



Dance of the Tapuya Indians (Albert Eckhout c.1640)

Etnografisk Samling, Nationalmuseet, København

The Atlatl as Combat Weapon in 17th-Century Amazonia:

Tapuya Indian Warriors in Dutch Colonial Brazil

by

Dr. Harald E.L. Prins

Kansas State University

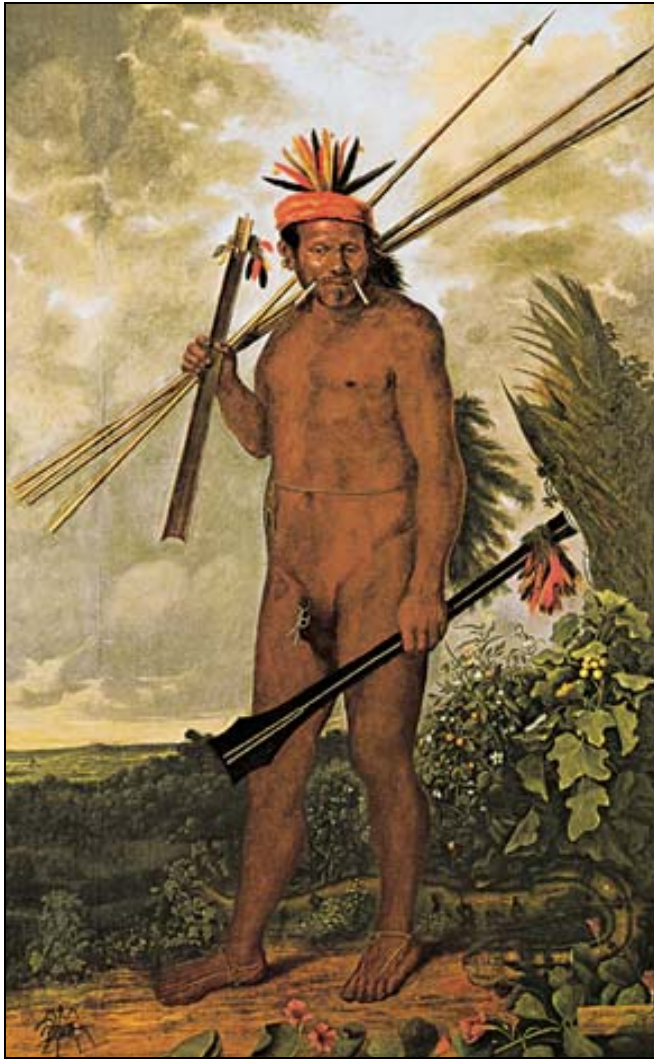
24 May 2010

in

The Atlatl

Vol. 23, Number 2

Newsletter of the World Atlatl Association, Inc



Tarairiu warrior with atlatl, four javelins & war club (Eckhout 1641)



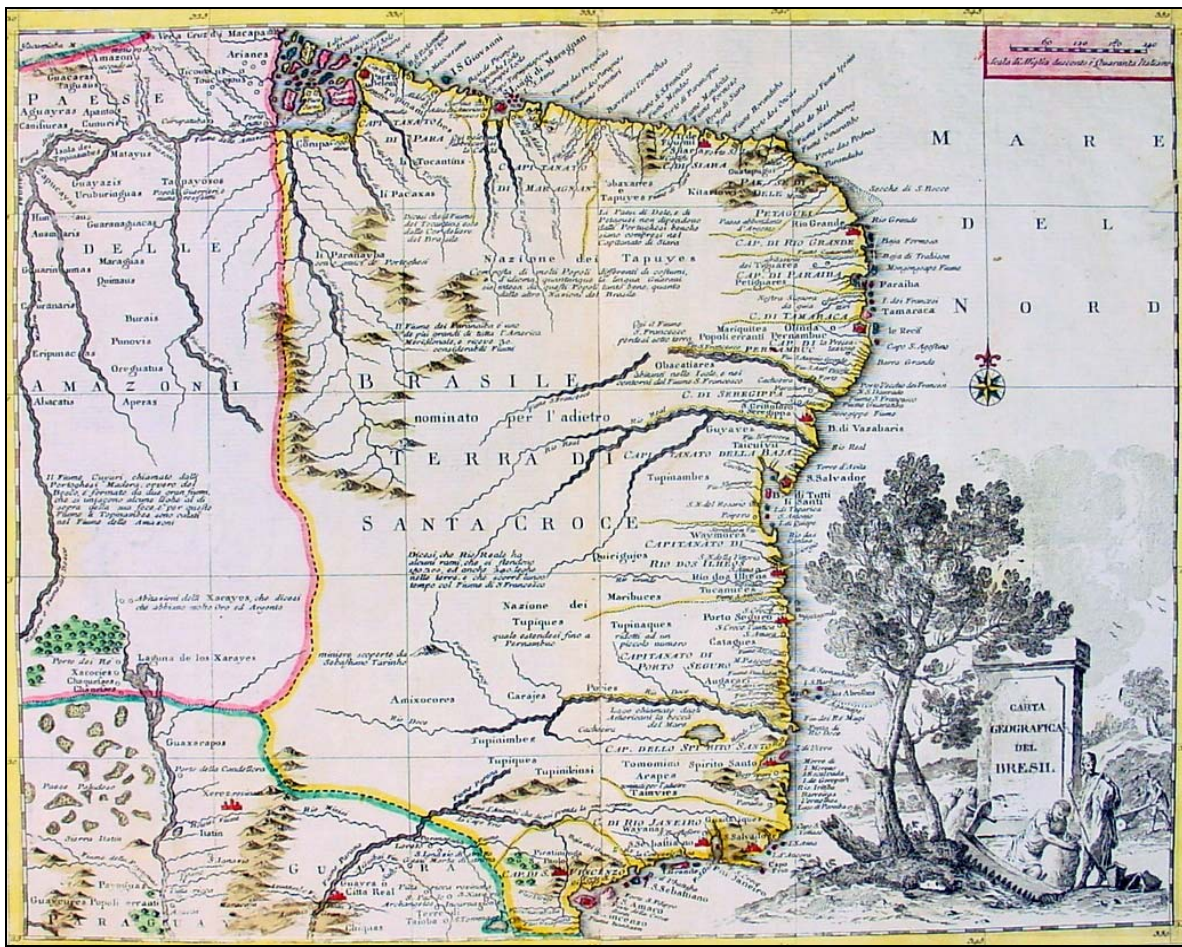
Tarairiu atlatl (detail in Eckhout 1641)



Tarairiu atlatl
Etnografisk Samling, Nationalmuseet, København

Perhaps the most fascinating but, oddly enough, little noticed ethnographic detail on two large 17th-century paintings depicting Amazonian Indian warriors is the wooden spear-thrower or throwing-board, now often known by its Nahuatl name as *atlatl*.¹ These tribesmen belong to the *Tarairiu*, a now-extinct group of about 1600 people historically ranging the mountainous hinterland of Rio Grande do Norte and surrounding area in northeastern Brazil. Together with other tribes inhabiting the sertão, the semi-arid highlands in the interior, they were one of the many groups generally known as *Tapuyas* (variously spelled). Primarily referring to Ge-speaking peoples, this is a depreciative term for “foreigners,” “barbarians,” or “enemies” in the language of their Tupi-speaking neighbors traditionally inhabiting Brazil’s coastal tropical forests.

¹ For instance, John Hemming (1978:297-311) discusses in considerable historical and ethnographic detail the Tapuya, including the Tarairiu, but nowhere mentions the atlatl as part of their armed outfit. And although his book includes a picture of their “war dance,” as painted by Albert Eckhout in c.1640, he only mentions that these Tarairiu warriors “brandish arrows and clubs” (fig.11). And although Rebecca Brienen (2006:120-121) mentions the “spear thrower” in her exhaustive study of Eckhout’s paintings, describing in great detail how she sees the Tarairiu portrayed by the Dutch, she mentions this remarkable weapon only once in passing.



Map of Brazil – after Claude Delisle – by Giovanni Battista Albrizzi in *Stato presente de tutti paese*, Venice, 1745

Feared like the Mohawk in northeast America, Tarairiu warriors were recruited by Dutch commanders as indigenous guerillas in military campaigns against Portuguese colonial troops in 17th-century Brazil. Migratory foragers and reported to have been cannibals, these “savages” quickly gained a diabolic reputation as “infernal allies” of Dutch troops in coastal Brazil in the 1630s and 1640s (van den Boogaart 1999:104,117; Meuwese 2003).

A few of these Tarairiu Indians were portrayed by Albert Eckhout (1610-1666), whose large oil paintings count among the most spectacular visual representations of American Indians in the colonial period. For anthropologists and historians, the ethnographic detail in these paintings is of particular interest.² Originally hailing from Groningen city in the northern Netherlands, Eckhout sailed to Pernambuco on the northeast coast of Brazil in 1637. Together with other artists, as well as naturalists, architects, and other learned men, he had joined Count

² In his 1928 Sorbonne dissertation on the Tupinamba, Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux discusses Eckhout’s painting of the Tapuya (Tarairiu) warrior dance. Considering its spectacular portrayal of a now-extinct indigenous people and its deeper symbolic meaning, this fascinating image was chosen as emblematic for the Smithsonian Institution exhibit *Alfred Métraux: From Fieldwork to Human Rights*. Conceived and planned by Edgardo Krebs, with the assistance of Dr. Sarah Fee & the author as guest co-curators, this exhibit was scheduled at the National Museum of Natural History, October 2006-March 2007, but running into funding problems, it failed to materialize.

Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, the newly-appointed Governor of New Holland, a Dutch colony of the West India Company (1630-1654). During his seven year stay overseas, Eckhout resided in Mauritsstad, a new city built on a small tropical island opposite Recife, and capital of a territory extending from Sergipe on the south to Maranhão in the north. Traveling in the coastal lowlands, he encountered not only African slaves on Portuguese and Dutch-owned sugar plantations, but also Indians, and, of course, a variety of mestizos, mulattoes, and zambos due to several generations of inter-ethnic sexual relations (see also Brienen 2006).

In their colonial scramble for Brazil, the Dutch first recruited Potiguara and Tabajara warriors, regional subdivisions of the Tupinamba, a far-flung ethnic group inhabiting large villages in the coastal lowlands from Cananéa in the south of the State of São Paulo to the mouth of the Amazon. Primarily depending on manioc, but also growing maize and other crops in their gardens, these two northern Tupi-speaking tribes had their own deep grievances against their Portuguese neighbors who had long dominated, exploited and mistreated them. After an indigenous Brazilian uprising against Portuguese settlers in 1624, the Dutch tried to capitalize on the turmoil and established a foothold in this rich sugar-producing colony. After a year, however, they were ousted. When the Dutch were forced to abandon their operation, a number of their Potiguara allies boarded their ships and sailed to the Netherlands, where they were interviewed by directors of the West India Company in Amsterdam. These Tupi-speaking tribesmen informed the Dutch about other tribes hostile to the Portuguese, in particular “wild” nomads they called *Tapuyas*.

These Tapuyas were not a singular ethnic group or tribe, but, as the Dutch recognized at the time, included a variety of peoples “distinguished by names, dialects, customs, and boundaries.... They are distributed over a very large territory that encompasses five rivers.... ; cannibals they are all and due to the fame of their cruelty they are feared by other Savages and the Portuguese.... They fight with bows and arrows, javelins with stone points and wooden clubs” (Barlaeus 1647:323-24, my translation).



War Dance of the Tapuya, Detail (Albert Eckhout c.1641)

The Dutch were most familiar with the Tarairiu, a Tapuya tribe of migratory foragers and raiders inhabiting the forested mountains and highland savannahs of Rio Grande do Norte. Unlike Tupinamba archers, these Tarairiu “use no bows or arrows, but throw their darts with their hands...” (Nieuhof 1682:878). Fierce and feared, they were described by Zacharias Wagner about 1640 as “extraordinarily tall, strong, and well built. These savage men with rough dark skin and long black hair walk around completely naked.... They show great skill in throwing sharp and heavy darts using throwing boards against the target they wish to hit. They do not use the sharp

darts on an enemy in flight but large heavy swords [clubs] made of black wood. They run with incredible speed and, completely naked, they jump among thorns and thistles, letting out terrible cries and attacking their enemies with great uproar, defeating them with chants and dances" (cited in Buvelot 2004:68).³

The Tarairiu atlatl shown here has a unique design well-described in Latin by the German naturalist Georg Marcgrave who resided in Dutch Brazil (1637-1644): "*Tapuyarum nationes quaedam nullis arcubus utuntur, sed sagittas suas emittunt manus jactura solummodo imponendo ligno cuidam excavato instar tubi per medium secundum longitudinem dissecti*" ("Some Tapuya nations do not use bows, but throw their arrows by hand, except they place those on a piece of hollowed out wood, like a war-trumpet that has been cut apart over half in length.").⁴ The atlatl illustrated below is (as far as we now know) the only authentic Tarairiu throwing-board in existence today and forms part of the ethnographic collection of the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen.⁵ Comparing this artifact with the atlatl held by the Tarairiu warrior as painted by Eckhout, we may speculate that the original colorful feathers on this artifact have either disintegrated or otherwise not survived the tooth of time.



Tapuya Atlatl in the Danish National Museum

Courtesy Nationalmuseet, K benhavn

About 88 cm (35 in) long and 3 to 4.5 cm (1½ in) wide, this furrowed spear-thrower is made of brown hard-wood. Well-polished, it was carved with a semi-circular outer half and a hollowed-out groove. Tapering off to its distal (left) end, it was designed to cradle the tail end of a javelin, or dart, over two meters long (c. 82 in, i.e. 6.8 ft). The butt of this javelin, or dart, could hook on a horizontal wooden spur, or peg, lashed with a cotton thread to the distal end of the throwing board, where a few scarlet parrot feathers were originally tied for decoration (Bahnsen 1889; M traux 1949:247).



Tapuya javelins, or darts, in the Danish National Museum

Courtesy Nationalmuseet, K benhavn

³ The common German term for an atlatl is *W rfholz* or *-brett* (or *Pfeilschleuder*), but Wagner (fol.95) nicely described this furrowed artifact as a "small crib" (*kleinen Kripfen*) (cited in Ehrenreich 1894:86).

⁴ After seven years in Dutch Brazil, Marcgrave perished on the coast of Angola in 1644. His descriptions as a naturalist were posthumously incorporated in the famous 1648 book *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae*, co-authored by his companion Dr. Willem Piso, a physician who also served in Brazil. This particular sentence (Piso and Marcgrave 1648:278) was cited by German anthropologist Paul Ehrenreich (1894: 86).

⁵ In an e-mail to the author, Ms. Bente Gundestrup of the Danish National Museum cautioned "The atlatl (Hb.25) has never been in the Royal Kunstkammer. It is registered for the first time in 1839, when the Kunstkammer was already closed down."

No doubt somewhat varying in length, Tarairiu darts or javelins (called *werp-pyl*, *spiets*, or *schigt* in 17th-century Dutch records) were probably made of a two-meter long wooden cane with a stone or long and serrated hard-wood point, sometimes tipped with poison.⁶ Equipped with their uniquely grooved atlatl, tribesmen on the warpath could hurl their long darts from a great distance with accuracy, speed, and such deadly force that these easily pierced through the protective armor of the Portuguese or any other enemy (see also Raymond 1986:173). Typically, while they threw with their right arm, their left hand remained free to hold the hard-wood club as a deadly weapon for close combat (compare Eskimo and indigenous hunters harpooning their prey with an atlatl, rather than shooting with a bow, as this much older device left them with one hand free to hold a paddle; see also Steward 1946:519).

Like warriors in other tribes, Tarairiu not only used their weapons to chase wild game or battle enemies, but also for sport: “They compete for glory by jousting and spear-throwing. The aim is to please the public, especially their lovers; the women decide on each one’s bravery and victory.... Every year, in the summer, they come together in different bands and armies to perform their stomping dance, their spear-throwing and other games dedicated to the [stellar deity of the Northern constellation]. The feast lasts three days; the champions step forward decorated with feathers of different colors, as in the Olympic games” (Barlaeus 1647:325,329-30, my translation).



Count Johan Maurits van Nassau (1604-1679), Governor of Dutch Brazil, and Fort Ceulen at the mouth of the Potengi river in Rio Grande do Norte. Built in the 1590s by the Portuguese, who named it Forte dos Reis Magos, it was captured by the Dutch in 1633, serving them as a rallying point with Tarairiu and other Indian allies. (in Montanus 1671)

In 1630, the Dutch tried again, this time conquering Pernambuco and establishing a foothold at Recife. In the next few years, they expanded their colonial domain and recruited not only

⁶ The two darts, or javelins, depicted here are in the Danish National Museum, one being 201 cm long, the other 208 cm. They were first mentioned in the collection of the royal Kunstkammer in Copenhagen in 1689: “The original spearheads are missing but are known from an earlier photograph in the Department of Ethnography. The spearheads appearing in the illustration are copies produced on the basis of this photo” (Dam-Mikkelsen, Bente Gundestrup & Torben Lundbæk (eds) 1980:32-33).

1952:682). Three of these are large oils depicting “Tapuyas” – one representing a naked Tarairiu tribeswoman carrying human body parts (probably of a deceased relative, representing ritual endocannibalism); another portraying a warrior with parrot and rhea feather adornments carrying an atlatl with four javelins in his right hand and a war club in his left; and, last but not least, a very large oil on wood painting (172 x 295 cm) pictured at the opening of this article, showing a war dance with eight armed and feathered tribesmen (a couple with atlatl), and two maidens on the edge of the forest admiring their fiery display.⁷ This spectacular art collection ended up in the Royal *Kunstkammer* (Chamber of Arts and Curios) in Copenhagen, which became part of what is now the Danish National Museum.

And what happened with the exotic “curiosities,” including Brazilian Indian weapons, necklaces and head ornaments” shipped to the Netherlands in 1644? Where did they end up? Do they still exist? Is it possible that the atlatl, javelins, and war clubs treasured for so long in the Danish National Museum, as attested by its ethnography curator Dr. Kristian Bahnson in 1889, and correctly identified five years later as Tarairiu by Amazonian Indian specialist Dr. Paul Ehrenreich in Berlin, originally formed part of this collection?⁸ Or were these shipped and collected by someone else, perhaps later? Because the museum’s historical records are inconclusive about the provenance of these precious artifacts, we can only speculate.⁹

What we need not speculate about, however, is the dismal fate of their original owners—the proud and battle-scarred Tarairiu, equipped with their archaic but amazingly effective atlatls, were ruthlessly exterminated as an indigenous nation in the early 1700s.

⁷ There has been much speculation about these two young Tapuya women, but it appears evident from 17th-century Dutch sources that Eckhout graphically illustrated what Smithsonian Institution anthropologist William Crocker (2004) detailed in his chapter on “The Extramarital Sex System” of the Canela, who form part of the same culture and language area in northeast Brazil as these Tapuya (see also Lowie 1946^c).

⁸ Noting that this particular atlatl is the only example of its type known to exist, Bahnson (1889:221) explained that although the ethnographic museum in Copenhagen possesses no information about its original provenance, this wooden throwing-board came in its possession “with the old collection of the royal *Kunstkammer*, where it had been kept since a long period, albeit without identification in that collection’s inventory, the records of which are too little detailed.” Co-editor of the 1980 book on the Royal Danish *Kunstkammer*, Ms. Bente Gundestrup suggests that Bahnson was misinformed, e-mailing the author that “The atlatl (Hb.25) has never been in the Royal *Kunstkammer*. It is registered for the first time in 1839, when the *Kunstkammer* was already closed down.”

⁹ After writing this article, I found Quentin Buvelot’s 2004 edited volume *Albert Eckhout: A Dutch artist in Brazil* in which he depicts a photograph showing two 17th-century wooden “clubs from Brazil” in the Danish National Museum. Although Buvelot (2004:18) suggests their “similarity to objects depicted by Eckhout makes it likely that they were included in the gift” by Johan Maurits to the Danish king, Ms. Gundestrup of the Danish National Museum disagrees, e-mailing the author that these clubs “were part of the Gottorfer *Kunstkammer* until it was transferred to Copenhagen around 1750.... so these can for sure not have been a gift from Johann-Moritz to the Danish King.” In fact, she cautioned: “We have no sources telling us how these objects have reached Copenhagen. It is pure speculation – but they might have been bought from or donated by Johann-Moritz - OR some Danes in Dutch service might have brought objects home from Brazil.” This may also be true for the parrot-feather ornament in that museum’s ethnographic collection. Originally placed in the *Kunstkammer*’s “East India Chamber,” it appears of Amazonian origin, perhaps 17th-century Tarairiu.

Acknowledgments

It is my pleasure here to express my appreciation for my generous colleague and fellow Americanist Christer Lindberg of Lund University, Sweden, where I served as a guest professor in March 2010, as it was in his office I saw a large poster of the “Tapuya” warrior and recognized the tribesman was armed with an atlatl, an ethnographic detail I had missed when viewing smaller reproductions of his portrait. Together with a group of his anthropology students we then visited the Danish National Museum. I also thank John Whittaker of Grinnell College in the US, one of the world’s foremost anthropological experts on the atlatl, who provided useful feedback and invited me to submit this article. For the translation of Marcgrave’s description of the atlatl in Latin, I turned to my good old friend and esteemed former professor Ton Weiler, a medievalist now retired from Radboud University in the Netherlands. And last but not least, I am indebted to Bente Gundestrup, Research Fellow at the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen, who provided valuable information on the museum’s Kunstkammer, clarified issues concerning the provenance of its Tarairiu objects, and generously provided the photograph of the unique atlatl and javelins in its fabulous ethnographic collection.

Literature

- Bahnsen, Kristian. 1889. Über Südamerikanische Würfholzer im Kopenhagener Museum. Leiden: *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, Vol. 2:217-77.
- Barlaeus, Caspar. 1647. *Nederlandsch Brazilië onder het bewind van Johan Maurits Grave van Nassau 1637-1644*. [Rerum per octennium un Brasilia]. Edited by S. P. l’Honoré-Naber. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1923.
- Birket-Smith, Kaj. 1952. “The History of Ethnology in Denmark.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 82 (2):115-127.
- Boogaart, Ernst van den. 1999. “Infernal Allies: The Dutch West India Company and the Tarairiu, 1631-1654.” Pp. 101-28. In Marcos Galindo et al, (eds). *Indios do Noreste: Temas e Problemas 2*. UFAL.
- Brienen, Rebecca P. 2006. *Visions of Savage Paradise: Albert Eckhout, Court Painter in Colonial Dutch Brazil, 1637-1644*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Buvelot, Quentin (ed.). 2004. *Albert Eckhout: A Dutch Artist in Brazil*. The Hague: Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis.
- Crocker, William H, and Crocker, Jean G. 2004. *The Canela: Kinship, Ritual, and Sex in an Amazonian Tribe*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth (2nd edition).
- Dam-Mikkelsen, Bente Gundestrup & Torben Lundbæk (eds). 1980. *Etnografiske genstande i Det kongelige danske Kunstkammer 1650-1800 / Ethnographic Objects in the Royal Danish Kunstkammer 1650-1800*. Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet.
- Ehrenreich, Paul. 1894. Über einige ältere Bildnisse südamerikanischer Indianer. *Globus: Illustrierte Zeitschrift für Länder- und Völkerkunde*, Vol.66 (6):81-90.
- Hemming, John. 1978. *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians, 1500-1760*. Cambridge: Harvard university Press.
- Krebs, Edgardo, Fee, Sarah, and Prins, Harald E.L. 2006. *Alfred Métraux, From Fieldwork to Human Rights: Itinerary of a 20th-Century Ethnographer*. A Smithsonian Institution exhibition brochure. Washington DC: National Museum of Natural History.

- Lowie, Robert H. 1946^a. "The 'Tapuya'." Pp. 553-56. *The Marginal Tribes*. Handbook of South American Indians, Vol. 1. Washington: Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 143.
- . 1946^b. "The Tarairiu." Pp. 563-66. *The Marginal Tribes*. Handbook of South American Indians, Vol. 1. Washington: Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 143.
- . 1946^c. "The Northwestern and Central Ge." Pp.477-517. *The Marginal Tribes*. Handbook of South American Indians, Vol. 1. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 143.
- Métraux, Alfred. 1949. "Weapons." Pp.229-64. *The Comparative Ethnology of South American Indians*, Handbook of South American Indians, Vol.5. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 143.
- Meuwese, Marcus P. 2003. "*For the Peace and Well-Being of the Country*": Intercultural Mediators and Dutch-Indian Relations in New Netherlands and Dutch Brazil, 1600-1664. Notre Dame University Doctoral Dissertation.
- Montanus, Arnoldus. 1671. *De Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld: of beschryving van America en 't Zuid-Land*, Amsterdam: Jacob Meurs.
- Nieuhof, Johan [1682] 1808-1814. "Voyages and Travels into Brazil." Pp. 697-881. John Pinkerton (ed). *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World*, Vol.14. London: Longmans, etc.
- Piso, Willem, and Marcgrave, Georg. 1648. *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae...in qua non tantum plantae et animalia, sed et indigenarum morbi, ingenia et mores describuntur et iconibus supra quingentas illustrantur*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Raymond, Anan. 1986. "Experiments in the Function and Performance of the Weighted Atlatl." *World Archaeology*, Vol.18(2):153-77.
- Steward, Julian H. 1946. "Tribes of the Montana: An Introduction." Pp. 507-533. *The Marginal Tribes*. Handbook of South American Indians, Vol.1. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 143.

Dr. Harald E.L.Prins
 Department of Sociology & Anthropology
 207 Waters Hall
 Kansas State University, Manhattan KS 66506
 E-mail: prins@ksu.edu

05/24/2010