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Unsettled Communities: Changing Perspectives on
South American Indigenous Settlements

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DISPERSED, NUCLEATED, DISPERSED: CHANGING MATSES SETTLEMENT PATTERNS, 1969-1995

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The following account describes what happens when a little contacted Amazonian people accept the patronage of a missionary organization, in this case the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The general pattern is familiar. The tendency for Amazonian peoples to migrate towards missionary stations and other contact agencies is well known. The impact this has on previously dispersed, semi-nomadic groups often is pronounced. Descola (1981) and Taylor (1981), writing about the Achuar, report a tendency toward nucleation followed some years later by dispersion, a pattern similar to the Matses. Frechione (1990) describes the formation and persistence of the Yekuana village of Asenõña, a community of 450 which as of his writing had remained in the same place for 20 years, almost as long as the longest-lived Matses community.

The Matses illustrate well the "unsettled communities" theme of the present volume, and they help us to move toward a general theory of indigenous behavior in the contact context. The Matses case is particularly important because, until they accepted SIL missionaries in 1969, the Matses were little influenced by—and except by reputation, little known to—the outside world (Romanoff 1984). On the eve of the SIL contact, Ribeiro (1967:145) even declared them to be extinct in Brazil, where most of them were living at the time.¹

One conclusion from the Matses data is that no single factor—ecological, ideological, or social—alone is adequate to account for the course of events. On the contrary, all these factors come into play at various times and in various combinations. This paper is therefore in part an argument against reductionistic explanations of population movement and settlement pattern that would privilege any one of these factors over the others. I describe in detail the history of population movements since 1969 together with what is known about the reasons for these movements, or what I have been able to gather about them. The data are often patchy, the result of a reliance on frequently unsystematic written reports and interviews with persons who have had extensive contact with the Matses—Harriet Fields of SIL who made the initial contact in 1969 and has been working with them ever since then; Luis Calixto Méndez, a Peruvian anthropologist who has been working with them for the last 15 years; and Steven Romanoff, who did his doctoral fieldwork with them between 1974 and

1976, within a few years of SIL contact. Although I visited Peru in the summer of 1995 and worked for a few days in one village (Aucayacu), I have not yet undertaken long-term fieldwork with the Matses.

Historical Sketch

In earlier sources, the Matses are called Mayoruna, but since Romanoff (1984), Mayoruna has been used as an umbrella term for northern Panoan peoples, including the Matis and Korubo as well as the Matses (Erikson 1994). The modern Matses inhabit a remote area about 180 kilometers southeast of Iquitos, on both the Peruvian and Brazilian sides of the upper Yavari (Yaquerana) River. Their territory lies two days walk east of the towns of Jenaro Herrera, on the Ucayali, and Requena, on the lower Tapiche, rivers unconnected to the Yaquerana/Yavari except at highest water. Peru declared some 344,687 hectares a Reserva del Estado for the Matses in 1973, and in 1993 surveyed and marked slightly more than 450,000 hectares in a proposal for land entitlement, although the Matses do not yet have official title to this land. In Brazil, their territory lies within the Parque do Vale do Javari.

The history of Matses—or more properly, Mayoruna—contact begins with the first explorers and missionaries to penetrate the Amazon basin from the Andean highlands in the sixteenth century. In the course of the "Jesuit century," from 1636 to the expulsion of the order from Spanish crown lands in 1767, Mayoruna local groups were occasionally "reduced" in mission settlements, where they came into contact with other indigenous peoples. The majority, however, appear to have remained independent. The later rubber boom seems to have had a more considerable impact on the general population, and it is with its conclusion around 1920 that the modern Matses begin to come into focus. By the end of the rubber boom, the Matses population had fallen to a critical low, and the group embarked on a period of raiding indigenous, mestizo and settler communities on the peripheries of their territory. Romanoff (1984) credits the group's survival to this practice, which continued until the acceptance of SIL in 1969.

Traditionally the Matses lived in large longhouses, housing 100 persons or more, organized on patrilocal residence principles. The houses were located on ridges or hills close to streams, with cultivated fields on the tops of surrounding ridges.

Each longhouse had its own headman, generally the most senior male, but sometimes a group of related longhouses would locate in clusters under a common leader or chief. Fields would then be cleared on top of a hill in the middle of the group, a defensive posture befitting their belligerent stance toward the outside world. During the period of raiding, the Matses also maintained secondary houses to which they could move in case they were threatened, presenting their attackers with a sort of shell game (Romanoff 1984:46-47).

Every few years, the large or super longhouses would move. Moves might occur for any of several reasons, including a decline in garden productivity, a fall in hunting returns, altercations among kin, avoidance of outsiders, and death, particularly that of a senior man. In moving, the super longhouses would break up into smaller longhouses, housing single extended families, which would rejoin when a new permanent location was found. The longhouses did not always come back together in the same combinations, however. Not uncommonly, some families chose to go their own ways, and there was a good deal of shuffling of position (Romanoff 1984; Calixto Méndez n.d.-a).

Changing Settlement Patterns, 1969-1995

The group of Matses that SIL made contact with in 1969 was small, but once contact was established, other groups came to join them on the upper Choba. Map 1 is the first of a series of maps which trace changes in settlement locations at key intervals. Map 1 represents the situation in 1969 and a few years after, with arrows indicating the movement of houses to the upper Choba. The group originally contacted by SIL was on a Choba tributary, but soon moved to another tributary after an airstrip was cleared there for SIL aircraft. No fewer than 16 of the traveling longhouses congregated in the vicinity of the airstrip and a house built for the missionaries. The 16 houses were derived from four super longhouses in Brazil. Three of these moved in their entirety, whereas the fourth broke up into families, some of whom chose to move to a series of locations along the Lobo river in Brazil (Romanoff 1976, 1984). There was a good deal of movement in the early days, and some of those who moved to Peru from Brazil later returned there (according to Harriet Fields in a 1995 interview).

SIL personnel designated one of the longhouse headman as "chief" and funneled work activities through him (Romanoff 1984). Over a period of a few years the loose congregation of longhouses on the upper Choba evolved into a more formal arrangement under his charge, and came to be called Chëshěmpi, or "black," the Matses name for the Choba. At Chëshěmpi, the traveling longhouses failed to combine into the super longhouses in the traditional manner. They established themselves at varying distances apart

in the forest, out of sight from one another through the trees, and each built a secondary house at several hours' walk from the center. Gardens were cultivated around these secondary houses and hunting paths radiated out from them. The houses at Chëshěmpi were utilized mainly when the SIL missionaries in residence, the outlying houses at other times (Romanoff 1976, 1984).

This is the situation that obtained between 1974 and 1976, when Romanoff was in the field. Note that Map 1 shows only one settlement in Peru at this time that is not part of the Chëshěmpi congregation. This small group on the lower Choba, which came to be called San José, was associated with a Franciscan missionary who rarely, if ever, put in an appearance (Romanoff 1984).

In 1978 (Map 2), a conflict broke out among the families living along the Lobo, a Yaquerana tributary, in Brazil, and some families relocated (or were relocated by FUNAI) to the lower Yavarí at a place called Lameirão. According to Harriet Fields, this community has recently crossed the river and now lives in Peru. Other communities along the Lobo also moved in 1978, some families migrating north to settle in the border town Palmeiras (Melatti 1981). Two new villages, San Juan and Santa Sofia, were formed along the middle Yaquerana in Peru. The reasons for these other movements have not been recorded, but some at least appear to have been related to the same set of conflicts that led to the founding of Lameirão.

About 1980, two of the Chëshěmpi chiefs' nephews, not wanting to be under his authority, moved out and founded their own villages along the upper Gálvez. This is shown in Map 3, which depicts the situation circa 1980-1981. Note that by this time the village of San José on the lower Choba was no longer in existence, its citizens having moved and founded the village of San José de Añushi, on the lower Gálvez. Most of the inhabitants of San Juan, located on the middle Yaquerana, moved first to the Lopes in Brazil, and then returned to the middle Gálvez as Nuevo San Juan (Calixto Méndez n.d.-a, n.d.-b), leaving only a few persons in the old San Juan.

The last Peruvian village on the middle Yaquerana, Santa Sofia, broke up around 1980 as well, its residents moving in various directions (Map 4). Some traveled up the Yaquerana to found Paujil, just south of the Peruvian garrison town of Angamos. They were later joined there by some of their relatives who went first to Chëshěmpi. Other families from Santa Sofia moved to the Gálvez, some augmenting the population of Nuevo San Juan and others founding the new village of Nueva Choba (Calixto Méndez n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Chëshěmpi lasted until 1982 when the large village was moved a short distance away and its name changed to Buenas Lomas (Map 5). At Buenas Lomas, the space between longhouses was cleared for fields, following the traditional pattern of planting in the

middle of a group of houses, but outlying houses continued to be utilized by some families.

Two years later, in 1984, families living on a tributary of the Ituxi in Brazil crossed the Yaquerana into Peru to found the village of Nuevo Cashispi. The next year they were joined by families from the Lobo. In 1985, some families left Buenas Lomas to found Nueva Ideal on the middle Yaquerana. Meanwhile, an altercation led some families from Remoyacu, on the upper Gálvez, to leave and found their own village, Seite de Junio. A year later, Remoyacu and its neighbor Buen Perú relocated to the middle Gálvez. And sometime after this, following an attack on the village by a jaguar that led to the deaths of several children, Seite de Junio broke up, its residents dispersing to Remoyacu and Nuevo San Juan.

During the same period, a rather different drama was unfolding elsewhere (Map 6). In 1984, Nueva Chova was induced by a representative of a missionary organization (Lighthouse Ministries) to move *en masse* to a location on the Aucayacu, a secondary tributary of the Ucayali just north of the mestizo town of Jenaro Herrera. They were shortly joined by families from the Brazilian village of Trinta e Um. But the new community was short-lived. The inducement to move had included the promise of being allowed to live in the traditional manner, but no sooner had they built a longhouse, shed their clothes, and painted their bodies, than tourists were brought in to see them. The Matses were quick to respond by charging for photographs and proceeded to burn their longhouse (building single-family dwellings in its place), then gradually moved back to the Gálvez. In 1986, some families moved to the Brazilian side of the upper Yaquerana to found a new village called Santa Sofia (not to be confused with the old Peruvian Santa Sofia, which broke up in 1980). When I visited Aucayacu in 1995, only one extended Matses family (originally from Brazil) remained. Most of the rest of the 70-odd villagers were Cocama-related mestizos.

By 1992 (Map 7), further changes had occurred on the Gálvez and Yaquerana/Yavari. The village of Paujil had moved from the Yaquerana, just above Angamos, to the lower Gálvez. A new village, Jorge Chavez, had been founded on the Gálvez, and another, Fray Pedro, on the Yavari, below Angamos.

In 1995 (Map 8), the Gálvez River communities were much as they were in 1992. Nuevo Cashispi was still in existence on the Peruvian bank of the Yaquerana, and Trinta e Um and Santa Sofia on the Brazilian side. But important changes came to the Choba.

Santa Rosa was founded out of Buenas Lomas, which finally broke up in the Spring, when its headman (called "chief" by SIL) led about a third of the village downstream to a new location, appropriately named Buenas Lomas Nueva (New Buenas Lomas). This chief is the son of the old Chëshëmpi chief, who

died at the end of 1993. He is the parallel cousin (and classificatory brother) of the headmen of Remoyacu and Buen Perú. These men recognize his authority, whereas they had not recognized the authority of their uncle. This chiefdom, if we can call it that, represents something of a novel development in that it is composed of geographically distant communities, rather than co-resident ones. On the other hand, it is still kinship-based, and not all Matses communities, even in Peru, follow the chief's lead in all matters.

Discussion

About a third of the population of the original Buenas Lomas remained behind when the chief moved (a third moved to other locations, but return occasionally), but for all intents and purposes, that community has collapsed (Fields interview). The remarkable thing is that it lasted as long as it did. Chëshëmpi encompassed 508 people in 1976 (Romanoff 1984:65). The 1993 Peruvian Census lists Buenas Lomas as having a population of 706, or 60% of the total 1177 Matses counted in Peru (Instituto Nacional 1994:188). If the three successive communities (the original unnamed community, Chëshëmpi, and Buenas Lomas) are treated as one, this large community was in existence for twenty-five years, with only infrequent and minor changes of location and defections. Nothing of its size or longevity was known traditionally, and its continued existence must be credited to the influence of SIL and Peruvian government policies that encouraged permanency of settlement. In Brazil, also, there has been a concentration of the population, in the village of Trinta e Um. Informants in Iquitos regularly described this as a very large village, population estimates ranging up to a staggering (and unbelievable) two thousand. A large village would imply some concentration of formerly smaller communities, but unfortunately I have found no data on the development of Trinta e Um.

Besides this tendency to concentrate the population in communities on a scale far larger than anything known traditionally (and, in the case of Buenas Lomas, subsequently to disperse), there has been a marked tendency to settle on rivers rather than streams. At least in the decades immediately prior to 1969, there were no settlements on the Gálvez, the Yaquerana, or even the Choba, but only on streams tributary to them. Having accepted contact, the Matses no longer find it necessary to withdraw into the interfluvial hinterlands.

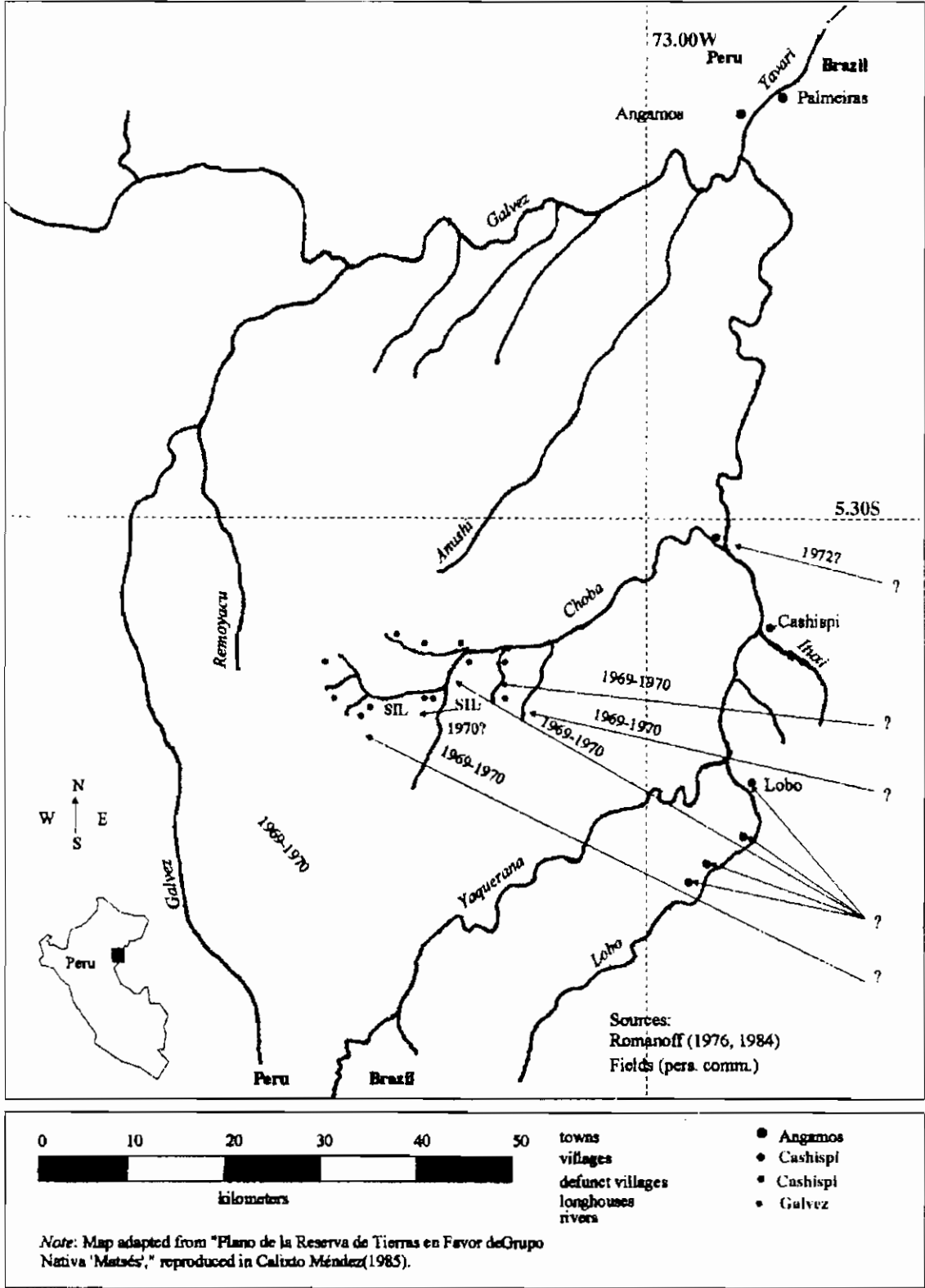
A third tendency toward change, especially over the last ten years, has been the giving up of longhouses for single family houses. The majority of Matses communities now consist of single (extended) family houses of the sort typical of this part of Amazonia. Only two longhouses remain, one at the much reduced Buenas Lomas and other at Santa Rosa on the Choba. However, despite these changes, other

factors have remained the same. The tendency for communities to move every few years is very striking. Although some villages have stayed in place as long as 10 or 15 years--a good deal longer than was the case traditionally--like Buenas Lomas, they have ultimately moved.

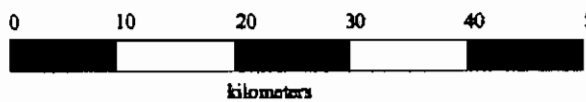
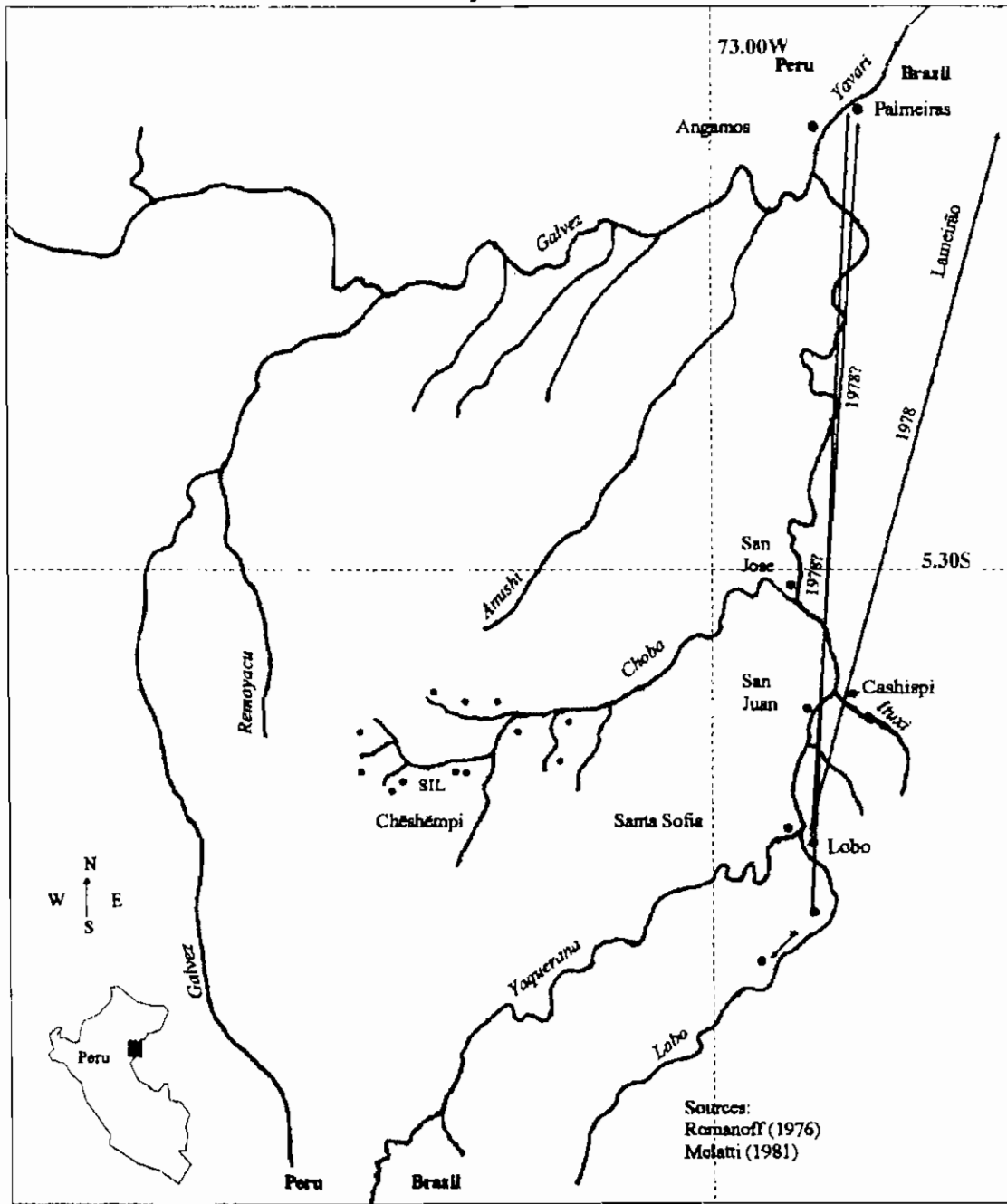
The reasons for increased sedentism are part of the greater situation of contact--increased exposure to and influence from Peruvian national patterns, including schools and clinics, typically built with an eye toward permanency. The reasons for movement, however--fields giving out, hunting productivity falling, altercations, death--are among the reasons longhouses moved. Moreover, the tendency for families co-resident in a village to move independently of the others has its precedent in the period before 1969. Co-resident families have not always separated, of course--in several cases, entire villages have moved together. Good examples are the movement of Remoyacu and Buen Perú from the upper to the middle Gálvez and the transplantation of Nueva Chova to Aucayacu. This alternative pattern also had its precedent in the earlier period, when an entire longhouse might move together.

I would like to take this argument further. My impression is that villages are, for the most part, composed of patrilineally related kinfolk living patrilocally, with the village houses lined up like longhouse compartments. Such a village plan appears in Aucayacu, where the original longhouse was replaced by a string of houses, and it has been described for the Panoan Sharanahua (Siskind 1973:67), Shipibo (Roe 1980:80; Siegal and Roe 1986:98-99), and Isconahua (Momsen 1964:50) as well. However, since kinship data and settlement plans are not available for Matsigenka villages other than Aucayacu, this remains an hypothesis to be tested.

Map 1: 1969-1972



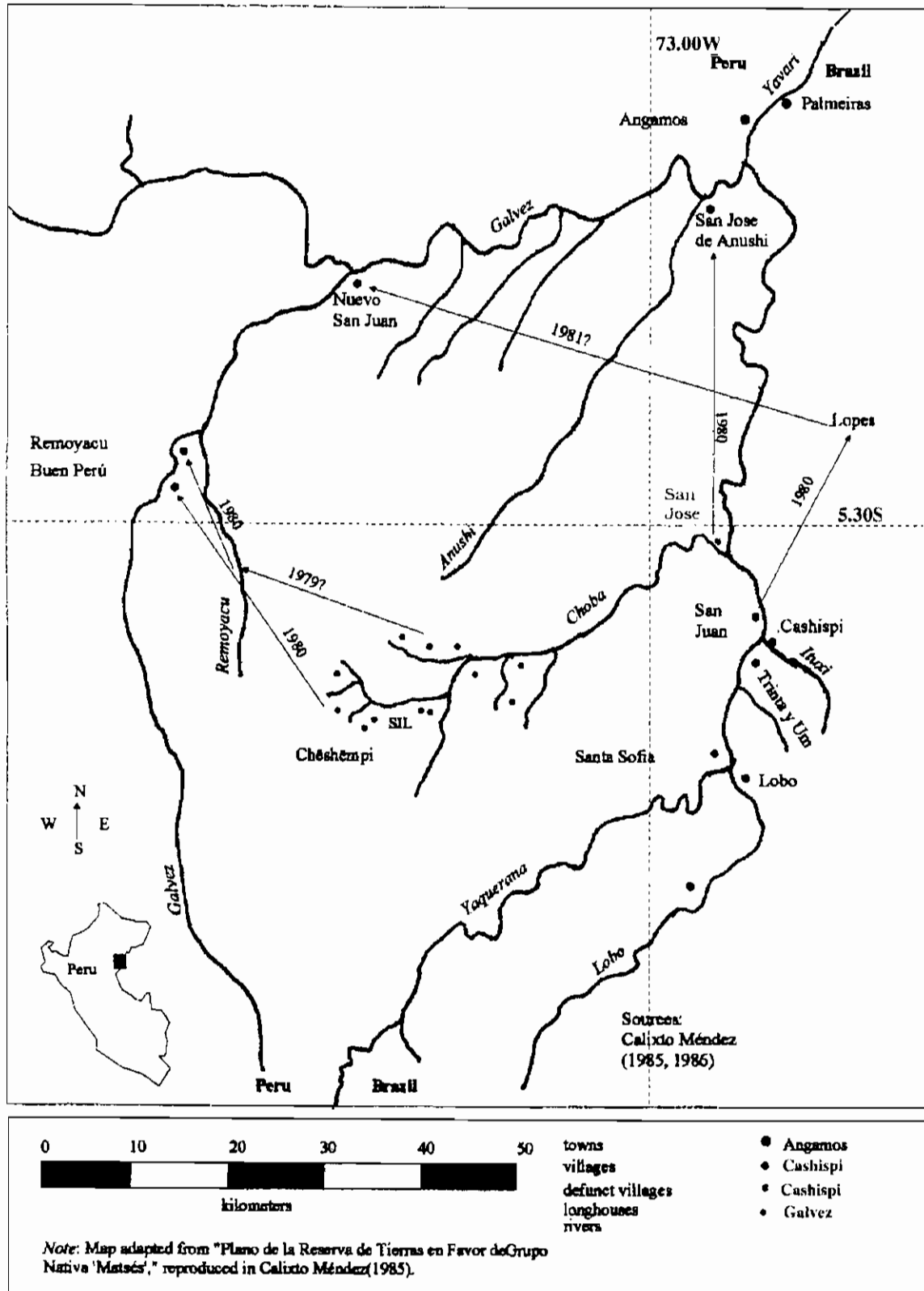
Map 2: 1978



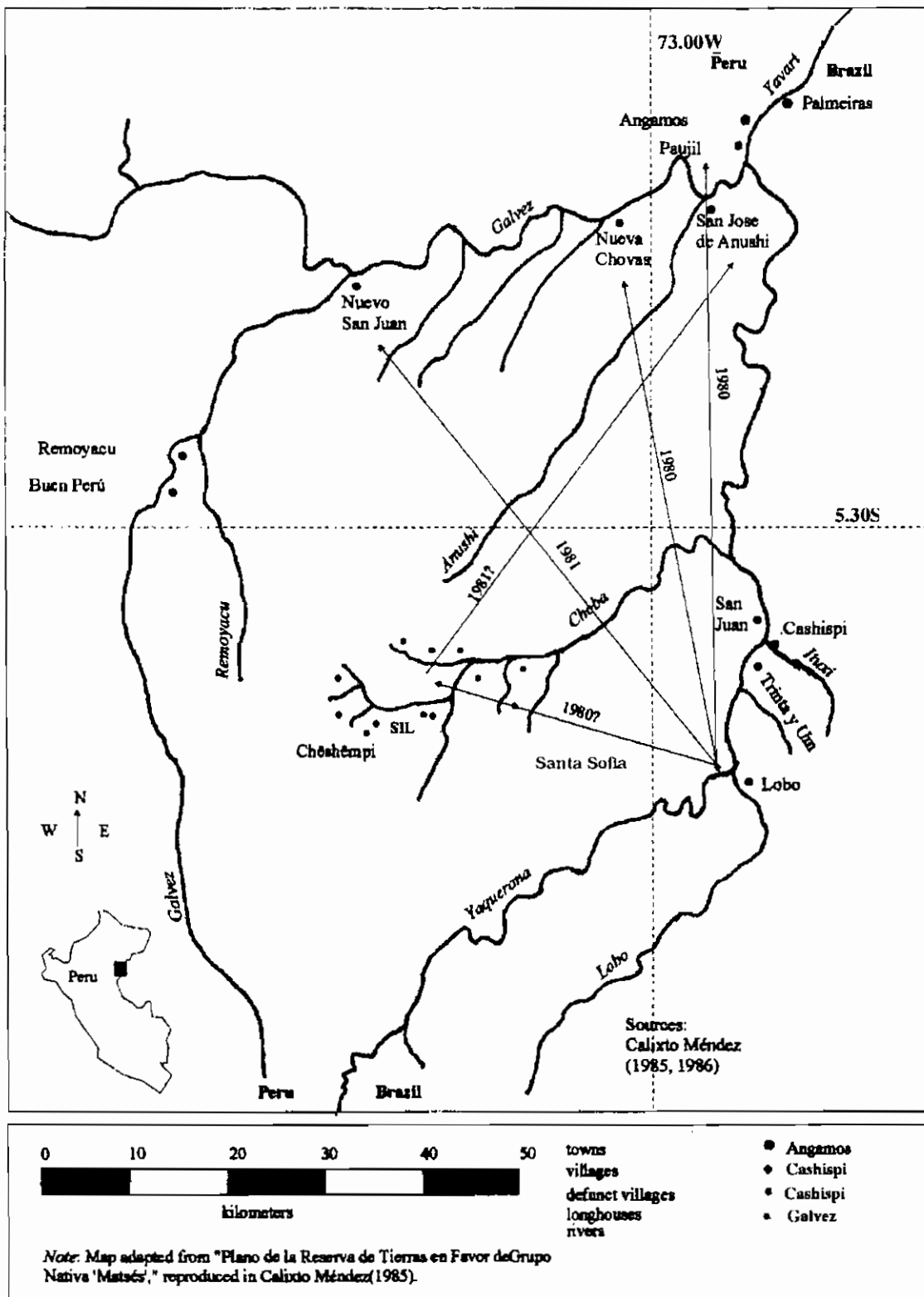
- | | |
|------------------|------------|
| towns | ● Angamos |
| villages | • Cashispi |
| defunct villages | • Cashispi |
| longhouses | • Galvez |
| rivers | |

Note: Map adapted from "Plano de la Reserva de Tierras en Favor de Grupo Nativo 'Matsés'," reproduced in Calixto Méndez (1985).

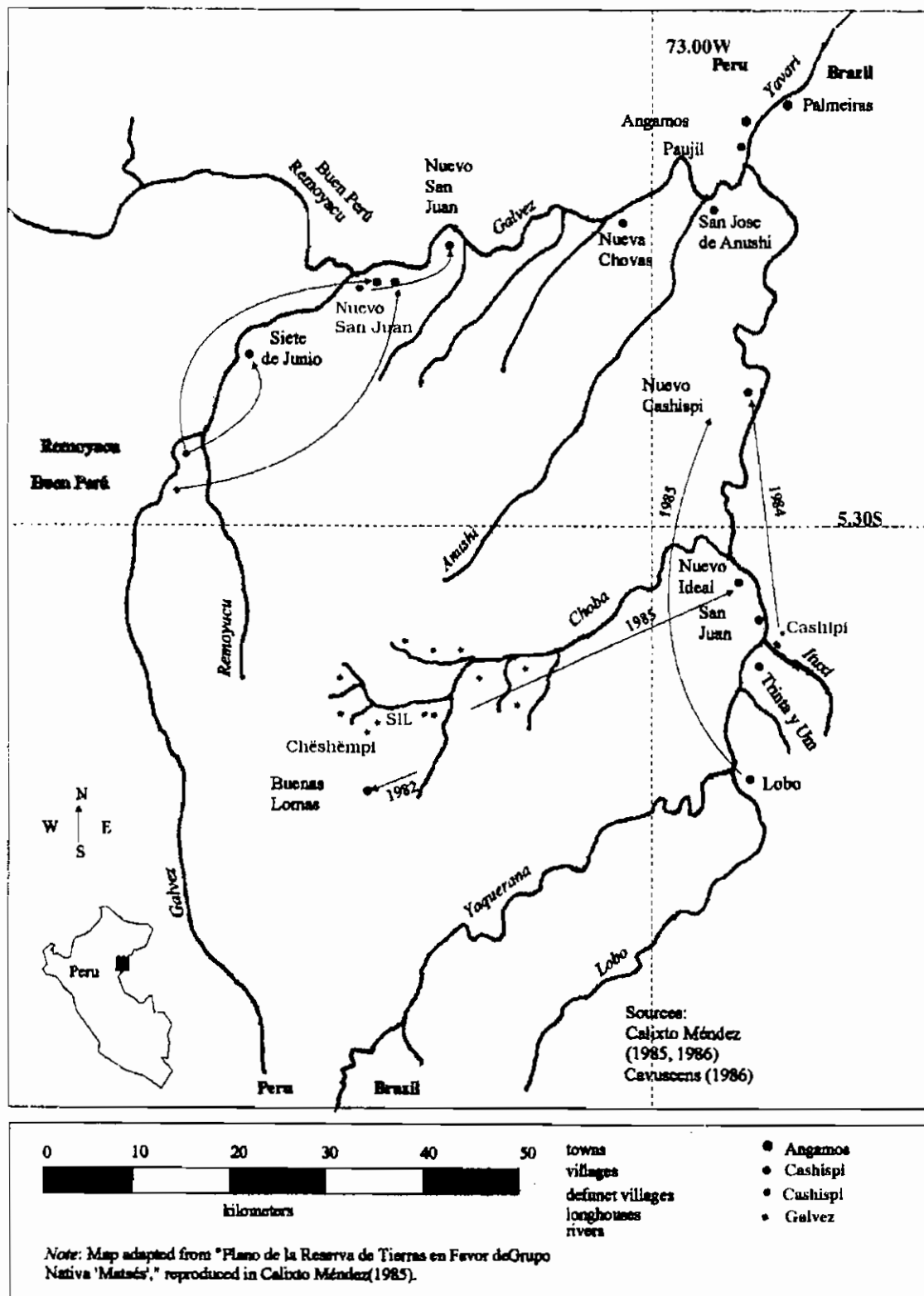
Map 3: 1980-1981 (a)



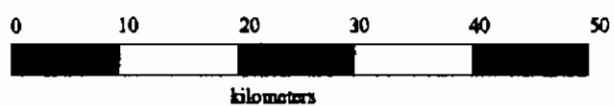
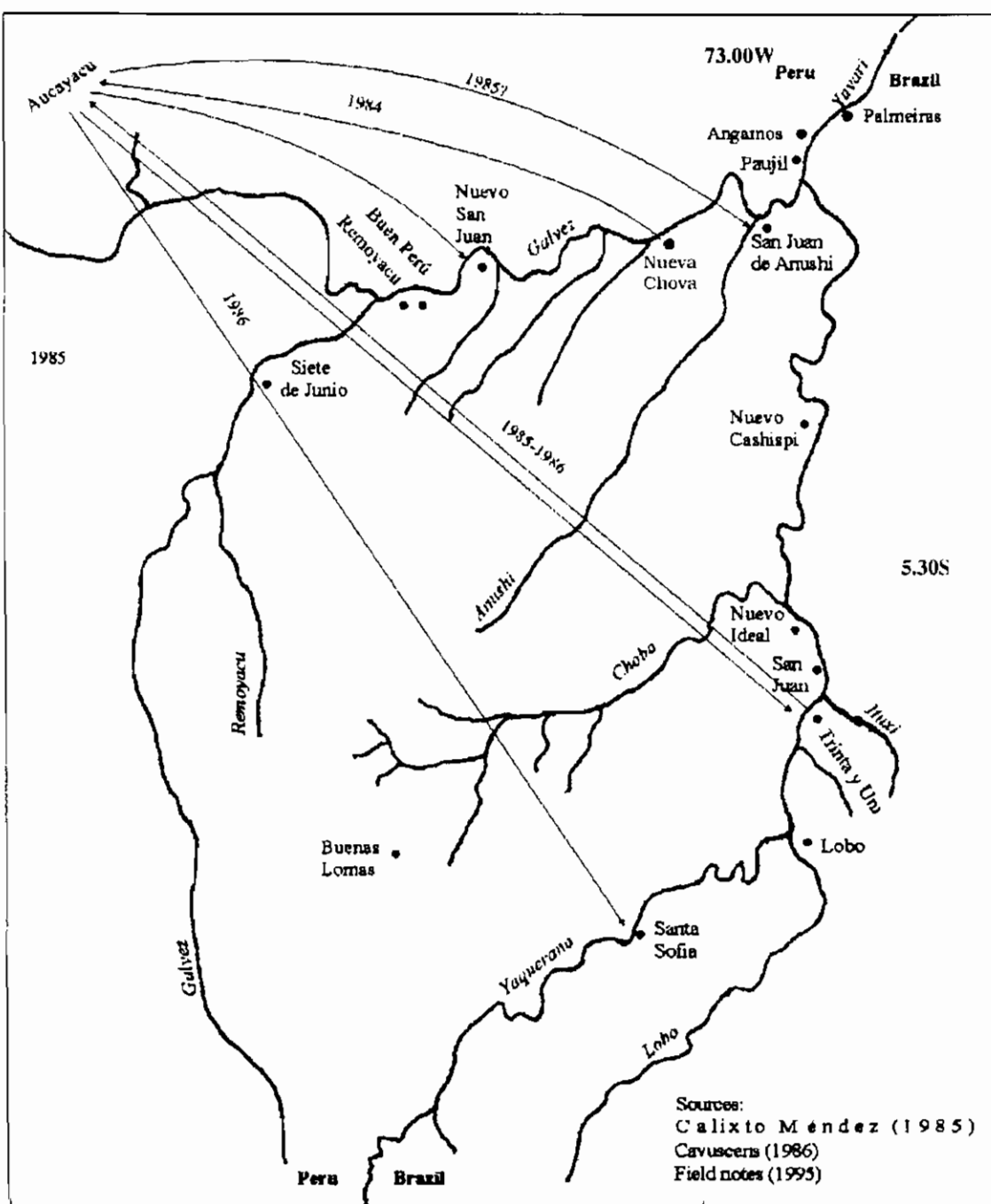
Map 4: 1980-1981 (b)



Map 5: 1984-1986 (a)



Map 6: 1984-1986 (b)

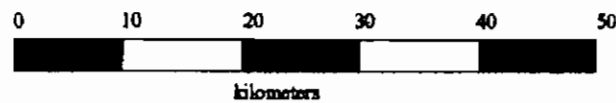
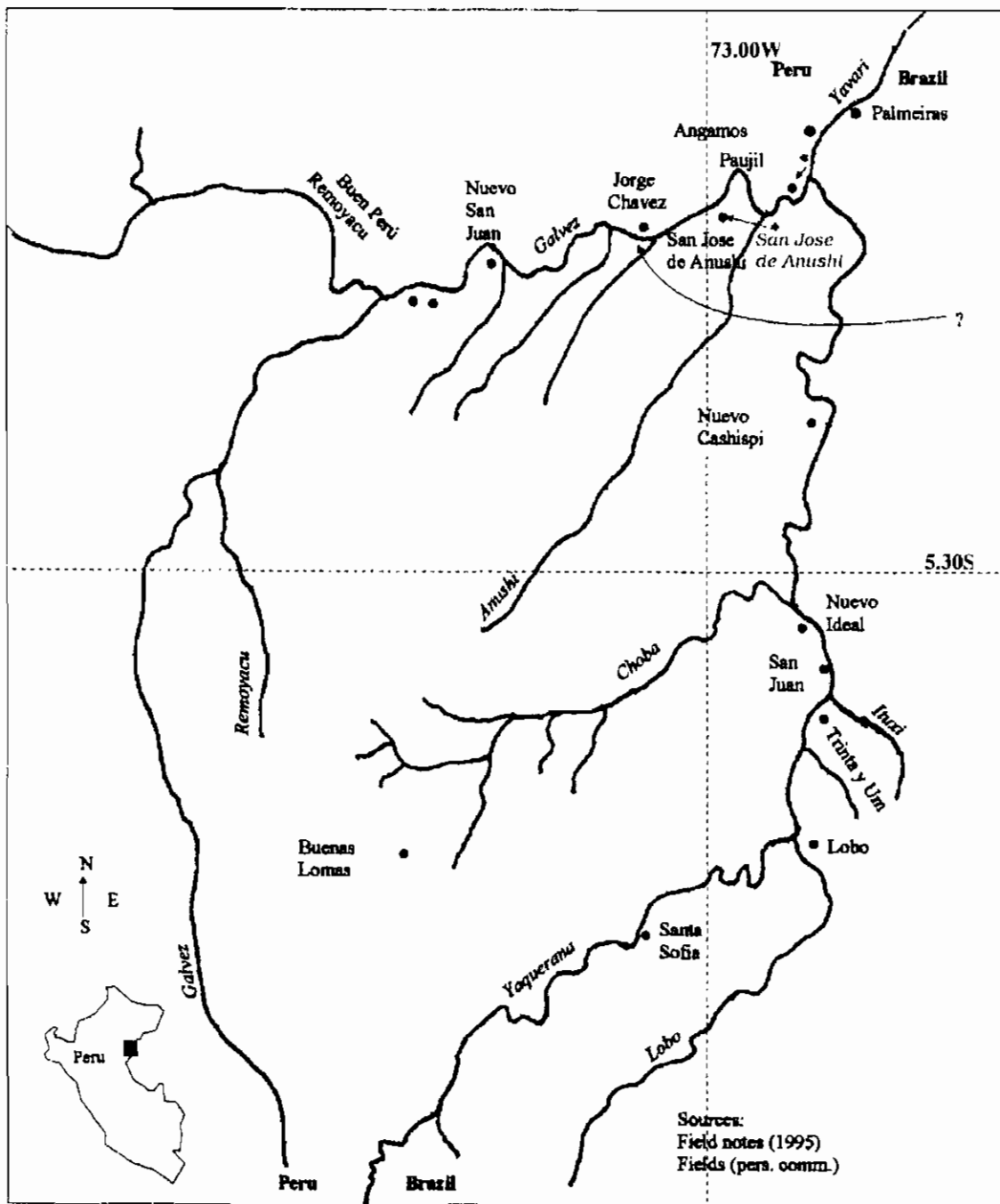


towns
villages
defunct villages
longhouses
rivers

• Angamos
• Cashispi
• Cashispi
• Galvez

Note: Map adapted from "Plano de la Reserva de Tierras en Favor del Grupo Nativo 'Matsés'," reproduced in Calixto Méndez (1985).

Map 7: 1992

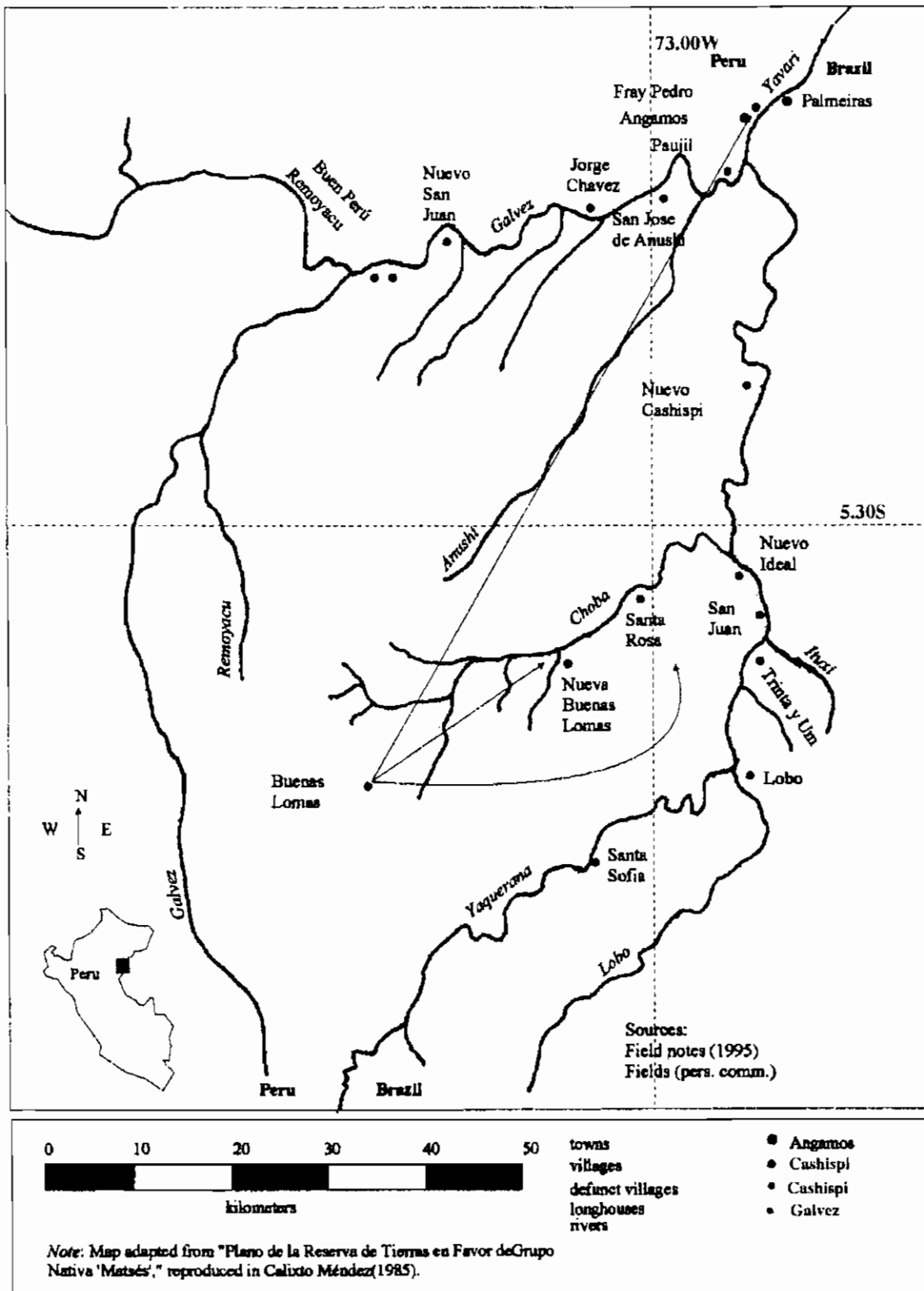


towns
villages
defunct villages
longhouses
rivers

- Angamos
- Cachispi
- Cachispi
- Galvez

Note: Map adapted from "Plano de la Reserva de Tierras en Favor del Grupo Nativo 'Matsés'," reproduced in Calixto Méndez (1985).

Map 8: 1995



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Notes

¹ This synopsis glosses over an important series of events in the early history of modern contact with the Matses. In 1963, SIL missionaries spotted a Matses village on an overflight, and began dropping trade goods to them. In 1964, a civilian-cum-military expedition left the Ucayali river town of Requena for Matses territory, bent on colonizing the area. The Matses attacked this group, who took refuge in an abandoned longhouse, and were later rescued by U. S. military helicopters flown in from the Panama Canal Zone. The Peruvian air force then bombed Matses villages, sending most Matses fleeing across the river into Brazil, where most were living when SIL trade goods were finally accepted in 1969. See Romanoff (1984) for the fullest available account of these events.