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Two anthropologists recall Dominique Buchillet

first voice: Janet CHERNELA

second voice: Jaime DIAKARA DESSANO DIHPOTIRO *

Dominique Buchillet (Janet CHERNELA)

Dominique Buchillet, the anthropologist who pioneered medical anthropology in the Upper Rio Negro of Brazil, passed away on June 9, 2018 in Brest, France. She was recognized for her tireless research and publication in the field of indigenous health practices as well as her dedication to the people with whom she worked. In 1975 Buchillet received an undergraduate degree in psychology from the Université Paris X, Nanterre, remaining at the same institution to receive a Master's Degree in Ethnography in 1978 and a Doctoral Degree in 1983. In 1982 she joined ORSTOM, today known as IRD¹. Although the bulk of her career focused on Amazonia, in 2010 her research interests turned to Southeast Asia, where she studied the history of contagious disease in Thailand and South China.

Scholarly production

A meticulous researcher and prolific author, Buchillet published widely in French, Portuguese, and English. Her significant publications include: “‘Personne n’est là pour écouter’: les conditions de mise en forme des incantations thérapeutiques chez les Desana du Uaupes brésilien” (Buchillet 1987) and “Sorcery beliefs, transmission of shamanic knowledge, and therapeutic practice of the Desana of the Upper Rio Negro” (Buchillet 2004). She was an active participant in the 1st International Congress of Ethnobiology, held in Belém,

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1. ORSTOM is the acronym of the Office de la recherche scientifique et technique Outre-Mer (Eng: Overseas Office of Scientific and Technical Research), today known as IRD, Institut de recherche pour le développement (Eng: Research Institute for Development [a French research institute under the joint supervision of the French Ministries of Higher Education and Research and of Foreign Affairs]).

Brazil, in 1988, and organized the book, *Medicinas tradicionais e medicina ocidental na Amazônia*, published by the Museu Goeldi in 1991. In 2007 she compiled the *Bibliografia crítica da saúde indígena no Brasil (1944-2006)*, a comprehensive registry of indigenous health in Brazil, with 3,222 references from scientific proceedings, reports, pamphlets, dissertations, archives, and the internet. The work has become a fundamental reference for researchers and practitioners in the anthropology of health.

A new, indigenous, anthropology

But Professor Buchillet didn't limit herself to academic pursuits. She was deeply committed to the rights and well-being of the communities with whom she worked. In 1997, for example, she played a fundamental role in finalizing the process of demarcating indigenous lands in the Upper Rio Negro, Brazil. Indeed, some of Buchillet's most important contributions may be those that are the least visible—most notably, her encouragement and mentorship of indigenous authors and scholars. Among her most enduring legacies may be the books of Desana and Tariana narratives, written in collaboration with indigenous authors in the series “Coleção Narradores Indígenas do Rio Negro”, published by the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of the Rio Negro (FOIRN) and its partners.² The series had its origins in 1980 when the Desana authors, Firmiano Lana (Umusi Pārōkumu) and Luiz Lana (Tōrāmu Kehirí), recorded the mythology of their Desana clan³, the *Kehiripōrã*. (The contribution by Jaime Diakara, which follows, will further comment on this collection.) Their book, *Mitologia dos antigos Desana-Kehiripōrã*, was first published in 1980 by Livraria Cultura Editora, and republished in 1995 by the indigenous association, FOIRN, and the NGO, ISA,⁴ as the inaugural volume in the series.⁵ This

2. FOIRN is the acronym for the Federação das Organizações Indígenas do Rio Negro. Founded in 1987, it represents speakers of twenty-two different languages of the Arawakan, Eastern Tukanoan, and Nadahup linguistic families throughout the Upper Rio Negro basin in Brazil.

3. I have used the term “clan” in keeping with Dominique Buchillet's own choice. It refers to a named descent group of imprecise genealogy. Wari Dihputiro Porã can be glossed as “Grandchildren of Wari Dihputiro,” where Wari Dihputiro is the name of a putative Desana ancestor. The construction of the clan name is universal among member groups of the Eastern Tukanoan family, regardless of language.

4. ISA, Instituto Socioambiental, is a Brazilian not-for-profit, civil society organization founded in 1994. With bases in eight cities and offices in São Paulo, it coordinates projects in indigenous areas throughout Brazil.

5. The initial recording of Desana myth by authors Firmiano Lana (Umusi Pārōkumu) and Luiz Lana (Tōrāmu Kehirí) emerged in the late 1960s in conversations between the authors and Pe. Casimiro Beksta, Salesian missionary stationed in the Uaupés River basin approximately three decades. In the early 1970s the playwright Marcio Souza and the poet Aldisio Filgueiras interpreted and adapted the myths for a stage production, *Desana, Desana*,

pioneering new series drew sponsorship from local indigenous associations and was winner of the 2007 Prêmio Cultura. Professor Buchillet was one of the principal organizers and major contributors to the series, editing five of the eight volumes that currently make up the collection. Through this effort, the contributions of Dominique Buchillet have and will continue to influence generations of future indigenous men and women to become documentarians and interpreters of, as she phrased it, a “new, indigenous, ethnology.”

Dominique Buchillet’s edited volumes reflect her sojourn in the Uaupés basin, a subregion of the Rio Negro basin that delineates the frontier between Colombia and Brazil. Between 1981 and 2006 she worked with elders in four Desana communities (São João Batista, Rio Umari, Igarapé Urucú, and Igarapé Cucura), to record ritual practices and cosmologies. At the same time, she involved young people at every stage of recording and transcribing. She encouraged them to preserve their language and culture, cautioning that Desana, with fewer than 4,000 speakers, was, according to Unesco criteria, “definitively endangered.”

Remembering Dominique Buchillet

I learned about Dominique’s arrival in the Uaupés basin long before I met her. Rumors circulated rapidly along the rivers of the basin in the late 1970s, despite the vastness of the area and the absence of overland transportation or communication technologies. And we, the anthropologists, were a frequent topic of commentary. I had traveled to the area in 1978 with Berta Ribeiro, a senior anthropologist whose many publications were part of the university canon. Her work among the Desana would become another achievement in that corpus. After some months Berta and I parted for separate field sites—mine to the Upper Uaupés among the Kotiria (then known as Wanano), and Berta to the Tiquié and Papurí Rivers to work among the Desana. The two groups spoke different, but related, Eastern Tukanoan languages and considered one another to be in-laws. It was by means of the network of rumors that I was first introduced to Dominique Buchillet. Dominique, the villagers remarked, with obvious approval, possessed both strength and stamina. She worked with the women each morning and the elderly men each evening. After storing her hammock at dawn, she trekked to the gardens with the women. She weeded, harvested the heavy manioc tubers, and returned with full basketloads, balancing the heavy weight (some 40 kilos in my experience) by means of a tump-line

which was performed in the famous Teatro Amazonas in 1975. When Marcio encouraged his friend, Berta Ribeiro, to review the project, she carried it to fruition, meeting with the authors in the village of São João Batista, editing the work, providing an introduction, and seeing it to publication in 1980 with Livraria Cultura Editora. Fifteen years later, it became the inaugural volume of the pioneering series, “Coleção Narradores Indígenas do Rio Negro,” published by FOIRN and ISA.

across her forehead. Afternoons, along with the other women, she peeled, grated, and cooked the tubers. Late afternoons and evenings she worked with elders, painstakingly reviewing and re-reviewing transcriptions and translations. When, at day's end, she climbed into her hammock, she lay awake, recording fieldnotes by flashlight or firelight.

I came to know and admire Dominique over the next twenty years. We shared values and goals. We were deeply committed to indigenous rights. We worked together, with Darrel Posey, Paiakan, and Kubein, in organizing the 1st International Ethnobiology Conference. It was a tense time as the three had been arrested not long prior. We watched as the mission centers of the river basin receded to give way to secular institutions. We watched as the children we knew grew into parents of their own offspring. We watched as a vibrant new generation of native intellectuals arose.

Those best positioned to enumerate the lifetime contributions of Dominique Buchillet are those whose lives she impacted most. One of these is the Desana anthropologist and author, Jaime Moura Fernandes (Diakara Dessano Dihpotiro).⁶ In 1993, when Jaime was 19, Dominique Buchillet was hosted by his family in Cucura Village. Jaime's older brother, Kissibi (Durvalino Fernandes), had recorded, by hand, the mythology of the Desana Wari Dihputiro Põrã clan, recounted by their shaman father, Diakuru (Américo). Over the next three years, Dominique Buchillet worked with father and son to facilitate the publication of two books. In 1996 the first project came to fruition with the publication of Volume Two of the Narrators series, *A mitologia sagrada dos antigos Desana do grupo Wari dihputiro põrã*. After ten years this was followed with the 2006 publication of *Bueri Kãdiri Marĩriye. Os ensinamentos que não se esquecem*. It is the eighth and, at present, final volume in the collection. Jaime followed in Buchillet's footsteps, entering a graduate program in anthropology and obtaining a Master's Degree in 2016. I invited Jaime to contribute to this remembrance. Here is what he said:

6. In 2018 I invited Jaime Diakara, friend and colleague, to contribute to a remembrance of Dominique Buchillet. He agreed, and, in a series of emails, sent the text published here, with the invitation to translate it into English and into "proper anthropological language." I have taken certain liberties in doing so, while always maintaining fidelity to the original. Any errors in the English text are mine.

An anthropologist among the Dihputiro Porã Desana of the Cucura River

(Jaime DIAKARA DESSANO DIHPOTIRO)⁷

These words pass on a memory of a history without end, a memory of one who was deeply concerned about the loss of indigenous Desana knowledge, who needed to register it so that it might be read and lived by generation after generation of the Desana clan, the Wari Dihputiro Porã.

Cucura River Village is a site named by the Desana Wari Dihputiro Porã clan. Village life there was punctuated by ceremonies whose timing was ordered by the movement of the constellations. In those days, no one worried about recording or writing spoken mythologies. At that time, oral narratives were only heard, lived, and practiced; it was a contextualized form of indigenous education.

With changes to our culture—our civilization, that is—my older brother Kissibi was the one who went to study. When he was a student in the Salesian boarding school he was selected to become a local school teacher. Then, in 1991, he participated in a training program for indigenous teachers to develop a unified orthography for transcribing the Tukano language. It was led by the French linguist, Odile Lescure.

The experience in the program inspired my brother to write a book on the mythology of our clan, the Wari Dihputiro Porã. His urgency in recording the mythology in writing was due, in part, to his awareness that a great Desana elder, a holder of sacred knowledge, was dying, taking with him a vast amount of traditional indigenous knowledge. What's more, Desana youths no longer valued their culture or their cosmopolitics. This prompted him to write down the sacred mythology and to publish it as a book that young people could read. But the publication would have to await the arrival of someone, an outsider, with an interest in Desana knowledge. So Kissibi decided to write down the mythology that had, until this time, been only spoken. Every day, at the end of afternoon, at a time we call "the mouth of night," my brother Kissibi stayed up very late talking to my father, the shaman Diakuru Kumu. As they sat in front of our house, my brother, with his little composition notebook and pen in hand, plied him with questions. As my father Diakuru gestured and spoke, my brother jotted down his every word.

After some time, they completed the documentation of *A mitologia sagrada dos antigos Desana do grupo Wari dihputiro pôrã*. When it was finished my brother didn't know who or where to turn to get it published. So he wrapped

7. Diakara Dessano Dihpotiro (Desana name given prior to birth), also known as Jaime Moura Fernandes (Portuguese), and the abbreviated Jaime Diakara, is a writer and illustrator of children's books and lecturer on Desana cosmology. He holds a degree in pedagogy from the Universidade do Estado do Amazonas (UEA) and a Master's in anthropology from the Universidade Federal do Amazonas (UFAM).

the text for safekeeping inside a package of Papaguara crackers and stashed it high up in the house rafters.

Between 1990 until 1992 the renowned anthropologist and researcher, Dominique Buchillet of ORSTOM, contacted the Desana of three villages: São João Batista, Rio Umari and Igarapé Urucú. She was conducting research on the mythology of the Desana clan called the Kehirípõrã or, “Sons of the Dream Drawings.” The narrators of the Kehirípõrã clan versions of Desana mythology began making a written record of them in 1968 after meeting with the anthropologist Berta Ribeiro, in the village of São João Batista, along the Rio Tiquié.

When she read this work, Dominique became interested in investigating Desana mythology in greater depth and she sought more information. According to my brother Kissibi and my father Diakuru, Dominique said that each of the narrators she had recorded until then told a different version, and she was confused. She felt that she was never going to get as clear and solid a version as she had hoped for. Unable to complete her work, she sought another means of researching Desana myth. She discovered that, according to the Desana hierarchy, the group [those who had published their version] were not one of the leading groups. As a result, she began a new line of inquiry, asking, “Who are the leaders of the Desana hierarchy?” She soon discovered that there was another Desana clan, the *Wari Dihputiro Porã*, of Cucura Igarapé, that could recount the correct version of the sacred mythology of the Desana people.

Dominique Buchillet in Cucura

In 1993, therefore, Dominique decided to continue her adventurous journey into Desana mythology. I often think of the time she arrived in Cucura Igarapé. I remember her walking down the path with her rucksack on her back, exhausted and soaked with sweat. She asked, “Is Mr. Américo or Mr. Durvalino in the village?” At that time any White that came to the village would have been a missionary—a priest or a nun. All the residents gathered around to meet her, to satisfy their curiosity, and to offer her a gourd of xibé [water with manioc flour].

A few minutes later, she introduced herself as an anthropologist whose goal was to study Desana mythology. She said she was going to spend a few days in the village. Since my brother had been waiting for someone who was interested in publishing his work on Desana myth, the arrival of an anthropologist in Cucura delighted him.

Seeing my brother’s excitement, my father said, “Son, a person has arrived who is going to help you. Take good care of her—bring her to your house and give her a place to sleep.” And also, my brother lived alone with his wife and spoke Portuguese. He could both host her in the village and also serve as the translator in her work.

To be absolutely accurate, I asked my brother how long she stayed in the village. He said:

In her first visit she spent thirty days in the village. During these thirty days she lived according to our customs—she ate the way we do, bathed in the river, hiked to the garden to harvest manioc, grated it, and participated in drinking ceremonies. She slept by the fire so she could read and write her notes on Desana mythology. (Kissibi, pers. com., October 2018)

In order to describe her living and working with us in greater detail, I asked my brother to recount a little about the work on myth during those thirty days. He told me:

She arrived knowing some Desana mythology. When she asked us about it, I simply gave her my handwritten version, *A mitologia sagrada dos antigos Desana do grupo Wari dihputiro pôrã*. She liked it very much and was going to look for a publisher for the book that I wrote with my father Diakuru on cures for certain kinds of diseases. (Kissibi, pers. com., October 2018)

After producing one study, she returned to ORSTOM to find a publisher and at the same time to edit the text into proper anthropological and ethnographic language.

According to my brother, Dominique returned again to the community in 1993, bringing with her the good news. He recounts:

Our work with her would be published with the support of UNIRT,⁸ FOIRN, ISA, and IIZ.⁹ She spent thirty more days working with us to revise, improve wording, and organize the text. The myths that were written in the book weren't complete. She translated the Desana so that she could understand it better and rewrote it in proper anthropological language. In 1996 the book was published in São Paulo through ISA. Besides this he had other writings that she took with her, *Bueri Kãdiri Marĩriye. Os ensinamentos que não se esquecem*. (Kissibi, pers. com., October 2018)

That's how Dominique helped my brother achieve his dream. She returned to ORSTOM to continue re-reading and editing the draft of *Teachings that ought not be forgotten: Desana stories for children*. He never lost hope and confidence in Dominique Buchillet. He reports:

In 2005 Dominique told me that she had finished editing one of the *Teachings that ought not be forgotten*. In 2006 another book was published with support

8. UNIRT is the acronym for União das Nações Indígenas do Rio Tiquié, an indigenous association of the Tiquié River.

9. IIZ is the acronym for Institut für Internationale Zusammenarbeit and stands for the Climate Alliance, Austria.

from FOIRN, ISA, and Horizon 2020¹⁰ of the European Commission, all due to the efforts of Dominique.

After the release of the narratives, Dr. Dominique Buchillet disappeared from our lives. In 2018 we learned that she had died. These partial, fragmented, accounts are from me, Kissibi (Durvalino Moura Fernandes). There are many things to be said about the work that Dominique Buchillet did. I considered her to be a sister, a member of my family. Even today my father *Diakuru* (Américo Castro Fernandes), at ninety-three, remembers her and says that she helped us re-remember our Desana mythology. For those of us who sat at her side talking about Desana mythology, it will be hard to forget her. She remains in the memories of our family and in the memory of the Desana people. (Kissibi, pers. com., October 2018)

The account from my brother is a living memorial. It is like a sacred book full of mystery, it offers us a remembrance of Dr. Dominique Buchillet as one of the anthropologists that studied Desana mythology.

For my own part, I had contact with Dominique in 2016, when I entered the anthropology program. I wrote to let her know that I completed my Master's Degree. She sent her congratulations, saying that I would continue on the path of anthropology, in indigenous anthropology, as an indigenous anthropologist, recording the knowledge of my own people to create a Desana body of theory and ideas. And she said it was up to me to make an anthropology built on an imaginative reading of *A mitologia sagrada dos antigos Desana do grupo Wari Dihputiro pōrã*.

These moving words remain in my memory, and today inspire me to remember all that she did with the Desana nation and especially with my family, the *Wari Dihputiro Porã*.

She will forever be remembered as someone who is always present among us.

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10. Horizon 2020 is the name given to the major Research and Innovation program of the European Commission.

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