

# NOMADS OF THE LONG BOW

The Siriono of Eastern Bolivia



Allan R. Holmberg

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Prospect Heights, Illinois

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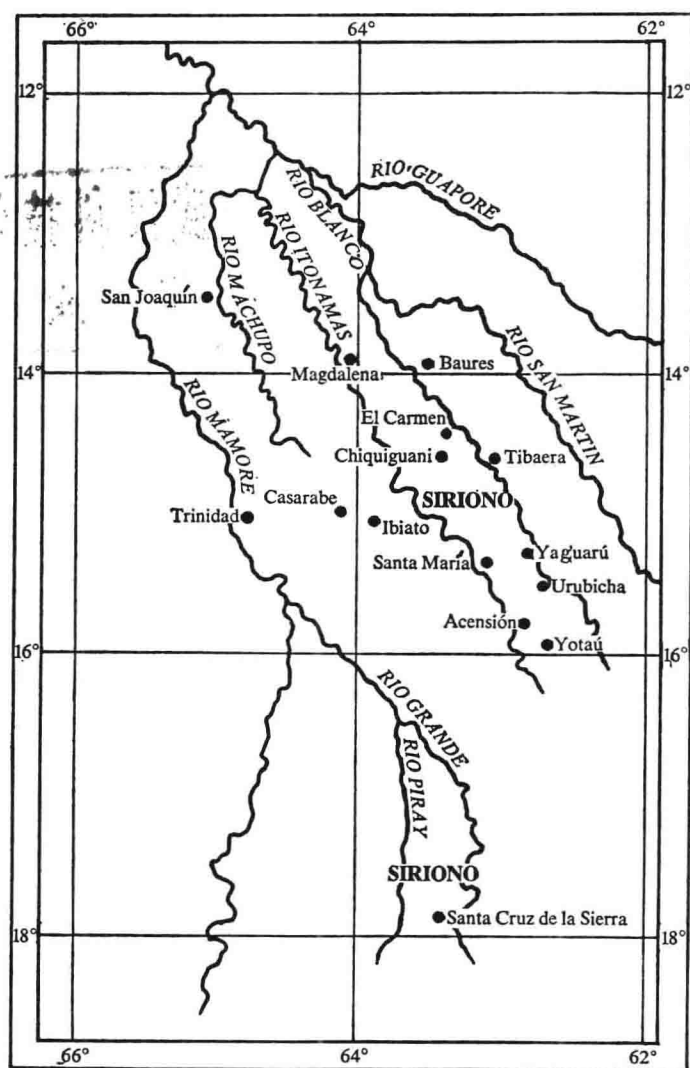
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ALLAN HOLMBERG's early death in 1966 deprived anthropology of a leading innovator and distinguished scholar. As a Sterling Fellow in Anthropology at Yale, Dr. Holmberg completed his doctoral thesis on the Siriono Indians in 1946, published here as revised by the author shortly before his death. In 1948 he joined the faculty of Cornell University and began eighteen years of work in applied anthropology, using his knowledge to correct the injustice of poverty, sickness, and ignorance among peasant peoples in developing areas of South America.

Professional recognition came to Dr. Holmberg in such posts as Chairman of the Department of Anthropology at Cornell, Director of the University's renowned Peru Project, Treasurer of the Society for Applied Anthropology, and membership on the President's Scientific Advisory Committee, the Latin American Science Board, the Committee on Overseas Studies in the Behavioral Sciences of the National Academy of Sciences, and the Advisory Board of the Cornell Program in Social Psychiatry.



Territory of Eastern Bolivia Occupied by the Siriono

## FOREWORD

THIS account of the near-starving Siriono Indians, foraging through the tropical swamps and forests of eastern Bolivia, was written by a young anthropologist at the beginning of his career. The book was originally conceived as a technical monograph to be read by a few specialists. Even worse, it was a doctoral dissertation designed to demonstrate the author's professional competence as an ethnographer. Those of us who have read scores of such theses know that few of them are very readable as literature and that fewer still are very exciting.

Yet, soon after Allan Holmberg's thesis was deposited on the library shelves of Yale University in 1947 it began to excite the keenest professional interest and discussion among anthropologists. Published three years later by the Smithsonian Institution, it attracted a wider circle of excited readers and was soon out of print. Throughout the world, enthusiastic scholars and students of man began to read, study, and argue over his work. In this new edition, published posthumously, Holmberg's thesis is now made available again not only to the scholar and student but to the general reader who would share with the scientist something of the excitement and adventure of anthropological discovery.

The lowly but instructive Siriono are an Old Stone Age people. They may have degenerated to this level from a more advanced technical condition, a view long rejected by the author, or they may simply be survivors who "from the beginning" retained a variety of man's earliest culture. The problem is intriguing, but is irrelevant to the value of this book as a Paleolithic ethnography, a systematic description by a professionally trained eyewitness of the way of life of a still-living Old Stone Age people. It was at this Paleolithic level of subsistence, under conditions of a hunting and gathering technology without domesticated crops or livestock, that man developed, and our own and the Siriono's ancestors became *Homo sapiens*.

Paleolithic man, however wise or foolish, is inevitably outside of history, for without writing, he has no written record of his own. Nor have Old Stone Age societies successfully survived the depredation of the New Stone Age and civilized men as these extended their uncompromising ways of life over the globe. Thus, few Paleolithic peoples ever enter history, and fewer still remain there—that is, unless a rare Holmberg appears on the scene from some civilization to bring them into the human record. Simply as a description of such a group, Holmberg's work constitutes an important contribution to the study of man.

It is not easy to make generalizations about Paleolithic peoples. The small sample of simple, Old Stone Age folk surviving into our times—the Eskimo and a few Indian groups in North and South America, pygmies and bushmen of Africa, Oceanic Negritoids, aboriginal Australians—shows a considerable range of behavior differences, as well as some general similarities. Some have been cited as aggressive and gener-

ally malevolent in support of the popular *Lord of the Flies* or *Naked Ape* thesis that man is by nature born ornery and vicious. Others have been called *The Harmless People* and used to support an argument such as Prince Kropotkin's that within the simple group mutual aid and norms of benevolence are of value for survival and are thus an original aspect of the human condition. The data on the surviving Paleolithic Siriono are important to this debate and to the even older debate on the roles of Nature versus Nurture in shaping human behavior. We may well join prehistorians, ethnographers, and other specialists in welcoming Holmberg's work, which discovered, described, and thus introduced into history a new and in many respects extraordinary Paleolithic experience.

Theoretical rather than humanitarian interests led Holmberg to seek out this starving group of Indians for his dissertation research. He did not know what he would find, for the Siriono were scarcely mentioned in the existing literature. But he hoped he might discover data with which to test the universality of some of the psychoanalytical assumptions popular in the 1940s. Anthropology, with its wide range of interests, is notorious for its discovery of a number of famous negative cases—single examples of patterned behavior that demonstrate the need to modify or throw out dogmatic notions based on a too narrow, parochial or biased scanning of the human data. The negative case is the exception that proves or tests the rule that certain behavior is universal as claimed and thus probably inevitable in human experience.

During the past half century the psychoanalytic portrait of human personality has come to be widely and almost unconsciously accepted by Western and Western-educated publics as a good likeness. Accord-



ing to this view, the sexual drive is universally the most dominant in the conscious and unconscious lives of human beings. And sexual libido in myriad manifestation is seen as the basic core of human action everywhere—except, as we discover here, among the hungry Siriono! If the hunger drive can displace sex in much of the normal waking and dreaming life of these food-starved Indians, then the role of this and of other appetites in the frustrations of our lives needs to be reconsidered, and the working out of such frustrations in overt and covert behavior requires further investigation. The lesson is that our first attempt must always be to understand the complicated life of each individual and of each group in its own specific terms while obtaining what help we can from “universals” drawn from our still too limited samples of humankind.

The trends and traditions of local cultures must be understood and utilized if the lives of individuals, and the group as a whole, are to be effectively changed by conscious influence exerted from outside, as is the aim of our modern programs of technical aid. It is clear that the specific traditional Siriono attitudes toward food could have been made to play a crucial role when mission or government agencies sought to change the nomadic Indians into sedentary gardeners and livestock producers, offering them sure means to secure a stable and adequate supply of food. Applied anthropology, the application of anthropological insights to the solution of problems of planned cultural change, is not a topic dealt with in this book. Yet the author, before he left the Siriono, and using his detailed knowledge of their specific way of life, had already begun to “experiment with culture,” to introduce to them new forms of behavior carefully

determined with regard to their already established patterns of feeling, thinking, and action.

Applied anthropology continued to be one of Holmberg's primary professional interests, and during his long association with Cornell University, from 1948 until his early death in 1966 at the age of fifty-six, he won a world-wide reputation as a leading practitioner of the art. His Cornell program of research and development centered on Peru, where, among other projects, he successfully undertook to transfer initiative and authority in the Indian village of Vicos high in the Andes to the peasant villagers themselves, divesting them in a few years of their centuries-old peonage, and raising their level of living manyfold. He found that indeed the behavior of these peasants could be changed, but toward what ends, and by what sure means—ends and means which would not bring damaging reaction from within or counteraction from without? In the face of these large questions, Holmberg carefully made the necessary ethical and scientific calculations with knowledge, wisdom, humanity, and moral courage. The Siriono, too, could have used such anthropology to advantage.

Finally, this book suggests that the tasks of the field anthropologist may require some physical as well as moral bravery, some ingenuity as well as wisdom, some inner stamina as well as interest in humanity. As we read the modest introduction to this study, we appreciate the difficulties and actual dangers Holmberg overcame in establishing and maintaining contact with the elusive nomads of the long bow as they moved about their most inhospitable territory, a region so isolated that it was months before the author learned of his country's entry into the Second World War. Holmberg succeeded admirably in his scientific

work among the Siriono; but he also succeeded in maintaining health, energy, and spirits and in surmounting all the varied housekeeping troubles which confront the scholar working alone in a distant corner of the world. Had he failed in these essential tasks, there would have been no skilled observation, no careful records, no thoughtful analysis, and we would not have this report today.

With the young Allan Holmberg as companion and highly competent guide, the reader now embarks on this adventure in modern anthropology. May he not only discover the Siriono but also something of the aims and methods and character of the science of man and of one of its best practitioners.

*Surin, Thailand*  
*June 1968*

*Lauriston Sharp*

## INTRODUCTION

THE following study was carried out under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council of which I was a pre-doctoral fellow in 1940-41. It had its origin in 1939, when I was associated with the Cross-Cultural Survey (now the Human Relations Area Files, Inc.) at the Institute of Human Relations, Yale University. While studying there, I was privileged to get considerable exposure to the cross-disciplinary approach to the problems of culture and behavior which was being emphasized at the Institute, especially by Doctors Murdock, Hull, Dollard, Miller, Ford, and Whiting.

As I continued my anthropological studies, it became more and more apparent to me, as to others, that a science of culture and behavior was most apt to arise from the application of techniques, methods, and approaches of several scientific disciplines concerned with human behavior—particularly social anthropology, sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis—to specific problems. Consequently, in casting around for a subject on which to carry out field work, I began to search for one that would be especially amenable to cross-disciplinary treatment.

The data in slightly different form were presented to the Graduate School of Yale University in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

While studying at the Institute of Human Relations, I became keenly aware of the significant role played by such basic drives as hunger, thirst, pain, and sex in forming, instilling, and changing habits. Because of the difficulty of studying human behavior under laboratory conditions, our knowledge about the processes of learning has been derived largely from experimental studies of animals. However, the procedure, successfully employed in psychological experimentation, of depriving animals of food suggested that it might be possible to gain further insight into the relationship between the principles of learning and cultural forms and processes by studying a group of perennially hungry human beings. It was logical to assume that where the conditions of a sparse and insecure food supply exist in human society the frustrations and anxieties centering around the drive of hunger should have significant repercussions on behavior and on cultural forms themselves. Hence, I took as my general problem the investigation of the relation between the economic aspect and other aspects of culture in a society functioning under conditions of a sparse and insecure food supply. More specifically, the problem resolved itself into determining, if possible, the effect of intermittent frustration of the hunger drive on such cultural forms as diet, food taboos, eating habits, dreams, antagonisms, magic, religion, and sex relations, and upon such cultural processes as integration, mobility, socialization, education, and change.

In our own society there are many individuals who suffer from lack of food, but one rarely finds hunger as a group phenomenon. For this reason a primitive society, the Siriono of eastern Bolivia, was chosen for study. The Siriono were selected for several reasons. In the first place, they were reported to be semi-

nomadic and to suffer from lack of food. In the second place, they were known to be a functioning society. In the third place, the conditions for study among them seemed favorable, since it was possible to make contact with the primitive bands roaming in the forest through an Indian school which had been established by the Bolivian government in 1937 for those Siriono who had come out of the forest and abandoned aboriginal life.

I left for Bolivia on September 28, 1940, and arrived in the field on November 28, 1940. Between November 28, 1940, and May 17, 1941, I worked with informants of various bands of Siriono who had been gathered together in a Bolivian Government Indian School at Casarabe, a kind of mixed village of Indians and Bolivians, situated about forty miles east of Trinidad, capital of the Province of the Beni. (See map.) At the time of my stay this so-called school had a population of about 325 Indians.

Following my residence in Casarabe, where I became grounded in the Indian language and those aspects of the aboriginal culture that still persisted there, I left in May 1941 to join a band of about 60 Siriono who were living under somewhat more natural conditions near the Rio Blanco on a cacao plantation called Chiquiguani, which was at that time a kind of branch of the Casarabe school. Upon arriving at Chiquiguani, however, I found that as a result of altercations with the Bolivians, the Indians had dispersed into the forest, so that I encountered no people with whom to work. Consequently, I returned to a ranch near the village of El Carmen. There I was fortunate in meeting an American cattle rancher, Frederick Park Richards, since deceased, who had resided in the area for many years and who had a number of

Siriono living on his farm and cattle ranch. Through him I was presented to a Bolivian, Don Luis Silva Sánchez, a first-rate bushman, and explorer for the aforementioned school, who offered to be my companion, and who stayed with me during most of the time that I lived and wandered with the Siriono. In company with Silva I set out in search of the Indians who had dispersed into the forest. After about ten days they were located and agreed to settle on the banks of the Rio Blanco, about two or three days' journey up the river by canoe from the village of El Carmen, at a place which we founded and named Tibaera, the Indian word for *asayí* palm, the site being so designated because of the abundance of this tree found there. I spent from July 15 to August 28, 1941, at Tibaera continuing my general cultural and linguistic studies, but under what I regarded as unsatisfactory conditions, since I had previously laid my plans and devoted my energies to acquiring techniques for observing a group of Siriono who had had little or no previous contact. Consequently, I suggested to Silva that we go in search of other Indians. Finally, on August 28, 1941, I set out from Tibaera, in company with Silva and parts of two extended families of Indians (21 people in all), traveling east and south through the raw bush in the general direction of the Franciscan missions of Guarayos, where we were told by the Indians that we might locate another band which had had little or no previous contact. After eight days of rough travel, much of which involved passing through swamps and through an area which had long been abandoned by the Siriono, we joyously arrived at a section of high ground containing relatively recent remains of a Siriono campsite. My Indian companions told me that this site had been occupied by a small

number of Indians who had come there in quest of calabashes about three "moons" earlier.

Inspired by the hope of soon locating a primitive band, we silenced our guns, and lived by hunting with the bow and arrow so as not to frighten any Indians that might be within earshot of a gun. We followed the rude trails which had been made by the Indians about three months earlier, and after passing many abandoned huts, each one newer than the last, we finally arrived at midday on the eleventh day of march just outside a camp. On the advice of our Indian companions, Silva and I removed most of our clothes, so as not to be too conspicuous in the otherwise naked party—I at least had quite a tan—and leaving behind our guns and all supplies except a couple of baskets of roast peccary meat, which we were saving as a peace gesture, we sandwiched ourselves in between our Indian guides and made a hasty entrance into the communal hut. The occupants, who were enjoying a midday siesta, were so taken by surprise that we were able to start talking to them in their own language before they could grasp their weapons or flee. Moreover, as their interest almost immediately settled on the baskets of peccary meat, we felt secure within a few 'moments' time and sent back for the rest of our supplies.

Once having established contact with such a group, I had intended to settle down or wander with them for several months, or until I could complete my studies. I was forced, however, to abandon this plan when, after being with them for a day or two, I came down with an infection in my eyes of such gravity that I was almost blinded. Fearing that this infection would spread to a point that I might lose my sight, and since I carried no medicines with which to heal



it, I decided to set out for the Franciscan missions of the Guarayos, about eight days' distance on foot, the nearest point at which aid could be obtained. Before leaving, however, I consulted with the chief of this new group (his name was Ačíba-eóko, or Long-arm) and told him that I planned to return and study the manner of life of his people. In the meantime, the Indians in our original party, knowing of my plan, had already convinced the chief and other members of his band to return with them to the Rio Blanco and settle down for a while at Tibaera, a plan which suited me perfectly. Consequently, in the company of 4 Indians of this new band and Silva, I traveled on foot to Yaguarú, Guarayos. After about two weeks of fine treatment at the hands of the civilian administrator, Don Francisco Materna, and the equally hospitable Franciscan fathers and nuns, I was able to rejoin the band, and we slowly returned to Tibaera, arriving there on October 11, 1941.

Besides what studies I was able to make of this band while roaming with them during part of September and October 1941, I continued to live with them at Tibaera, except for occasional periods of ten days' or two weeks' absence for purposes of curing myself of one tropical malady or another or of refreshing my mental state, until March 1942, when my studies were terminated by news that the United States had become involved in war three months previously.

As can be readily inferred from the above account of my contacts with the Siriono, they were studied under three different conditions: first, for about four months, while they were living at Casarabe under conditions of acculturation and forced labor; second, for about two months, while they were wandering under aboriginal conditions in the forest; finally, for about