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Learning and Growing in Indigenous Amazon: the Education System of French Guiana Wayana-Apalaï communities

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Abstract

This paper presents the first results obtained from an exploratory study conducted with a Wayana-Apalaï indigenous community living in the High Maroni region in French Guiana. The study is situated within an ecological and interactionist approach and attempts (1) to understand educational family practices and community logic of the training of children and (2) to describe parents' expectations vis-à-vis their children as a postmodern dynamic. The ethnographic corpus was gathered during a period of five years with the aim to link observed behaviors with contextual and cultural variables. Following the analysis of the data, the authors propose a diagram of a) the micro-systems structuring the Wayana-Apalaï kinship system; b) a description of parental roles and educational functions; and c) an overview of parental expectations in terms of "traditional success"/ "school success".

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Keywords: parenting, cultural minority, traditional success, school success, French Guiana Wayana.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the present time, French Guiana hosts a growing Wayana-Apalaï indigenous community. Nomads started to occupy the Guyana shield less than two centuries ago as an effect of the pressure of colonization. Their ancestors were known as Roucouyennes - because of the habit of painting their bodies in red with the fruit of *achiote or roucou* (*Bixa orellana*) - and Oupouloui, as described by the paradigmatic works of French geographer Jean-Marcel Hurault (1968, 1972). Nowadays, the Wayana and Apalaï of French Guiana have abandoned the nomad lifestyle and established their homes in the indigenous villages of the Haut Maroni region (the southern sector of

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the Maroni river): Elahé, Cayodé, Twenké, Taluwen, Antecume Pata and Pidima on the French side; and Anapaiké, Alawa and Koumakapan on the Surinamese side.

A new sedentary lifestyle for the indigenous communities of Guiana has been facilitating interactions between traditional and modern ways of life, with the school playing the role of main vector (Grenand, 2000; Grenand and Lescure, 1990). In fact, from a postcolonial point of view, the school has acted as a balance in a dynamic of encounters and disagreements between different values, models of social organization and communication systems, with an obvious inclination towards the “development” of native people, their “modernization”, and, last but not least, their “education”: in a few words, their behavioral change. In the last decades, some transformation has been put into operation to develop pedagogical tools and practices to improve quality and to make the organization of primary education easier in this Department/Region of France (Maurel, 2010, 2012). Nevertheless, some scholars complain about the need to increase awareness between French elementary teachers working with indigenous children in a remote duty station, with no anthropological or linguistic training (Alby and Launey, 2007). If the linguistic field has been catching the attention of a greater part of scholars working in this field, studies on family education practices of minority groups are limited and insufficient. This is the reason why we hereby try to focus on it and why we hope our work could be a contribution to this domain.

2. Systemic interaction and social ecology: a theoretical framework

Our work is based both on an interactionist-symbolic approach (Mead, 1928, 1930; Blumer, 1969) and on an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). The first one is focused on giving a sense to interpersonal performances: interpretation will take into consideration the interactive situation and the sense will be attributed to gestural and language symbols shared by a community (Blumer, 1969). Following this option, we considered presenting the results of our observations underlining the role played by family, as well as the meanings and values attributed to parents’ behavior. As described by Garfinkel (1967), this approach rally also an ethno-methodological vision because the researcher has to be involved in the meaning - construction process with the other actors during their everyday lives in order to understand the « common sense » as assumed by community members. The second one has to be considered as a ground model: animating a large number of scholars, it has been declined in countless explanatory and comprehensive models (Levine, 1967; Berry, 1971; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ogbu 1985; Super & Harkness, 1986; Valsiner, 1987). Three of them in particular have inspired our research.

- The eco-cultural framework fashioned by Berry (1971, 1976, and 1995) considers that individuals and their environment develop in mutual influences: culture is the functional adaptation of behavior of the ecological and socio-political context. Individual and collective diversity is the result of a series of mutual adaptations. According to its creator and from a macro-environmental point of view, this model is above all a general paradigm, useful to comparative studies and to show both cultural diversity and the cultural pressure applied on behavior by transmission and acculturation.
- The developmental model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that a set of systems, interlinked and interlocked, act on cognitive child development. A micro-system (the nearest environment) is included into a meso-system (the set of micro-systems), which is included into an exo-system (the external forces – policies, economics, law enforcement - with an effect on micro-systems). All are held in a macro-system (remote forces with a long term influence, like culture and values). Bronfenbrenner’s theory of the ecological system tries to understand the global context where children evolve, considering systems to be in a constant, interactive dynamic with the internal structure: the child. Bronfenbrenner’s macro-approach has been completed by a bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci 1994; Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 2005), more focused on the micro-system role and on the positive development of children.

- The cultural-ecological model shaped by Ogbu is based on a macro-sociological theory and it draws the micro and macro approaches closer. His model is more “holistic”, integrating economic, political, cognitive and behavioral structures. In addition, Ogbu underlined in his work the difference between the « volunteer minorities » (and the immigrants’ children) and the « unwitting minorities », incorporated by the majority society against their will, as an effect of imperialism or slavery: Afro-American, Indigenous and Chicanos people in the United States by way of example (Ogbu, 1978, 1985, 1987). To understand the different rates of school success between unwitting minorities, the author suggests the hypothesis that they build a peculiar and very own cultural system. He also proposes four items for analyzing them: (1) a common sense theory about social success, (2) a fluctuating identity of language and culture, (3) a self-contradictory cultural framework and, finally, (4) a lack of confidence on the dominant elite (Ogbu, 1992). This conceptualization of the unwitting minorities’ notion is very useful for understanding the present condition of the Wayana-Apalai people.

3. Doing research in French Amazonia: the case and the method

According to the theoretical framework that leads our work, we have developed qualitative research, favoring the ethnographic observation and completed by informal interviews. We consider that deep fieldwork within the Wayana-Apalai community was an honest way to observe family practices during the daily, monthly and annual cycles. Due to the context of research (living the indigenous family life in the Amazonian jungle), note-taking was sometimes impossible during the observation, nevertheless a journal of the experience was recorded at every possible time.

Both authors of this article developed fieldwork in Antecume Pata. One of us carried out a punctual observation during various stays of at least one week: the immersion was granted by the status of guest within a Wayana family and by the opacity of observations (our observer status was not announced with the aim of not perturbing the natural development of events and practices). The other author moved to the village as a long-term resident, working as a substitute teacher at the local elementary school between 2011 and 2013. Our position was intentional and motivated by a double form of objectification:

- An external position of strangeness for the first observer which needed a gradual appropriation and understanding of the Wayana-Apalai social environment, through direct observation (not as a participant) and a comprehensive approach: the problem was « to make familiar what is stranger » ;
- An internal position of participant observation for the second observer, needing to remain aloof with the aim of « grasping » the native point of view: here the problem was « to make stranger what is familiar ».

Our comprehensive option combined our representations with the parents’ representations. This combination gave us the opportunity to link the researcher’s point of view (which would translate scientific objectivity by a « natural » description of the context) with the parents’ point of view (which represents subjectivity linked to declared practices).

The communities where we worked at comprised Wayana and Apalai host families, with some Tiriyo and Wayapi individuals. A high number of people were born in Brazil or Suriname, but most of the young and adult people were born in French Guiana and they hold a French passport. Their villages are settled on the riverbanks or on islands surrounded by the Maroni River, all along the border with Suriname. Our research extends to the villages of Antecume Pata, Twenke, Talwen and Cayode. Those isolated communities, located at a distance of more than 300 km from Cayenne, the capital of the Department, in what is also known as the « indigenous country », all dispose of primary schools (we have to note here that the notion of « indigenous country » is, obviously, a colonial category, referent to the nostalgic image of a savage Amazon, a green hell filled by red Indians, far away from any source of civilization). The first school in this sector of the French Amazon was established at Antecume Pata in a peculiar way. This little indigenous village was founded in 1965 by André

Cognat, a former worker from Lyon who had left his western life to live in the Amazon. He became part of the Wayana community in 1961 and was renamed as Antecume. Four years later, he founded his own village (translated as pata in the Wayanan language), Antecume Pata, located on the French side of the Maroni River (Cognat, 1967, 1977). Observing the top-down (still colonial) relationships between the indigenous community and the local administration, Antecume decided to give to villagers of all ages a basic scholar training. It was, in fact, the first school experience for the indigenous people of the Haut Maroni region. The first goal to achieve was the learning of writing competences: a team of local trainers was trained and, over twenty years, some generations of indigenous people learned at school outside of institutional education but, as explained by some of Antecume's ancient pupils, « our school gave us the opportunity to understand better the French institutions and bureaucracy. We learned how to survive in town, in Maripasoula, Cayenne or Saint-Laurent du Maroni! ». This sense of surviving was a factor that other villagers consider to be a link to the demographic boom of Wayana people during the last twenty years. Did Antecume's school give them the inspiration for reflection on their ethnic identity? Or did it create a hybrid community of practices, a postcolonial effect of the ethnic transfiguration imagined by Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro (1971)? For a wider discussion on ethnic transfiguration, see also Ali, 2010). It is possible, but not very certain. What is certain however is that, in the villagers' representation, it served as a propeller for more balanced dialogue with the French Republic. The experiment achieved (and advanced) its goals: in 1986 the school was integrated into the public departmental apparatus and became the Antecume Pata Public Elementary School. Entrance was limited to school age children with adults excluded. Planning and educational targets were changed to apply to the national syllabus. For Antecume Pata people, it was like a revolution: we consider that as the starting point of their “unwitting minority” condition.

Antecume dealt with local education officials to preserve the training in the written Wayana language. Until 2008 it represented the entrance door for the writing training, as well as an experimental specificity. Teachers worked with the support of an ILM, a Mother Tongue Assistant (*Intervenant en Langue Maternelle*) and in the first year of school, the preparatory class (*Classe Préparatoire*) was doubled: one year in Wayana and the other one in the French language (see also Maurel, 2012). The Antecume Pata experience was an isolated case for the indigenous people of French Guyana. Other communities were not able to follow that example and so had to accept the imposed republican schooling. The establishment of schools into the « indigenous country », especially on the Maroni side, is recent: Twenke opened its school in 1972, Elahe in 1985 and Cayode in 1990. They represent the privileged vehicle of contact with the western world: for their artifacts, the knowledge they dispense, but also the norms, the style of work, the economic and power relationships that this conveys and obviously, for the people working within: for more than fifty years, teachers in indigenous schools were European and they carried with them their lifestyle, also living in the jungle. In 2012, the first indigenous teacher of French Guiana started working at the Antecume Pata Elementary School. He and his current colleagues of the Haut Maroni region inherit a system where all school age children are sent to school and where most of parents are persuaded that this school is a key social-elevation factor.

We therefore worked with families where most parents took elementary classes. Even if our first goal was to describe the Wayana family style, we also observed the evolution of parents' expectations within the systemic interactive dynamic context: a school is visibly a key factor to generating syncretic forms of values, beliefs and ambitions (in the sense of Ogbu, 1992).

4. Microsystems and indigenous family life

The education and training of young Wayana-Apalai was, before the advent of school, a family process. At the present day, two micro-systems participate, more than others, to build up their education: family and school. They also feel educated by other micro-systems: religious missions, television, internet and other media. However the family resists as a bastion of the essential Wayana-Apalai *Weltanschauung*. In fact, the indigenous

of French Guiana share a common vision of the family as an extended micro-system enlarged to parents' siblings' families (which also includes none-biologically-linked members). A child will therefore consider all of their mother's sisters as mothers and all of their father's brothers as fathers. On the other side, all of his mother's brothers and all of his father's sisters (*idest*, the opposite sex siblings of their parents) will be considered as parents-in-law, since their descendants are potential husbands/spouses for the child in question. It is a classical classificatory distinction based on sex and generation applied to kinship. The English language, with a similar classificatory option, gathers together the parents' siblings of the same sex and designates them, respectively, as uncles and aunts. We observed also that the family system in Antecume Pata involves both biological and acquired parents. As a case in point, a child will recognize authority and the educational role of both his biological father and his father-in-law equally.

For a Wayana-Apalaï child, there are as many family micro-systems as there are uncles and aunts. In one way or another, all community members are connected by a family link, so every community member could be classified into the kinship pattern of every other member. The family link crosses borders, so the Wayana-Apalaï people of French Guiana have relatives living in Suriname or Brazil: all of them share a common perception of family community. It is an identity concern based more on family than on ethnicity. What do we mean? We are talking about the fact that, as we observed, the linking factor connecting them is kinship and not a western (and ethnocentric) concept as "ethnicity". Thus, if we refer to the Bronfenbrenner model, the micro-systems influencing the child life correspond to all families where there is someone who the child considers as their father or mother. This set of micro-systems, to which we have to add the school micro-system, forms the Wayana-Apalaï meso-system.

5. Parental performances and personal development

The ethnographic approach gave us the opportunity to observe directly during everyday life how the local (traditional) knowledge and the capabilities and skills linked to the Amazonian environment are transmitted. In short, we could classify Wayana-Apalaï learning into three fields: every field will be transmitted above all by a care-giving, family micro-system (even though there are other micro-systems in the village that form part of the child's training, as shamans, musicians or artisans).

- Cultural knowledge (the knowledge, *strictu sensu*), incorporated in cosmology, shamanism, music, graphical arts, oral history and immaterial heritage (tales, legends, rituals, territorial representation, geographical and astronomical references);
- Technical capabilities (the know-how), that we could consider as the concrete response of Wayana-Apalaï people to distinctive features of their environment. We are talking about the hunting and fishing "art", gastronomy and brewing of *cachiri* (a beer of fermented cassava, *Manihot esculenta*), as well as weaving cotton, basketry in *arouman* (*Ischnosiphon arouma*), the manufacture of pirogues and building of huts;
- Social skills (manners and life management competences), represented by their ecosophical *Weltanschauung* (their world-vision based on the natural environment they occupy) and their way to act in the social landscape that they live at: management of resources, cycle of life, rhythms of work, prevention and resolution of community disputes.

The dynamic of education in a Wayana-Apalaï house assigns to every family member very specific roles and responsibilities. During the fieldwork, we observed a large number of family interactions linked to child training. For the purposes of this article, we will only describe the most representative.

We could start with the Wayana-Apalaï mothers who literally carry their babies in their arms all day long with the aid of a shoulder bag, the *bandoulière*: it is a little cotton hammock where children can sit or stretch out, maintaining skin-to-skin contact with their mothers. As you can imagine, breastfeeding is much easier and the possible stress or pain experienced by the child are quickly overcome due to its proximity with the mother. A significant number of mothers keep on carrying their children in a *bandoulière* until they are three years old.

Normally, after the “plunge”, the children keep on suckling up to the age of three or four years. The mother is in charge of the child’s language training: she will teach them “how to” talk and how to distinguish the words (and to conceptualize them) linked with everyday family life. Indeed, between Wayana-Apalaï people, “children are never alone [...]. Someone will try to understand the baby talk because all issues concerning children need an answer. Someone else will decrypt the future personality of the child by paying close attention to their behavior: those almost ethological (sic!) observations can determine the name the child will receive when they are able to walk without any aid [...]. Crying is considered as a serious threat for the child’s development, so parents do all they can to avoid such a crisis: less talented women for this type of conciliation fall short on their reputation” (Hurault et al. 1998:140, translated by the authors). When children reach a certain autonomy at about three years of age, the mother’s role will be to train her daughters on household chores and home life: the tools and timings for cooking, settlement and spaces of the orchards (*abattis*), how to spin cotton to transform it and weave shoulder bags or hammocks and, above all, the basic social competences that, in short, we can define as being respect for the other members of community and the availability to be ready at every moment to properly receive and welcome every possible guest of the family. The sons will be trained on skills that, as resumed by an Antecume Pata villager, consist in “knowing how to take care of themselves”. Children will learn the dangers hidden in the house, the village, the orchard: the fire that burns, the caterpillar that bites, the river that drowns.

The educative role of the father is strictly linked to landscapes and spaces under the competence of the Wayana-Apalaï men: the river and the forest. He will train his daughters to “understand” the ecosystem where they live so that when they grow up, they will be able to recognize the different noises and sounds of the forest, the different species of animals and how to prepare them for cooking. Fathers take back home a good choice of prey, representing a model to show to his daughters what a good hunter has to take back to nourish the family: a warning message too, so that the daughters can understand that the husbands they choose must be able to do the same thing (or better, if possible). The boys will be trained in the art of living in a forest and a river environment, to become “a good father”: hunting (with a bow and arrow for the younger ones and with a shotgun for teenagers), fishing (and its different techniques: archery; poisoning river water with the juice of rotenone extracted from lianas of *Lonchocarpus spp.* gender; lines and hooks; nets or traps in form of creels, for carnivorous predators such as *aïmara*, *Hoplias aimara*); weaving baskets with *arouman* fibers and manufacturing of farming tools; fabrication and driving of pirogues (starting with a paddle and, when a teenager, learning with an outboard motor) and finally, assembling a cabin. It is a slow and progressive learning process, a training path where the child “carried out everything according to his rhythm: eating, sleeping, fishing with his short line. He has probably bothered an adult with his movements, his noises; or he has probably scared a fish away. Even, no order will be proffered, no menace, and the child will not be reprimanded” (Hurault et al. 1998: 142, translated by the authors).

We have to underline that this pattern of family training (vertical and asymmetric) works until adolescence. After that, the teenagers will start a path of horizontal training (symmetric) where the role of parents diminishes in order to leave more space to other actors: friends, associates and same generation family members. For boys, more than girls, adolescence is the age of autonomy “when they form gangs, when the oldest ones serve as a model more than the father himself, whose influence is now more discrete. It is the age of risk, the age when they start hunting in little groups and even alone, and when they get lost during one or two long days in the jungle” (Hurault et al. 1998: 144, translated by the authors).

Grandparents are in charge of the child’s training in the field of hygiene and health, thanks to their knowledge of traditional remedies. They are also the keystone of oral literature and oral heritage transmission (Chapuis and Rivière, 2003). As demonstrated by Suzy Platiel’s ethno-linguistic works, such tales are genuine educative institutions for oral tradition societies, as in the Wayana-Apalaï case (Platiel, 1993). Indeed, the grandparents’ work contributes to developing listening, attention, hearing and memory skills, as well as the skills related to language (lexical and syntactical), to determine logical relations (and not only at the cause-effect level), to construct hypotheses and arguments and to solve everyday issues. It is interesting to note the position of children

“offered” to grandparents: a customary opportunity to grant them with an already weaned child, although not the firstborn. According to the principle of uxori-local residence (even if we observe some anomalies to the principle), children are not separated from their parents since the adoptive family house is the same as (or very close to) the natural family house. Grandparents will act as real parents: for them, the only condition to the offering is to have suitable space, time and resources to nourish and train the child. They are social parents and the child will recognize them as “parallel parents” along with their biological parents, even with their parents-in-law. In the Wayana-Apalaï culture, lineages do not erase each other: they are cumulative (so every community member can embody different degrees of kinship for every other community member) and they form a complex net of relationships that some functionalist could interpret as an inclusive pattern, where every community member could be considered also as a family member.

Other family members have very concrete responsibilities for children. Elder brothers and sisters will be in charge of helping the same-sex younger ones to discover the world: they represent a model for closer (and easier) action in view of the adult’s one (and, above all, less demanding in case of failure). Uncles and aunts will treat their fictive filiations exactly as they would their natural children, with the same care, same discipline, same rigor... and same love.

Finally, other community members also interact with children’s education, even if they are not directly linked with their lineage. Among all of them, shamans play very important roles, not limited to native (and syncretistic) therapies and ethno-biology knowledge, but rather as a manager of the *marake*: a ritual practiced less and less that most of younger people have never seen. *Marake* is the essential ritual of the Wayana-Apalaï culture: a celebration spread over several months which brings *tepiem* (the initiated people) into a new stage of their life. The ceremonies include a series of force and courage trials, *kalau* (cosmological and mythological) chant and traditional dance rehearsals. The final, and culminating point, is the application (really a soft touch) on the *tepiem* bodies of a *kunana*, a basket holding a large number of ants and wasps that will bite the *tepiem*, giving them the power to be reborn – after days of starvation - as real (and authentic) Wayana-Apalaï people. *Marake* could not be interpreted as a ritual passage because traditionally every community member has the opportunity to pass their trials seven times in the course of their life. We prefer to consider it as a restarting point to underline, in a performing way, the entering to a new stage of life. It is a contact point between the state of Nature (represented by *kunana*) and the state of Culture (the rebirth as Wayana-Apalaï social people). In addition, exactly as previewed by Lévi-Strauss for other similar “anthropological contact points” (1969), it is universal and normative, running up the *tepiem* (and the entire community) into a transcendent stage where they act “beyond nature and culture”. Besides their concrete functions (in the field of medicine and social therapy, as Masters of the Spirits), shamans are respected by the community as being sage, savant and discreet: they assure peace and justice into the villages, they establish agreement for villagers and, above all, they guarantee the harmony between humans and nature (as in the case of disregarding an interdiction), as well as with spirits and dead souls (see also Ailincăi et al., 2012). For a Wayana-Apalaï child, a shaman is a reference point and an example of spiritual heroism.

According to the traditional outlook, for a young Wayana-Apalaï, success derives from the internalization of the three domains of knowledge to which we referred earlier. For a boy, the main goal is to be strong and courageous; to become a man capable of building his home and to respond to the natural household needs (hunting, fishing, maintenance of working tools, caring for infants); briefly, a devoted husband and an attentive father. For a girl, the main goal is to be able to manage her house opportunely, to brew a good quality *cachiri*, to attend a community celebration and, obviously, to be a devoted wife and an attentive mother. To successfully perform in their lives, a young Wayana-Apalaï has to grow up with a tough discipline of learning (also individually): thanks to that, he will acquire the skills needed to be considered as a real human being. *Marake* is a symbolic expression of this *Weltanschauung*.

Our observation according to what was observed before by other scholars in ethno-linguistic and anthropology studies (Hurault, 1968, 1972; Léna, 2000; Camargo, 2007; Dupuy, 2007): traditional educative practices are

already conserved and the customary roles attributed to the transmission/acquisition of knowledge are respected. It is one of the few domains that has resisted to the progress of the western way of life. Other domains did not resist this shock: for example, the traditional outfit - a little red loincloth called *camisa or kalimbe* - is already abandoned by most people. Only in Antecume Pata has the local school preserved the use of *camisa* and *kalimbe* as a form of “school uniform”, according to the wishes of the students’ parents.

6. Interactive dynamics between tradition and modernity

Even if the educative model that we presented, resulting from our fieldwork observations, seems to remain constant and loyal to the Wayana culture and heritage, parents’ declarations (and representation) during the interviews highlight a “progressive” dynamic related to their expectations focused, above all, on the children’s success. We use the term “progressive” from a postcolonial point of view: progress, in this case, is intended as a uni-linear (top-down imposed) way, a teleological path separating savagery from civilization.

We especially investigated parental representations during a series of seventeen interviews performed in Antecume Pata. Fifteen of them were able to speak fluent French, the other two were not French speaking at all (the exchange was facilitated by the ATSEM (*Agent Territorial Spécialisé des Ecoles Maternelles*), the primary school assistant, who assists the primary teacher in managing the daily work). Twelve of them were women and five were men; fifteen were 18 to 30 years old, two from 30 to 40 years old; one had only one child, three had two or three children and eleven have four or more children; four out of seventeen had a job (and a wage). By sampling the medium statistical data, our sample result representing a majority of women, was aged between 18 and 30, French-speaking, with more than three children and primarily in charge of the housework.

As remarked before, interviews were not structured; instead six questions served as a common thread with the aim to gather their opinions towards children’s success at school: (1) Why do you take your children to school? (2) Do you notice any differences between children who have gone to school and those who have never been to school (or stopped early)? Which ones? (3) What would you include into the school programs? (4) Do you prefer for the teacher to speak in Wayana-Apalaï or in French when at school? (5) Do you think it would be a good opportunity to have an open school for adult people during the afternoon, two or three times every week? (6) If so, do you think you would participate?

The data analysis showed how people are significantly still in agreement with traditional Wayana-Apalaï learning, but also how they give the same (or, sometimes, a bigger) significance to the school, even if the evoked reasons are substantially different (“to learn French”, “to learn something”, “to find work”, etc.): in all 17 interviews, parents underlined the importance of school, but only six parents agreed with the idea that their children had to go away to attend school. Eleven of them preferred their children to grow up and live their life in the village. The success is generally associated to the traditional idea of “being a good Wayana-Apalaï” (*idest*, good fathers and mothers), but a high number of parents preferred the “modern” – economic - ideal of a wage-earning job, possibly as a public officer (in the local police, the local school, the local hospital) or as carpenters, oarsmen or gold washers. Their answers fulfilled the proposition of Ti’iwan Couchili (representative coordinator at the FOAG - *Fédération des Organisations Autochtones de Guyane*, the Federation of French Guiana Native Organizations): “Elder Wayana-Apalaï knew how their children would be amputated of part of the knowledge they received. In exchange of this painful (but reflective) decision, which implies the abandonment of the semi-nomadic life, they hope that a little part of us would be able to reach those public territorial jobs: nuns, teachers... We believe this curiosity is linked to this availability to dialogue characterize, also today, the totality of southern French Guiana indigenous communities” (Couchili, 2010, p. 58). We interpret those newborn expectations as the umpteenth effect of an ethnic transfiguration transforming not only behaviors and practices, but also, and above all, their faith, representations and dreams.

Other works carried out between 2007 and 2011 corroborate the same conclusion about the parental representation of school significance into the village as a “cultural landscape”. In 2011, Garnier published the

results of his 2010 survey with Wayana families registered in the Junior Secondary School of Maripasoula (the only town in the High Maroni region) and when he asked “Do you want your sons and daughters to leave their home village to go to Secondary School?”, 14 families out of 16 answered affirmatively, expressing the desire to keep their children going to school to be integrated into French national society (in a wide sense, knowing that Wayana-Apalai have to travel to Cayenne, Kourou, Saint-Laurent du Maroni –in French Guiana - or further away to Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux or Toulouse to attend secondary school or university). Garnier’s study highlights the parents’ desire to see their children continue going to school, not only for junior secondary studies, but also for secondary and university studies, which is confirmed by the personal experience of Ti’iwan Couchili. She affirms that “Our generation is now in charge of evaluating the effects of the [national] educative system considering the expectations that led our parents to send us to school [...]. Well, if we do not have a successful model, it is difficult to abandon this decadent imaginary that has been shown to us for more than fifty years, since the opening in Camopi of the first primary school of the southern part of the country. French Guiana remains the last South American territory to have never promoted a local elite emanating from the regions considered as remote and to have always resisted intercultural education principles” (Couchili, 2010: 58). For that matter, in 2010 the French Guiana Board of Education created a Boarding School, the *Internat d’Excellence*, in Maripasoula with the aim of solving the problem of hosting all indigenous students of the local secondary schools. In addition, as remarked by Garnier, it is focused on building an appropriate environment, participating to success at school of children (Garnier, 2011). It is complicated to evaluate the *Internat d’Excellence* from our position (above all. due to the fact that it is too recent a creation), but ongoing research shows not only that it is creating social and psychological stress for students and their parents, but also that it has not achieved its objective to “train the students to excellence” (C. Sune, personal communication, March 15 2013).

The survey led in 2005 by Gourg (2010) showed the open-mindedness (and pragmatism) of young Wayana who have faced foreign language learning. Living on Haut Maroni, a multicultural river net, they are used to speaking not only their native language (Wayana or Apalai), but also the Sranan and the Aluku Tongo (Creole languages used by afro-descendants’ communities all along the Maroni River) with some basic notions of Portuguese (due to the presence of Brazilian diaspora), Dutch (because of the proximity with Suriname) and Chinese Mandarin (thanks to the local Chinese community that owns all the region’s low-cost general stores. Some speak other indigenous languages and all those who have gone to school speak, more or less timidly, French. The survey revealed that they would be more skilled in Portuguese and Spanish, even if they had to study English at school. Why do they “have” to study English though? The answer is because the parents themselves feel less concerned about the secondary schooling of their children. Due to these issues, they prefer to follow local teachers’ advice and preference is usually given to English.

7. Conclusions

Our concern to describe and understand the educative dynamic of the typical Wayana-Apalai family is limited, in this article, to the presentation of the social organization of the community and to the description of the educational “facts and occurrences” observed during fieldwork. An interaction-focused theoretical framework and an ecological model of interpretation have given us a double opportunity to present, on the one hand, family educational practices and, on the other, to show the dynamic generated by the interaction of the different micro-systems.

The results of our observations present an educative system based on non-coercive performances, an imitative learning with a limited number of interdictions (all linked to real, evident and concrete dangers), where knowledge is transmitted orally and contextualized in a systemic approach. As such, children are trained to create relational niches linked to the visible –tangible - world, as well as cosmological buildings based on myths and legends involving the supernatural (and invisible) world (Ailincăi et al., 2012). It is an education without

competition or discredit, a training aimed at empowering children and giving them an extremely precocious maturity.

Not so long ago, success for younger Wayana-Apalai people had more to do with the management of local knowledge related to the habitat. Our research has however highlighted the emergence of new parental expectations, linked to schooling and the labor market. We are at the front of a typical transfigurative dynamic generated by systemic interactions: a post-colonial context where most of the micro, meso, exo and macro-systems represent western values and practices. Only family interactions have withstood. Yet the artillery of modernity is apparently inextinguishable and the Wayana-Apalai parental representations are being modelled by this generational gap, where there is less place for traditional knowledge and lifestyle.

Finally, we consider that in order to create an adequate balance between the family micro-system (representing the Wayana-Apalai education system) and the school micro-system (French National Education System), there must be mutual knowledge and understanding of the traditional/local and institutional/national vision of the concept of “success”. What is more, the fact that school success is normally conceptualized by the actors of the French national education system from the angle of school failure, could testify about their ignorance of the gap existing between the two (world) visions. Our hope is that our research could contribute to showing the pattern of Wayana-Apalai education as a way of living (and not only of surviving) in a peculiar environment: a pattern that the National Education System has to consider in order to build an inclusive school, in agreement with local customs and conditions.

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