasted to *eneto*, as something heard against something seen; two forms of knowledge recognized by the Trio. The term for 'place' is *pata*. The term is most commonly used when referring to a human settlement, but it may also refer to the home of an animal or the location of inanimate objects or the haunt of supernatural beings. Thus an armadillo's hole is *kapai pata*, a garden site is *wii pata*, or literally 'manioc place', or *wiripè pata*, a spirit's abode. A human settlement may be called after a geographical feature, as in *Kawamalasamutu pata*, literally 'bamboo sandy place'; or after the name of its founder, for example *Eoyari pata*, literally 'the man Eoyari's place'.

Within the human *pata*, or village, there is a cleared area, the *anna*, which is the place where communal meals, dancing and other public events take place; and the *pakoro*, one or several houses where much of the private family and everyday life takes place. The front of the house, which faces on to the *anna*, is basically a male space, and the rear of the house a female space. Round the village is the *wiripèhtao*, a crudely cleared strip of land where rubbish is dumped. Beyond is the forest, *itu*. The village/forest contrast is the fundamental distinction in a system of classification based on concentric dualism. In social terms this classification incorporates a series of contrasts of the type kin/affines, friends/enemies, etc.

Within the forest there are named sites such as other villages and geographical locations. These latter are rapids, hills, unusual rock formations, etc. However, by far the greatest number

of named sites are known after an event that occurred there. Some of these events, for example a raid, are important enough for the knowledge of it and where it occurred to be widely known; awareness of other incidents, for example where a hunter killed a certain animal, may have restricted dissemination. At the same time, this geography is being continually redrawn as past events fade faster or slower from memory and new events occur to recreate the configuration of space.

Directing someone to a point in the forest presents problems. There is a large range of postpositions and adverbs that indicate location, but otherwise the language is relatively poor in directional terms. For example, there are no absolute terms for left and right, so central to Western vocabularies of direction. The term for right or left is *apētun* depending on whether one is right- or left-handed. The other hand, whichever it is, is *apēyano*. The term refers to the arm by which one is picked up from the ground at birth and this is the incident which confers on one right or left handedness. There are separate terms for east and west (connected with the sun's rising and sinking), but there is only a single term for north and south. However, the compass directions are virtually never employed when giving directions. Perhaps the directional terms most used are upstream and downstream, but by far the most common way of giving directions is by reference to named sites, knowledge of which depends on experience and familiarity. Given these two qualities this can be highly accurate, and I have been with an Indian directed by another to an exact spot some miles away.

This dependence on experiential knowledge puts the outsider at a very grave disadvantage, and not only the non-Indian. Despite popular ideas, Indians do get lost in the forest, and when in unfamiliar terrain have as much difficulty in understanding directions as any outsider. This apparent vagueness is also found when dealing with distances. Distance is always expressed in time, but in the absence of any numerical system there is nothing definite about its measurement. Journeys of less than a day's duration are related to the course of the sun; for trips of more than a day by the number of sunsets, often counted out on the fingers in the form 'it sunsets; it sunsets; it sunsets; arrive'. However, there is nothing too precise about this since no two Indians travel at the same speed nor will the same Indian do the same journey in the same time on different occasions. There are many variables such as whether one is accompanied by one's family or whether one is distracted by opportunities to hunt.

Many of these features are common in one form or another throughout Lowland South America. For example, the layout of the Trio village with its internal classification of public and private space reaches its apotheosis in the circular and horseshoe-shaped villages of the Gê and Bororo in Central Brazil. The need to create a geography through history becomes that more urgent among those groups forced, perhaps more than once in a generation, to move into unknown country. What has not been discussed in this short account is how cosmology and myth stamp their mark on the

classification of space and how they create dimensions to a world in which we have no sense of direction.

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