



Elementary Distinctions in World-Making among the Yukpa

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Abstract. – This article explores elementary distinctions underlying food exchange, sexual relations, and cosmo-sociology among the Yukpa of northwest Venezuela. For the Yukpa basic forms of social relations with human and non-human others and the world's existence are based on the reproduction of these distinctions. Their annihilation is feared, causes chaos, illness, and a possible reestablishment of primordial undifferentiated and unliveable conditions on earth. The author argues that a focus on elementary, operative distinctions offers possibilities to conceptualize Amazonian "sociality" beyond the axioms of a "symbolic economy of alterity" or "conviviality and the aesthetics of the everyday." [*Venezuela, Yukpa, elementary distinctions, sexual relations, food exchange, cosmology, community*]

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This article outlines some elementary distinctions in the cosmovision of the Carib-speaking Yukpa Indians of northwestern Venezuela and relates them to principles of food exchange, the regulation of sexual relations, and finally the reproduction of *oweija*, the world. These distinctions, so I shall propose, came into existence during the mythical process of transformation and are reflected not only by mythology, but also in external social relations and the logic of internal reproduction. Ultimately this set of operative distinctions is basic to cognitive and social processes of world-making

in Yukpa cosmo-sociology.¹ A fully developed ethnographic description and analysis of Yukpa cosmology, social organization, and sexuality would largely exceed the space available for this article. Therefore, my pragmatic decision was to focus on the elementary distinctions in the mentioned areas.

Two opposed positions currently provide prominent explanations of Amazonian cosmo-sociality. One – inspired by structuralism – focuses primarily on external relations and was labelled the "symbolic economy of alterity" (Viveiros de Castro 1996). Within this tradition Viveiros de Castro argues that predation and affinity are given principles structuring the central idioms of symbolic external relationships, and Descola (1996) distinguishes three modes of relations toward nature: predation, reciprocity, and protection. The second position, too, depicts relations of exchange as principles of metaphysics, but the main focus is on conviviality not on the symbolic relations of predation, conflict, warfare, or cannibalism, which are rather considered antisocial. This position was labelled "moral economy of intimacy" and is focusing on the "aesthetics of conviviality and the everyday." Its original centre of attention are internal relations and forms of reciprocity producing security, safety, and local Amazonian versions of sociality (Overing 1981, 1983–84). This position has been reformulated in an antisociological and antiformalistic way focusing on the arts, emotions and

1 This includes "social," "natural," and "spiritual" (or supernatural) dimensions in Western cosmology.