

**Grotti, Vanessa. 2022. *Nurturing the Other. First Contacts and the Making of Christian Bodies in Amazonia*. London, New York: Berghahn Books. 212 pp. \$135.00/£99.00. ISBN: 9781800734586.**

Book review by

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This book is a captivating and dense portrait of the consequences of an episode of “cumulative evangelism” orchestrated in the 1960s by North American Protestant missionaries that brought along recently converted Trio people as assistants in expeditions to reach previously uncontacted Amerindian tribes.

The protagonists of this study are the Trio people, a Carib-speaking group spread across Suriname, French Guiana, and Brazil, themselves contacted in the late Fifties by Western missionaries and immediately converted to Christianity, together with neighboring tribes of Wayana. Adhesion to Christianity implied the Trio disowning their traditional beliefs, including their shamanic practices for which they were respected and feared, adopting a sedentary, peaceful lifestyle, avoiding warfare, and establishing relations with neighboring peoples through exchange and trade. The Trio lived in villages that were originally mission posts; the missionaries lived with them, watching over their progress as “civilized” people, teaching them religious principles and practices but also agriculture and generally a life outside of the forest – even though the Trio are known as “forest people” by other Amerindians of this geographical area.

Considering several previous ethnographic studies of Lowland South American peoples, the Trio’s traditional lifestyle, their encounters with Christianity, and various alterities, the author focuses on a dualism that has powerfully emerged in her data: peacefulness versus fierceness. The tension between these extremes is inherent in the Trio notion of personhood. Peacefulness is described as a quality, a bodily state, and an ideal used as

a self-definition by the Trio, that - depending on the interlocutor - define themselves as Christian, and, more often, as “peaceful/happy”. Fierceness is a dangerous bodily and social state strongly associated with the forest's “wild people”, predation, warfare, lack of trading alliances, and close relations with the spirit world. The missionaries, interested in stabilizing the Trio and having peacefulness prevail in their social practices, associated fierceness with the devil and the invisible world of spirits.

The book closely follows the Trio in their daily activities and illustrates their relationship with close and distant kin, trading partners, and urban people, the social organization that has characterized their life in recent decades, given the increased communication and access to modern goods. Inter-village feasts and their double form of nurture, feeding, entertaining, and various aspects of conviviality are thoroughly described and cleverly analyzed. Beautiful pictures and diagrams complete and enrich the text. Grotti explains how such village convivial practices have changed in the recent past due to the missionaries' impositions of a Christian ethos, convincingly quoting extracts of conversations with the locals, evoking the past, and considering the transformations they experienced.

These data set the background for understanding the unique bond that the Trio have developed with the Akuriyo tribe members they contributed to contact, forcing them to leave their nomadic livelihood to become sedentary and live within their settlements.

The original encounter between these different groups started with a peaceful exchange of goods. However, the initial interactions are described as extremely risky since the then uncontacted Akuriyo embodied “wildness” and fierceness and were potentially dangerous. Their motivation to allow the foreigners into their forest space was allegedly fueled by their curiosity about the goods they offered. Eventually, the Akuriyo were persuaded to abandon the forest, settle in the Trio villages, and switch to a long-term, stable, sedentary life. The Trio's narrative of these events and their justification for the incorporation of former potential enemies is centered around the didascallic objective of domesticating, socializing and nurturing these peoples who lacked the basics of humanity, teaching them education and the principles of peaceful life in a village, and convert them to Christianity.

This relationship is unique, though, because Akuriyo's incorporation did not result in the merging of the two groups. Rather, each group sits in specific locations within the village; namely, the Trio/Wayana occupy the center of the village while the Akuriyo live in the peripheric borders; they never intermarry; hence, they cannot be turned into affines, and their relation is asymmetric and clearly hierarchical. The Trio host the

Akuriyo, nurture them, and consider themselves as their “guardians”; in fact, they control them, taking advantage of their hunting skills, appropriating their achievements, and their material culture, tapping into their capacity to deal with the forest spirits and animals, skills that the Trio has neglected and lost.

These same elements of hosting and controlling through nurture are highlighted in the fascinating description and analysis of the communal feasts, where the Trio downplay consanguine relations while attracting affines, who are symbolically incorporated. Such parties, however, are not a form of symmetrical socialization: amongst other things, they allow the hosts to assert control over those who attend. This is accomplished through the distribution of abundant manioc beer, a taming substance that promotes collective happiness only if ingested and regurgitated rather than absorbed. The way to deal with alcoholic intake reveals not only the maturity of individuals but also the social ineptitude of those unable to control their bodies and avoid drunkenness, like the Akuriyo.

The relation that the Trio carved with the Akuriyo is strongly asymmetrical and they justify their narrative of superiority to the “wild, forest people”, with the fact that they were civilized only recently through pacification, and remain fundamentally unskilled at simple tasks such as gardening, cooking bread, personal hygiene and aesthetics. As such, they depend on the Trio, who marginalize and despise them, keep them under close supervision, and often corner and bully them. This process of consolidating ambiguous relationships merging enemy capture, adoption, social predation, and nurture is vividly discussed and theorized against rich ethnographic and historical backgrounds throughout the book.

Aptly, the Trio term for nurture/child upbringing translates as “undoing the spider monkey”. For the Trio, both in their collective parties socializing affines and in their incorporation and submission of the Akuriyo, others remain others; nurture does not necessarily make kin out of others, but rather it maintains and reinforces their alterity.