



Pan-Tribal Confederacy of Indigenous Tribal Nations

The Only Multi-Racial Worldwide Indigenous Confederacy In Existence

The Nature of the Amerindian People with Respect to Authority Figures.

“Amerindians, traditionally, are quiet and peaceable people. They do not rebel without cause, and then only if misled. Amerindians by nature are reticent. They are not readily forthcoming with strangers, especially if confronted at the same time with someone “in authority”. Their timidity and reticence would be tinged with fear, following the bloody events of the Rupununi Uprising.” Thus wrote W.M. Ridgewell (1972) in “The Forgotten Tribes of Guyana”

The article below by Shefa Siegel, (from Corpwatch, an environmental watchdog group) shows the interaction between Mr Joe Singh (Retired Brigadier General) that demonstrates this deference to authority, even to their own detriment and that of their own community.

by Shefa Siegel, Special to CorpWatch, December 22nd, 2003

“Inside the two room mud house there is shade from the relentless equatorial sun. Ekufa Muwasha, the embattled Wai Wai chief-or Toshao-of Parabara Landing, reclines gracefully in a double-weave hammock, one leg dangling over the side as he gently sways. At times he talks so quietly I have to strain to hear him, but the softness in his voice does nothing to diminish the weight of his words. "This may start a war if the protected area is established," Ekufa explains.

In the summer of 2002, Toshao Ekufa met secretly with Washington-based Conservation International and signed his name to a controversial letter requesting that Parabara become the northernmost border of the proposed Southern Guyana Protected Area. This appeal, intended to signal the consent of the region's Amerindian tribes to the Guyanese government's conservation process, triggered the announcement that Conservation International would serve as the so-called management authority during the creation of a protected area the size of New Jersey.

Among Wapishanas living in Parabara the sense of betrayal was so profound that news of Ekufa's move raised cries not only for his dismissal as village leader, but for his head. One Wapishana proposed hoisting Ekufa's severed head on a pole in the center of the village, offering that "He can rule that way." Another villager suggested Ekufa's limbs be tied and his body cast into a canoe and floated downriver. Ekufa responded by threatening violence against Wapishanas.

But to Wapishanas, Ekufa's newfound alliance with Conservation International also signaled a transformation in his willingness to share ownership rights between both tribes. "Since Conservation International, Ekufa started putting Wai Wais like this and Wapishanas like this," one villager says, pointing skyward for Wai Wais and down for Wapishanas. "That's why we don't want him as leader."

"Everything was fine, we had no problem accepting him as Toshao," says Lawrence, referring to the fact that Ekufa had been elected despite moving to Parabara less than five years ago. "But now," he trails off dejectedly, looking towards a banana tree next to his house.

For his part, Ekufa does or says little to dispel the notion that his perception of ownership rights has changed. As he slowly unravels his rationale for bypassing the village council before negotiating with CI, he repeatedly

returns to idea that Wai Wai culture remains more intact, more authentically Amerindian, than Wapishana culture, and that this cultural authenticity gives the Wai Wai the only legitimate claim to the village. Finally, I ask Ekufa why he is now convinced, after living side-by-side with Wapishanas for years, even marrying a Wapishana, that the Wai Wai are the only tribe to have preserved their culture. "Major-General said so," he answers.

Major-General is Joe Singh, under whom Ekufa and other Wai Wais served while Singh was head of the Guyana Defense Forces. He is now Executive Director of Conservation International-Guyana, but among the Wai Wai Singh still commands the reverence reserved for a military leader. It was Singh who engineered the letter from Ekufa, and delivered it to the government. "Major-General said that we have to write the letter," Ekufa explains. "I told him, 'We don't know what to say, you have to write it'. So he told us what to say, and we wrote the letter."

This assertion, that it was Singh not the Wai Wai who initiated the letter, was also recorded by the elected District Chairman, Vincent Henry, who wrote in a letter to the government that "It was disturbing to find out that the letter to the President (edited by the villagers) was written by Major General Joe Singh." In the same letter, Henry protested that CI bypassed local democratic institutions in a series of undisclosed meetings with the Wai Wai which only later were explicitly defined as part of the protected areas process. "It seems that a deliberate effort was made to sideline the Regional Democratic Council in the whole matter," Henry wrote. "This, I must say, contributed in a great way to what is happening in Parabara."

When I spoke with Henry months later, he was still concerned about the tension in Parabara, saying despondently, "There were some problems before CI, but nothing like this."

Singh, however, maintains that at no point did CI drive the consultation process, insisting that "The Government of Guyana led the process - not CI - and invited the participation of the advocacy groups." More to the point, CI rejects outright the suggestion that the conservation process resulted in any kind of serious conflict in Parabara. Acknowledging only that there was a disagreement between the Wai Wai and Wapishana, CI's Media Relations Manager in Washington, Brad Philips, called the suggestion that the inter-tribal conflict had escalated to the brink of violence "totally ludicrous."

Meanwhile, Singh contends that any conflict was settled by a government-led consultation team, which gained the support of Wapishana villagers after agreeing to relax the timetable on making the boundary of the protected area extend as far north as Parabara. "The Wai Wai and Wapishanas continue to live in harmony without any hint of conflict," Singh says.

Still, reports from sources who have visited the village as recently as November say the tribal conflict persists. "They don't know," the source says. "There is still a problem in there. They're out in Georgetown, they don't know what's going on here. It has become a bit more quiet since CI stopped concentrating on Parabara for a while, but CI created a division between Wai Wais and Wapishanas that won't be easy to mend, and I'm personally convinced that it will never be peaceful there again."

Shefa Siegel is a freelance environmental writer who has worked with indigenous groups in Guyana and British Columbia.