OLIVIER ALLARD

Laziness and Stinginess
The Negative Efficacy of Care and the Dynamics of Kinship in the Orinoco Delta, Venezuela

Abstract: Care, in lowland South America, is an ethical practice that is constitutive of kinship relations. Drawing on the case of the Warao, an indigenous people of Venezuela, I complicate this link between care and kinship in two interrelated ways: first, by focusing on the impossibility of perfect care (the particularising orientation of care makes neglect inevitable); and second, by acknowledging that kinship must not only be made, but also unmade. Both strands of this argument contribute to an effort to show that the dark side of the care/kinship nexus is relationally productive. Since kinship relations are constituted by the memory of past acts of care and nurture, quarrels that arise from reciprocal accusations of laziness and stinginess trigger dynamics of separation with long-term implications. Care is remembered but its limits are also acknowledged, especially at death, and such reflexivity contributes to its properly ethical character.

Keywords: care, ethics, food, generosity, kinship, morality, nurture

Daily practices of care and nurture are constitutive of kinship in indigenous Amazonia – a general statement that can be understood in several ways. First, commensality and ritual precautions produce similar bodies, contrasting with those of enemies (Grotti 2022; Vilaça 2002). Then, even when there is little talk about corporeality or shared substances, feeding and sharing food represent ‘means of engaging others’ (Costa 2017: 17), which people vividly remember; kinship relations are often quite literally these affect-laden memories (Gow 1991; Taylor 2000). Finally, this is also a matter of ethical practice. Lowland South Amerindians are frequently animated by a strong desire to prevent suffering in others and are generally expected to pay close attention to the well-being of their relatives and co-villagers. This attentivity is experienced as pervasive and compelling to the point of, for instance, justifying decisions like sharing tools and joining retaliatory war parties (Alès 2000). The relation between care and kinship is far from stable, however. Indeed, there is considerable uncertainty here: who are really one’s kin and will they behave as such?

While the ambivalence of kinship has already been researched in anthropology (Peletz 2001), it always takes specific forms. Among the Warao, an indigenous people of Venezuela, I argue that it stems from the ambivalence of care and nurture themselves. On the one hand, Warao people very often express kinship in alimentary terms: by definition, my relatives are those who give me, and to whom I give, food: I call ‘father’ (dima) and ‘mother’ (dani) those adults who have fed me. However, relatives
are not always kind. When children fall sick and die, even close kin might be suspected of being the guilty ‘sorcerers’ (Spanish brujos). This remains exceptional, with most accusations and rumours relating to ordinary behaviour: villagers constantly criticise each other either for being stingy with food (and their possessions in general) or for laziness, thereby failing to contribute to the household. Either way, it means the well-being of relatives and co-villagers is scandalously ignored: they will have to withstand hunger, toil without tools, or endure rain and cold because of a leaking roof or lack of appropriate clothing.

To understand Warao kinship and its fluctuations better, I propose to draw on early feminist research on care, defined by Gilligan as ‘seeing and responding to need’ (1993 [1982]: 62). Contrary to later work that has focused on domestic and professional care work (see Mattingly and McKearney 2023), Gilligan had approached care as a concern for relationships based primarily on the perception of others’ conditions (Laugier 2006). While ‘care’ does not translate a vernacular term, it offers a framework to describe and account for patterns of interaction I witnessed in the field. Indeed, Warao people usually characterise their interactions in terms of perception and response: my interlocutors would, for instance, state that ‘to see the suffering’ (a-sanamata mikitane) of a relative should drive others to help and feed them. However, to use the concept of care in an anthropological analysis of kinship in lowland South America necessarily implies reworking it. Since care may be understood as an ‘insistence on the particular’ (Gilligan 1993 [1982]: 101; see also Laugier 2015: 220), that is to say a response to the specific needs of singular people, it entails neglecting other relations and other demands. Among the Warao, accusations and complaints, which echo each offering of food or goods to relatives in need, manifest that care is a self-contradictory ideal: neglect is the inevitable consequence of the particularisation of attention.

The impossibility of perfect care therefore creates innumerable daily dilemmas, which the anthropology of ethics, a field that has flourished over the past couple of decades, can help us understand. Anthropologists consider moral dilemmas not as puzzles that need solving, as some moral psychologists would like to reduce them to (see Haidt and Kesebir 2010: 798), but rather as unavoidable situations whose consequences people have to cope with (Laidlaw 2014: 127). To take a now canonical example, Melanesian Urapmin, who experienced ‘moral torment’ since their conversion to Christianity, always faced ‘the inevitability of moral failure’ according to Robbins (2004: 208): even within pre-Christian indigenous morality, ‘wilfulness’ was valued yet opposed to ‘lawfulness’. The critical evaluation of behaviours and actions is a consequence of such fundamental contradictions. It may also be seen as a matter of ‘perspectival moralism’ (Howland and Powell Davies 2022: 14): what appears unfair and violent from the perspective of a person who feels neglected or criticised is justified and necessary from the opposite point of view. In both cases, a question remains: to what extent are people reflective about their conflicting ethical condition? The Warao often criticise others, but also occasionally regret their own failings in moments of ‘moral breakdown’, in Zigon’s (2007) terms. The propensity to shift perspectives, however, is essentially limited to funerary laments, when women evaluate their own actions from the point of view of the deceased – that is to say, precisely when it is too late to remedy any shortcomings (Allard 2013). They acknowledge the irreversibility of actions
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(Lambek 2010: 50–54), which is crucial to the constitution of care as ethical practice rather than work. Such moments of reflectivity are highly circumscribed, so that while Warao people are alive they usually shift perspective in a different manner: they oscillate between providing care and eliciting it (Kelly and Matos 2019). Responses are often faulty, however: accusations outnumber praise, while quarrels tend to escalate. Such failures are actually interesting for their relational as well as their subjective consequences. Howland and Powell Davies advocate ‘taking the bad with the good’, since what is morally negative might be ‘generative of social life’ (2022: 6). To pursue this project, it is necessary to characterise Warao sociality more precisely.

Warao people belong to indigenous ‘Amazonia’, a term that anthropologists usually use as a shorthand for ‘lowland South America’, yet they are not its prototypical representatives. They mostly inhabit the lower Orinoco Delta in Venezuela (with a minority in neighbouring Guyana), which lies outside of Amazonia in the geographical sense. They have interacted with explorers and settlers since the sixteenth century, with the swampy Orinoco Delta serving as a zone of refuge. While regularly in contact with outsiders, and increasingly since the second half of the twentieth century, most of the 50,000 Warao speak their own (isolated) language, with a varying command of Spanish. Only a minority of non-indigenous people have settled in the lower Delta. More relevant to my argument, Warao people are not defined by alterity and its incorporation through predation as much as other Amazonians. Whereas Viveiros de Castro (2001) has famously argued that affinity (alterity) is the given out of which consanguinity (kinship) must be intentionally constructed, I would argue that among the Warao kinship is produced out of its internal ethical contradictions – a condition probably more widely shared in the region than is assumed. While practices of care and nurture produce kinship relations, their inevitable failure also engenders disappointments, accusations and quarrels that limit the extension of kinship. Yet this is also what enables people to have real kin: a negative efficacy of care is at work, in the same way that Bercovitch highlighted the ‘negative efficacy of exchange’ (1994: 518). Even when focusing on care and ethics, it is important not to mistake sociality for sociability. In a world where relations are always potentially multiplying, as with the Warao, what matters is (to know how) to ‘cut’ them (Strathern 1996) in order to limit ‘relational excess’ (Tola 2019): in other words, to differentiate rather than to join (Wagner 1977), contrary to some implicit assumptions of the ‘new kinship studies’ (Carsten 2000). Ethical concerns and the resulting conflicts are crucial to understanding the dynamic of connection and disconnection that characterises Warao kinship.

Specific and contingent events – the way food was divided on a particular day or the whispered accusation it gave rise to – may therefore have long-term, almost structural, consequences. To develop this argument, I will successively consider three different temporal scales. First, looking at actual, short-term interactions helps us to grasp the dilemmas intrinsic to kinship morality, so that care must be bestowed on but also elicited from others in real performances. Second, dilemmas are crucial to understanding the dynamism of Warao sociality: quarrels often lead to long-term separation and therefore ‘negatively’ define household composition and kin networks. Finally, it is necessary to consider how such processes affect people’s experience of their relationships, precisely because kinship relations exist only insofar as they are
experienced. Care is remembered, neglect may be regretted, and some potential relatives are not merely forgotten but properly unknown: this is the temporal constitution of care and kinship.

Imperfect Care

Seeing and Dis-regarding Need

There are various ways of tackling Warao morality. During my most recent visit to Venezuela, in 2017, my host and friend Jesús made a statement that summed up what I had understood about Warao ideals during fieldwork I began in 2007: ‘I am not stingy [with my food], and once it runs out, it runs out’ (Ine wani-naha, ekoro-kore, ekoro-ya). Warao people constantly criticise those who are stingy (kohi), and in Jesús’s statement generosity appeared as ideally unlimited: as long as he had something – sugar, typically – and others manifested their need or desire for it, he would give it away. Jesús was generous till the very end. He was also wary of covert aggression by envious shamans, whose actions – feared by all – were seen as retribution for retentiveness (see Munn 1992 [1986]: 224). Being stingy with relatives is despicable, but denying food or a cigarette to a shaman is dangerous. There seemed to be an almost hydraulic principle preventing accumulation, as in many descriptions of hunter-gatherer societies (see Powell Davies 2022: 102), although the Warao do not quite fit into that category. While they fish, sometimes hunt and occasionally continue to extract moriche palm (Mauritia flexuosa) sago, all of them now grow taro, introduced at the onset of the twentieth century. The Warao have engaged in a wide range of commercial activities for a long time, and received significant public income in the early twenty-first century, at least until the Venezuelan crisis of the mid-2010s hit (see Ayala-Laffée and Wilbert 2008; Rodríguez 2020). Some larger settlements, often founded as missionary villages, are highly differentiated and include private shops and public services (like health centres), but in hundreds of smaller communities, differences of wealth and status are much more limited and ephemeral. I conducted most of my fieldwork in Venezuela in such a village, which I call Burojo and take as a case study in this article. In relatively small and homogeneous villages such as Burojo, it always struck me that, in spite of a diversified economic basis, generosity was ideally as infinite as among hunter-gatherers: shops were impossible to run there, because owners would face their relatives’ constant demands.

The response to the suffering of others was also typically presented not merely as boundless but also as automatic. Often, when someone wanted to justify why they had sent food to another household or offered to an unrelated Warao, or even when explaining why they adopted an orphan, they merely stated: ‘[he or she is] poor for me’ (masaba sanera). It is telling that my Warao interlocutors, when translating the expression into Spanish, used a turn of phrase meaning ‘I feel pity for them’ (me da lástima). A statement about their perception of someone’s condition is converted into one regarding their own feelings. Discourses in Warao draw on the semantic field of suffering (sanamata) but their affective response is left unsaid: when someone is in the presence of a person in need, it goes without saying that action, and not words, are required.
However, despite being unlimited and automatic, such generous and caring responses were also deeply uncertain. People might always close themselves off from the distress of others, and that distancing effect is framed in terms of gaze and visibility: it is always primarily a question of perceiving need. The headman of Burojo told me about a local politician who was accused of hiding behind the allegedly golden gate of her mansion: ‘she does not see our suffering’ (ka sanamata mi-naha). Fellow villagers could also turn a blind eye to the plight of others, disregarding them in the literal sense. Since poverty is above all a relative condition, they often do so by hiding what they have, or at least taking pains not to display it, at the risk of seeming secretive, behaviour usually associated with sorcery and therefore morally condemnable. In all villages (except the larger mixed settlements), houses are built on stilts and located along the bank of the river, connected to each other by a stilted footpath. Those with the means build permanent walls of wooden planks, but many houses conform to the older and more rudimentary model of a platform on stilts, with a thatched roof, sometimes featuring temporary thatched partitions (to shield a sleeping section, for example). Villagers store their clothes and other possessions in opaque bags that hang from the rafters. They are careful to avoid taking everything out in front of others – a difficult task when villagers are always passing by to visit others or simply out of curiosity. Fishermen similarly cover their catch under palm leaves at the bottom of their canoes: protection against the sun and the prying eyes of neighbours. Managing the ‘visual availability’ of things is a way to ‘pre-empt excessive demands’ from others, as Ewart (2008: 516) has argued in relation to the Brazilian Panará. Yet when generosity is ideally unlimited, as it is among the Warao, demands are always excessive.

Praise is therefore less common than criticism. Indeed, Jesús did not make his statement in the abstract, but rather as a comment on a quarrel that was taking place among our neighbours. A widower was vehemently accusing other members of his household of being stingy with their food. Exasperated, he took his plate and food possessions to his married daughter, who lived nearby. He would henceforth eat with her. Jesús and his mother Adelina also accused most of the other villagers of stinginess, often in hushed tones. This meant that the latter were ‘bad’ (asida), and that I was not to give them anything. Conversely, when I strolled through the village, I was told that my hosts were ‘lazy’ (inatoma), that Jesús often lounged at home whereas men were expected to undertake productive activities; he had felled a tiny garden and at times did not even have his own canoe. He could claim not to be stingy, but he was so lazy he never had anything to share anyway. Why should others share a part of their catch? Let them eat pure taro! Those tubers were filling, even boiled without fish, but only people who had nothing else were content with them.

Such judgements certainly had to do with my presence, since they either justified or challenged my affiliation to a particular household. Yet they also appeared on many other occasions. Jesús admitted that he had often directly faced accusations of laziness from his mother- and sister-in-law at the beginning of his marriage, although he maintained they were unfounded: he was capable of setting out on arduous expeditions to procure fresh fish for his family or salted fish for sale (or to pay off his debts to local bosses); he had spent time upriver in his youth, working in local towns among non-indigenous people; he had gone on collective week-long trips to the giant garbage
heap of Cambalache to look for clothes and others objects. But he was unlucky: he did not receive any state income, unlike other villagers. The latter were really immoral: they were stingy with food and goods they had received without doing any work. Jesús could not be taken as an exemplary Warao man, nor was Burojo a typical lower Delta settlement. Yet the particular failings of my hosts dramatised tensions experienced by most Warao in the region, as I confirmed during stays in other villages. I will therefore rely on the description of particular encounters to offer some insights into a shared predicament.

**Concern for the Particular and its Limits**

Accusations can be used to reveal virtues people often fail to realise, as displayed in Overing and Passes’ (2000) landmark volume on Amazonian moralities. Such a view is unsatisfactory however because it treats failure as external to moral ideals and therefore cannot account for the particular conjunction that makes generosity both imperative and uncertain. ‘Care’ might be better suited for the task of providing an integrated framework. First, while generosity (‘not being stingy’) is obviously a way of responding to the needs of others, I argue that being hardworking (‘not being lazy’) represents another form of care. Jesús’s laziness meant that he was disregarding the needs of his relatives by remaining in his hammock or playing card games. Once, when everyone complained about him, his father Carlo told me the myth of Haburi, central to Warao lore. In one episode, it is only when hearing his children ‘cry from hunger’ (*noho ona-kitane*) that a father got out of his hammock and went fishing, which I understood as an implicit comment by Carlo on his son’s behaviour. It was a matter of perceiving need (here, hearing rather than seeing it) and responding to it. Second, among the Warao as elsewhere, hunger epitomises suffering in general (see Schieffelin 2005 [1976]: 71). While most discourses revolve around food and its circulation, they actually express a more general concern: sons-in-law are expected to build houses so that parents-in-law are shielded from the weather, while tools should be given or lent because they alleviate the suffering inherent to ‘work’ (*yaota*). Despite the centrality of the idiom of nurture, and of the fact that most criticism targets stinginess and laziness, I have decided to use the concept of care to foreground that what is at stake is essentially regard for the needs of others. I will nonetheless also pay attention to the implications of different forms of care.

Scholarship on care has especially explored how it conflicts with other logics, such as the universalising ambitions of justice (Gilligan 1993 [1982]; Tronto 1993), the realities of professional caregiving (Biehl 2012), the indifference of bureaucracy (Stevenson 2014), the constraints of the law (Borneman 2001) or even the fact that care itself may be experienced as coercive, for example when parents justify arranged marriages as a way of caring for their children (Mody 2020). However, in the context of Warao sociality, I contend that the tension is purely internal. Gilligan (1993 [1982]) has already stressed that care is essentially a concern for specific circumstances and individuals, but its self-contradictory implications are overlooked when it is pitted against other notions like justice: care can never be as unlimited and automatic as it should be; it is always imperfect, *precisely* because it must always be particularised.
This orientation towards the particular is manifest in many situations among the Warao, like in the distribution of food. In 2017, Yolanda, Jesús’s and Candida’s eldest daughter, was in her mid-teens and was therefore required to play an active role in the household — compared with the freedom she enjoyed as a younger child or that teenage boys were still entitled to. One of her many tasks was to serve food, a duty undertaken under the close supervision of her mother. Although Warao people sometimes roast fish, when it is plentiful, and particularly enjoy it with pancakes made either of wheat flour (bought from traders or stores) or of moriche palm sago (extracted from the forest), the most common dish in the lower Delta in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was a pot of fish stewed with taro. Yet again, food was divided and served very carefully. Candida often corrected Yolanda regarding the morsels served to someone (prompting her to indulge her younger sister with the fish head), the quantity of food (I could not stomach as much as they did) or even the people to serve. It was necessary to make sure that no one was forgotten, like guests who expected to be fed, or someone who had gone on an errand and would be particularly disgruntled to find nothing left for them on returning. People who had been overlooked in the distribution, or thought that others had eaten the best parts without them, were quick to express their disappointment or frustration. Food distribution was never standardised: Candida was educating Yolanda by showing her how to proceed, not by dictating abstract rules (Ingold 2000: 21–22).

Similarly, Warao people often stress that they work so as to sustain specific relatives: Jesús’s father told me that he went on long fishing expeditions because he wanted to give sugar to his grandchildren. When people travel upriver to the garbage heap of Cambalache, they are open to surprises but also look for precise items of clothing their relatives are in need of, such as a pair of sandals (Sorhaug 2014). The hammocks women weave are often referred to as the ‘future hammock’ (a-ha tane) of their grandchild or son-in-law (although they also occasionally sell their craft). It is not always possible to specify a future owner in such a way, however, so that hardworking people are likely to be accused of stinginess simply because they face constant demands. People are therefore not generous or hardworking in the abstract: it is always a matter of giving and attending to particular relatives, which automatically entails disregarding others, and this happens all the time. Paddling to a sago extraction camp with Jesús and Candida, we passed Jesús’s niece, who was returning to the village. Jesús asked whether there was any fish in her household and decided to give her one from our catch — a thoughtful decision, but one that led Candida to grumble there was barely enough left for us. He had set out to fish for his children, but it would have been immoral to ignore his niece. There was no fair way out.

While even close kin may be or feel neglected, this danger is deepened by the fact that care is not restricted to a limited number of family members. On the one hand, kinship is potentially everywhere: in the village, it was commonly said that ‘no one is really different’ (daísa witu ekida) and it was possible to trace kinship relations between most households, if not between every individual. Yet my interlocutors certainly did not give to every other villager. Neither is it a closed system, for outsiders or unrelated people can claim one’s pity. For instance, an old woman might come and eye a fisherman’s catch, and even explicitly ask him for a fish, stressing she is poor and...
alone – he might give her one reluctantly but would not dare to refuse. Vulnerability may also induce a more lasting response: orphans are sometimes taken in and raised by unrelated adults, making nurture into a means of opening up kinship. This is the basis of asymmetrical relations whose importance in indigenous Amazonia has recently been re-evaluated by Fausto (2008) and Costa (2017). They argue that adults raising children, humans feeding animal pets, shamans owning auxiliary spirits, leaders ‘taking care of’ (yaoro-kitane) their followers – because the latter are all vulnerable – are cases of a general scheme of mastery or ownership (see also Bonilla 2005). This foundational argument has, among the Warao, noteworthy implications for political leadership and kinship (to which I return below), but we must also avoid fetishising the owner–pet pair: asymmetrical relations are fundamentally reversible and contextual, especially between humans. While children are considered to be intrinsically helpless and therefore particularly moving (see Gow 2000), vulnerability is also a general moral condition – or rather a relative one. An adult can be poor or distressed in the eyes of another (‘for them’), and people always occupy multiple roles: children own pets yet are fed by their parents, shamans cure other villagers yet are protected by leaders, husband and wife attend to each other’s needs.

**Providing and Eliciting Care**

When considering specific interactions rather than abstract relations, it appears that responses must often be actively elicited and vulnerability performed. This is not merely a matter of strategic manipulation (or submissive ‘predation’, as Penfield 2023 has it), however, and should rather be understood through a complex theory of relationship and action. I hence follow Kelly and Matos’s (2019) proposal to analyse a ‘politics of regard’ in terms influenced by Strathern (1988): people (agents) act because others (persons) cause them to do so. Some do so in an ‘inert’ way, for example simply by looking and waiting to receive – as is common between relatives for whom it would be shameful to ask. Conversely, others make ‘explicit’ demands, especially when they presume a separation of interests and some resistance – as is usually the case with wealthier city-dwelling Warao or non-indigenous people. This is related to another important difference: possessions are often considered to be up for demand, so that people hide what they do not want to share, whereas control over one’s labour is ‘the essence of the autonomous self’ in Amazonia (Penfield 2023: 65). Although people work to satisfy the needs of their kin, this form of care is more complex than that entailed in serving and giving food.

It is well known at least since Clastres (1974) that coercion is often almost excluded from Amazonian sociality: among the Warao, ‘giving orders’ (inataba-kitane) is particularly frowned on and is associated with non-indigenous people and the Spanish language. When people want to make someone else work, and not simply obtain some available food or object, they need to influence them indirectly: as I mentioned, rebukes hardly led Jesús to go fishing, but crying children would have been a compelling motivation. While authority is in theory limited to the relationship between a man and his parents-in-law, I witnessed that this relation of asymmetrical affinity was usually euphemised in practice, so that a couple would never command a son-in-law
to come and assist them in rebuilding their house. If he failed to offer his help spontaneously, the in-laws would merely make mention of their old age and vulnerability. This is why appealing for support and asserting personal autonomy, even though they are often portrayed as opposing principles, are in fact intimately related (Schieffelin 2005 [1976]: 131): appeal constitutes a way of influencing others when coercion is impossible and agents remain autonomous because they may always disregard others. These dimensions relate to the two intertwined forms of power Kelly and Matos distinguish (2019: 407): that of the person who tries to cause someone to act and that of the agent who chooses to take account of the cause, who selects between multiple causes. Care must therefore not only be seen from the perspective of the ethical subject providing it – as a norm to follow or a virtue to cultivate – but also from the point of view of the person who is not merely receiving but rather actively eliciting it. Here is another important amendment we need to make to the notion of care for it to resonate fully in lowland South America. Yet, although the outcome of those interactions is always uncertain, it is also crucial because it shapes relationships in the long term: we therefore need to analyse these implications further.

The Dynamics of Kinship Relations: Separation and Particularisation

The Alimentary Forms of Kinship

Children are essentially vulnerable, but they will become adults and carers too; they often take care of their younger siblings and hence oscillate between eliciting and providing care. Regard is therefore mutual as people alternate between positions of cause and agent. When I asked Jesús’s half-brother Guillermo, at the time still a young boy, whether he was related to other inhabitants of the village (using a generic concept of relatedness5), his answer was deceptively simple: ‘[they] give us food’ (nahoro ka moa-ya) or ‘[they] don’t give us food’ (nahoro ka moa-naha). This should not be mistaken for reciprocal exchange, however: it was never a question of reciprocating a fish for a fish, or even a fish for a pack of flour – this kind of balanced exchange exists, but not between relatives, or at least, it does not define a relative. As argued by Bird-David (1990) and Rival (2002: 91), it is vital to distinguish sharing from reciprocity because only the latter implies a form of equivalence, whereas the former has no such requirement.6 It is always mutual, however: people do not give to those who do not give to them (whenever resources are to hand). This is not merely a utilitarian concern, but rather an aspect of the intersubjective nature of kinship: as Gow argued, the idiom of caring is ‘a two-way process’ (1991: 161); and if hunger epitomises suffering, then giving and sharing food represents the primary form of care.

When Guillermo defined a relative as someone who ‘gives us food’, he actually articulated two levels. ‘Us’ referred to the household: its composition was always changing, but it may be the only group that can be described as such, with assumptions of intimacy and shared interests, although it is defined by a pronoun, that is to say in a purely relative way. More precisely, ‘we’ were those people who shared food cooked on the same hearth. Differences in diet were not entirely irrelevant, insofar as many of my hosts and friends had to follow specific restrictions imposed on them
by a shaman who had cured them, like avoiding foreign foodstuff, such as onions, or predatory species of fish. Jesús’s mother, Adelina, would sometimes cook her food in a different pot, when others were using ingredients she could not eat. However, she was usually considered to form a single hearth or household with her son Jesús, his wife and their children, as well as her last son Guillermo (and me). What mattered above all was the sense of completely mutualising resources. If I had failed to bring onions, Adelina and her daughter-in-law Candida would prepare a single meal, typically a large pot of boiled fish and taro, served with its own stock: this was in itself illustrative of the relative unity of the household.

The fact that some people do, or do not, give us food represents an altogether different kind of relation. Apart from exceptional cases, for instance when visiting relatives who live in a different settlement, what is given is always raw food: fish, moriche palm fruit, mangrove crabs, or in some circumstances store-bought food such as wheat flour and sugar – taro is exempt from this list as people are supposed to grow it for themselves. People give food when they have plenty and learn or see that others are lacking, like when the latter have not gone fishing or do not have wage-money to shop with. Food is sometimes given to a specific individual, as when a man sends some fish for a grandchild living elsewhere or for a child fathered with another’s wife, but it will then be prepared and consumed within the household as a whole. This type of (raw) food-giving relation was typical of people who were not living together and yet considered each other to be true relatives. This is why Guillermo did not need to develop his answers further: someone who failed to give us food, that is to say who let us go hungry, could not be considered a relative.

It sometimes appeared to me to constitute a somewhat circular definition: though Guillermo explained kinship with reference to food-giving, at other times he would put it the other way around. As is common for teenage boys, he enjoyed roaming the neighbourhood and once took the opportunity of a mourning party to travel to another village, although unrelated to the deceased. Without a relative in that place where he had mere acquaintances, he was left unfed during his stay and went hungry until his return home. Yet this circularity must not be misunderstood as static: it is precisely the key to the dynamic nature of kinship and household composition. It is already well established that, in indigenous lowland South America, sharing food turns people into kin. People who share the life of a household are said by its members to become quickly ‘like our relatives’ (ka warao monika). Feeding is probably even more important than commensality (Costa 2017): a child calls ‘father’ or ‘mother’ the person ‘in whose hands [he or she] has grown up’ (a-moho eku ida-kotai), ‘through food’ (nahoro isia). Warao people stress this use of kin terms in address (rather than in reference), which reflects the importance of care. ‘To grow up in someone’s hands’ is the common way of referring to fosterage or adoption, which often opens up kinship and transforms people: I often heard adult men claim they knew how to speak Spanish, use machines or butcher pigs because they had been raised by non-indigenous parents (or in some cases because they had spent time as boarders in the care of missionaries).

Yet I want to stress that food is also at the heart of processes of disconnection, and therefore closes down kinship networks. This is crucial because Warao kinship is purely cognatic. This means that there is no obvious contrast between categories of
relatives (e.g., cross vs parallel, or patrilateral vs matrilateral), and this lack of internal differentiation raises the old question of determining the boundaries of cognatic kinship (Strathern 1992). Do relations extend indefinitely? Among the Warao, there is no strict genealogical distinction between second- and third-degree cousins (as among the Miraña, according to Karadimas 2000), nor does kinship simply fade out, whether due to spatial distance or simply because people stop maintaining relations (as argued in other contexts by Bodenhorn 2000; Gow 1991). I argue that there is, conversely, a primacy of disconnection: people do not simply forget relatives, they break up with them because of quarrels triggered by reciprocal accusations of laziness and stinginess, and such disputes often happen at close range. This is comparable to Tola’s (2019) argument that ‘fissures’ are necessary to prevent ‘relational excess’. However, unlike with the Qom (or Toba) of the Argentinean Chaco described by Tola, among the Warao such processes do not primarily happen through shamanic and sorcery attacks and revenge, but rather through ordinary disputes. Food is both the stuff through which kinship relations are made and the main reason behind their undoing.

**Histories of Disconnection**

Although people are drawn by the desire to live together and be among kin, disconnection was central to narratives of residential trajectory. I once again use Jesús’s example. He did not grow up in Burojo but moved there as a teenager with his parents, who were distantly related to other villagers. At the time, his mother Adelina was ill and looking for a shaman powerful enough to cure her. He had a brief first marriage—which, being childless, could hardly be called a marriage—but quickly left his wife: separations are common and usually justified by the simple fact that the spouses do not want (or love) each other anymore. Jesús then got married to Candida, who was the granddaughter of Burojo’s founder. The young couple briefly lived with one of Jesús’s sisters and her then-husband, before building their own house. However, they cooked and ate with Candida’s parents because they did not have their own kitchen at the time—it is always a distinct structure in this part of the Delta, located closer to the river than the house itself, where women cook food and unmarried men often hang their hammocks. Although they slept under another roof, this commensality made them part of the same household. Unfortunately, things did not go well. As I already mentioned, Candida’s mother (a hard-working and strong-willed woman, whose permanent activity amazed me but who was often perceived as angry), like her sisters, reprimanded them for being lazy and fed them stingily. It pained and angered the young couple, who quickly decided to move to the household of Jesús’s eldest sister. Another argument over food ensued, which finally led the couple to build their own kitchen. Their household never grew as large as some others in the village—probably because they had no adult children and therefore no children-in-law—but it incorporated various relatives at different moments: Jesús’s mother Adelina and his half-brother Guillermo, or Jesús’s sister Clara (with whom he had lived at the very beginning of his marriage), after she had an argument ‘about taro’ (*ure isia*) with her second husband’s mother. Indeed, I often heard women ‘scolding each other’ (*ori-sabahi-kitane*) at the top of their voices, while men, whenever the target of reprimands, are usually much quieter. Such quar-
rels always seemed to escalate, all the more so since dispute mediation ceremonies like those analysed by Briggs (1988) were hardly ever performed in Burojo.

Sometimes, when households split, people still gave (raw) food to one another – as was the case between Candida and her mother – since separation made other kinds of relation possible. Yet networks of relatives were also severed in the same way. This is why, while no one was ‘really different’ in Burojo, so many people emphatically denied being related to each other, or even complained they had no kin in the village. It could be understood as a way of saying that their relatives were not behaving as they should, leading them to be denied the status of relatives at all. Conversely, my hosts had ‘real kin’ (a-warao witu) in other settlements they visited periodically, as when they conducted expeditions to fish intensively, to gather wild fruits or mangrove crabs: they knew they would be welcome, offered a spot to hang their hammocks and fed by their hosts. Within the village, demands and expectations are usually overwhelming, excessive and cannot be otherwise (since generosity is ideally unlimited), whereas it is easier to maintain and enact kinship with relatives located further away. As a result, ‘kinship belonging is an impossible standard’, as Stasch (2009: 136) says of the Melanesian Korowai, because it implies that one must live among non-kin, or among lazy and stingy relatives, and remain separated from real kin.

Permanent processes of fission and division, relating to factionalism or segmentarity, were highlighted decades ago by Amazonianist anthropologists (e.g., Alès 1990; Clastres 1980; Rivière 1984). They might be more subdued or slower nowadays, so that villages grow larger and last longer, and therefore also become more divided. Yet villages still split, often when electoral politics aggravate daily tensions (Allard forthcoming), and they sometimes even disappear when residents flee to other settlements, as when epidemics occur. I have merely attempted to underscore the intimate roots of processes often treated primarily in terms of village politics, with a focus on leadership or witchcraft accusations, and in relation to economic phenomena, like issues of accumulation and reciprocity. Separation and division in fact very often originate in everyday ethical dilemmas, and derive from the impossibility of behaving as a good relative with respect to all co-villagers. Furthermore, even if care is not essentially gendered in Amazonia (Alès 2000: 134), women – or at least the female head of household and her closest daughters – play a crucial role in shaping social relations because they are in charge of most food distribution and reprimand those who do not contribute enough (Briggs 1993: 948). Often, stingily serving someone is in itself an evaluation of their behaviour, a way for women to express their thoughts through food, a medium that is both opaque and forceful (see Munn 1992 [1986]: 60–61; Weiner 1983: 696–697). I was told that a wife may always untie her husband’s hammock and put it down outside. Yet in most stories it was a more implicit process: men left when they had been made to feel unwanted. Unsurprisingly, female agency is occluded by looking at (male) discourses and leadership, so that, as feminist anthropology argued long ago, a focus on ordinary and intimate contexts influences perceptions of gender relations.

Quarrels have ethical roots, as well as long-term affective implications: turning to this question represents a way of exploring what kinship is further. For the Warao, I contend, it is essentially a question of temporally constituted relationships.
The Temporal Constitution of Care and Kinship

*Remembering and Not Knowing Relatives*

Real kin are people we can expect to be fed by, those who act with us in mind. This does not banish the threat of frustrated expectations and the inevitable quarrels these give rise to, however. Kinship is therefore oriented towards an uncertain future, full of hopes and disappointments. Maybe more importantly, it is also rooted in the past, especially in what is remembered. This is why there exists a ‘temporal constitution’ of kinship as much as there is one of care, as Borneman (2001: 42) has argued in the European context. It is also congruent with the temporal nature of emotion emphasised by Beatty (2019). In Amazonia, ‘in some sense [memory] is kinship itself’, states Taylor (1996: 206), because relations are literally constituted by the memory of past acts of care, nurture and sharing, and the related affective moods. Indeed, there is hardly any transmission of status, rights or material possessions. I have already stressed that people remember how they have ‘grown up in someone’s hands’ (and reciprocate using kin terms), but it is worth noting that childhood care is also vital to siblingship. Girls often take care of their younger brothers or sisters, a duty remembered by adults. When I asked fifty-five-year-old Adelina about her forty-year-old brother, she simply answered fondly: ‘my little brother, he was in my care, I used to sleep with him [in the same hammock]’ *(Ma rakobo sanuka, tai ma yaoro-bita, siko uba-bu-ae)*. It was a childhood memory of intimacy for both of them, carer and cared, and it is probably not a surprise that siblingship is, as elsewhere in lowland South America, the prototypical form of kinship.

As Gow (1991) has explored with great subtlety in relation to the Yine (or Piro) of Peruvian Amazonia, such processes work both ways, and are epistemological as much as affective. A strong opposition often exists between what is known through personal experience and what is known by hearsay (Déléage 2007; Gow 1991: 61–62), and it defines various gradients of kinship. Real kin are those who have cared for each other personally, or who have shared such care. Conversely, some people do not know how they are related to each other because they ‘never saw’ (*mi-naha*) those through whom they are connected. Others even learn that they are related ‘only when [they are] told’ (*wara-kore seke*): this is what Adelina told me when she admitted that her second husband was also a distant cousin; she met him only once she arrived in Burojo as a middle-aged woman. They had grown up in different settlements and had never experienced the relationship as such. Hence, they were not really related and the prohibition of marrying a relative – the only matrimonial rule – did not really apply. It would certainly have been different had they been first cousins (although first cousins would probably have met and certainly have known of each other’s existence), but my point is that genealogical distance was not the element Adelina advanced to justify her second marriage. It was a question of merely being told: since the relation had no past, its present could be discounted and a different future could be forged.

When people break up with each other because of the quarrels I have described in previous sections, they cease to have actual caring interactions. They may move to a different household or stop giving to each other, which implies that they also refrain from visiting each other, as visiting often amounts to displaying one’s expectations and
therefore making implicit demands. Consequently, their relation is not transmitted, because their children never witness them behaving as kin towards each other, even when they inhabit the same village. This is key to understanding how relationships are justified by reference to the previous generation. Adelina told me she called one of her neighbours ‘younger sister’ (dahia) because her own mother called the woman’s mother ‘younger sister’. In such a case, common among the Warao and in Amazonia in general, it is crucial that she mentions the use of kin terms in address: her mother enacted a kinship relation with the other woman. While kin terms for the same generation are the least discriminate, those for relatives of the previous generation enable to specify that one is not dealing with mere generic relatives, but with an ‘older paternal uncle’ or a ‘uterine uncle’, a ‘niece’ or a ‘daughter’.

This is why visits to relatives who live far away, even if they are occasional, allow everyone to experience the reciprocal care and use of kin terms, maintaining the bond despite spatial distance. However, as I have already hinted at, the potential expansiveness of the terminology is counteracted by the principle that kin terms must be used effectively, which excludes people with whom one has stopped having relations. This accounts for some discrepancies I recorded between adjacent generations. Jesús’s father told me that the wife of the headman of Burojo was his distant cousin; yet they never visited each other and overt tensions existed between Jesús’s relatives and the headman, who was accused of keeping state resources for his close relatives. For Jesús, the kinship relation had never been enacted and did not really exist: he emphatically denied being related to the headman’s wife or her children. We can here apply the formula that Gow (1991: 168) coined for ancestors: they ‘are not forgotten, for they were never known in the first place’.

The Reflexivity of Grief

This process is not as mechanical as it may seem, however, marked as it is by moments of heightened reflexivity. When someone dies, all their relatives must attend the funerary ceremony – even those who had fallen out with them. People consider that attendance is not compulsory when they were not their kin, but they still tend to go and ‘see the deceased’ (waba-hakotai mi-kitane), that is, the exposed corpse, whenever they had ‘seen’ them alive (i.e., known them personally). The ensuing wake could last a few days until all those concerned arrived, including funerary laments performed by women who were either close or distant relatives (see Allard 2013; Briggs 1992). Past interactions with the deceased are recalled, especially regarding food given or received, and how death has put an end to it all: ‘whereas you used to bring food for your children, brother, your comings and goings have stopped’ (Lavandero 1972: 343). Often, women also make explicit accusations in their laments, pointing to malevolent shamans and to unkind co-residents alike. Indeed, active shamanic aggression and lack of daily care sometimes appear as two sides of the same coin. Women, excluded from many forms of public discourse, find in laments a powerful means to voice opinions about social life.

There is a third dimension to laments, although it is not systematic: in some cases, female relatives of the deceased also criticise and regret their own shortcomings, for instance their constant reprimands or their stinginess (Briggs 1992: 345–346). They
acknowledge their behaviour as a reason behind their relative’s death, crying as evidence of regret, even though (or, precisely because) it is now too late to mend. Funerary laments – which are, unfortunately, quite often performed in Warao villages – therefore stand out in the course of daily life because they constitute one of the few moments during which failings are publicly recalled: there is more to kinship than the memory of past care. As Lambek has argued, such extraordinary acts disturb ‘the stream of practice’ (2010: 56) and are therefore crucial to making ordinary activities ethical. Death occasions what Zigon calls a ‘moral breakdown’ because it ‘shakes one out of the everydayness of being moral’ (2007: 133). It is nonetheless important not to harden the contrast between such moments and everyday practice, for they are constantly intertwined. Funerary laments are echoed by the crying of drunk people every year on the Day of the Dead and the regret manifested in crying can also be anticipated (Allard 2013). Indeed, when Clara told me that she and her mother Adelina had gone to see the leaders of the neighbouring village to seek mediation, she did not mention they had discussed the (past) causes of their strife. The leaders had reminded Clara of a simple truth I heard on many other occasions: ‘when your mother dies, you will cry’ (hi rani waba-kore, ihi ona-te). Moments of ethical reflexivity are diff racted throughout everyday life.

Conclusion

Perfect care is as impossible as pure kinship is senseless. Instead of trying to build a consistent picture of moral norms or virtues, I have attempted to foreground the minute dilemmas of Warao daily life, taking my inspiration from recent debates in the anthropology of ethics and morality. People criticise others and regret their own shortcomings, but their constant quarrels are also productive on a relational level: they carve (actual) kinship out of pervasive (potential) relatedness, so to speak. It is therefore possible to argue that kinship is limited by itself. Care is the stuff of kinship, because it is due to relatives and because it turns people into relatives. Yet neglect is inevitable and causes quarrels that cut relations. There is a dual process of making and unmaking kinship, so that one is not merely the absence of the other: the work of relating is constantly mirrored by that of disconnecting. Moreover, following Strathern’s (1988) insights, it is important to emphasise that disconnection always creates the possibility for a different kind of relation. Indeed, former household members may turn into relatives who give raw food to each other; and people who could have been relatives (but are not) may become potential marriage partners (see Calavia 2005: 119).

From that perspective, kinship among the Warao of the Orinoco Delta does not represent a domain or an idiom, a natural given or an ontological principle of mutuality (Sahlins 2013), but rather an ethical project that entails a specific form of sociality. Care is by essence a particular gaze and concern, which means both that generic relations must always be particularised and that it can only be performed in interpersonal relations. Indeed, Warao kinship is characterised by ego-centred networks of relatives but does not define any group – even households are mere temporary bundles of relations, a relative ‘we’. If it has an internal limit, as I have tried to argue, it also contrasts
to a different orientation: a process of collectivisation rather than differentiation. Kelly Luciani (2016) has demonstrated that this opposition is at the heart of interactions between Yanomami and non-indigenous Venezuelans: the former strive to ‘make people’ whereas the latter want to ‘make society’, that is to say, to build durable institutions, reinforce community organisation and the sense of the common good. To put it provocatively, we may understand it as an opposition between kinship and the state.

This contrast is canonical and has been criticised by Butler (2000) in her analysis of Sophocles’ Antigone. She argues that the play does not merely portray a conflict between the particularity of kinship (Antigone’s desire to bury her brother because he is her brother) and the generality of the law (Creon’s decree forbidding his burial), because kinship generates its own contradictions (‘kinship trouble’). When Antigone asserts the ‘radical particularity’ of her brother Òedipus, she omits that she has two other brothers whose deaths she does not grieve properly, which she has to neglect in order to mourn Òedipus. Butler’s interpretation chimes with my own understanding of Warao kinship and of care as a self-contradictory ideal. However, in the context of contemporary lowland South America, I suggest we keep the opposition between kinship and the state as coexisting antithetical orientations. The Warao often resist external attempts to have them constitute communities (Allard forthcoming), and I believe that this is largely a side-effect of the particularisation enacted by kinship. In many parts of lowland South America, strong indigenous communities have certainly been built, but there is often at least a hiatus between the community as an institution and kinship relations, even when the former serves to protect the latter (Sarmiento Barletti 2016). In the Orinoco Delta, conversely, communities hardly exist as such: when the headman of Burojo was criticised for favouring his relatives, he was actually not accused of corruption, of privatising public resources, but rather of stinginess, of disregarding the needs of other villagers. Kinship has probably been transformed by political resources and enrolled in electoral clienteles, but it has remained the Warao’s main form of relating.

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OLIVIER ALLARD is Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at EHESS in Paris and holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge. He has conducted fieldwork in Venezuela since 2007, and more recently in Guyana, in both cases mostly with indigenous people. Building on an original interest in kinship, morality and emotion, he has increasingly focused on relations between indigenous people and nation-states. Email: olivier.allard@ehess.fr; ORCID: 0000-0001-6562-2597.
Notes

1. Unless stated otherwise, all terms in italics are in Warao, an isolated Amerindian language.
2. To be stingy with something: verb *wani-kitane* + object. To be stingy as a personality trait: adjective *kohi*.
3. *Burojo* means ‘island’. I use this pseudonym to protect the privacy of the villagers, whose names I have also changed.
4. This is one explanation (among others) for the lasting prevalence of debt relationships in the area: when fishermen receive some goods on credit and are indebted to a boss, they can refuse demands because their catch already belongs to their boss, whereas they could never save enough money to buy, say, a fishing net in cash.
5. Possessive + *warao* means ‘relative’, reciprocal + *warao* means ‘related’, with *warao* being classically not a mere ethnonym but also a term for ‘people’ functioning as a first-person pronoun (Viveiros de Castro 1998).
6. Warao people distinguish between ‘giving’ (*moa-kitane*) to people who also give to them – which amounts to sharing – and ‘giving in return’ (*diboto moa-kitane*) – which implies reciprocity.
7. Kinship is usually cognatic in lowland South America, but often with a Dravidian terminology that divides everyone between consanguines and affines (an opposition that admittedly has a concentric orientation, see Viveiros de Castro and Fausto 1993). Among the Warao, however, kinship is reckoned indiscriminately through men and women, through same-sex and cross-sex relations. See also note 8.
8. Warao kinship terminology is Hawaianian at G0 (i.e., merging), which is common in lowland South America. At G+1, it is Sudanese, with a distinction between parents, parents’ parallel siblings, and parents’ cross siblings. Only at G-1, and only for a male ego, do we find a bifurcate merging terminology (for a female ego, the terminology is merging). There are different sets of terms for a male and a female ego. In all cases, there are specific terms for affines, and no kin term refers to a potential spouse or affiliate (see Allard 2010: 96–97; Heinen 1988: 627–634). While it is difficult to ascribe different behaviours to distinct categories of consanguines (although there is a marked contrast between consanguines and affines), it is still meaningful to be able to treat someone as a specific rather than as a generic relative (see Stasch 2009: 106–107).

References


Paresse et mesquinerie : l’efficacité négative du souci des autres et la dynamique de la parenté dans le delta de l’Orénoque, Venezuela

Résumé : Dans les basses terres d’Amérique du Sud, le souci des autres (ou care) est une pratique éthique constitutive des relations de parenté. En m’appuyant sur le cas des Warao, un peuple autochtone du Venezuela, je complexifie ce lien entre care et parenté de deux manières interdépendantes : tout d’abord, en soulignant l’impossibilité de prendre parfaitement soin d’autrui (le souci des autres représentant une attention aux besoins spécifiques de personnes particulières, il est inévitable qu’il conduise à en négliger d’autres) ; ensuite, en reconnaissant que les relations de parenté doivent être créées mais aussi rompues. Les deux volets de cet argument représentent une tentative de montrer que le côté obscur du lien entre care et parenté est productif sur le plan relationnel. Dans la mesure où c’est la mémoire des actes nourriciers et de soin qui fonde les relations de parenté, les disputes suscitées par des accusations réciproques de paresse et de mesquinerie déclenchent des dynamiques de séparation qui ont des implications à long terme. On se souvient du care mais on reconnaît aussi ses limites, en particulier lors de la mort des personnes concernées, et cette réflexivité contribue à son caractère proprement éthique.

Mots-clés : Care; Éthique; Nourriture; Générosité; Parenté; Moralité ; Nourrissement.