

Applying Concepts of cultural and social change to ethnographies

Yanomamo - Many of the changes that are occurring among the Yanomamo are the result of the increasing Catholic mission activities at their several main posts of Ocamo, Mavaca and Platanal and the extension of their influence to more and more neighbouring villages. Those Yanomamo villages away but relatively close to these centres are now becoming severely tied to and dependant on the mission posts. The missionaries have started schools and economic co-operatives in some of these outlying villages, sending Yanomamo teachers that they have trained as their agents of acculturation. - As the distance from the mission posts increases, contact diminishes and becomes more irregular, especially if the villages are not on or near navigable rivers via which the missionaries, and the Yanomamo agents they train, normally travel. - The policy of the Catholics has been to reduce as many of the widely-separated, isolated Yanomamo villages as they can to living at as few, large, easily reachable villages as possible. Many of the recent villages moves in the area of Kaobawa's village resulted from this policy: More and more villages are moving closer to the missions, or factions of larger villages are splitting away from the main group to do this. As this trend continues, mission villages are becoming larger and larger. Coupled with this trend toward larger, more concentrated villages is the gradual decrease in the total number of Yanomamo villages. - The 1987 Brazilian Gold Rush- What began in 1987 developed into a catastrophe of enormous proportions. The catastrophic changes were the consequences of a gold rush on the Brazilian side of the border that simmered for many years and then exploded in 1987. Diseases brought by Brazilian gold miners then spread from one village to another, even to remote Venezuelan villages near the border, either because the Yanomamo there began visiting the mining area and brought home the sicknesses or because some Brazilian miners illegally crossed into Venezuela and brought the diseases with them. - As the gold fever intensified, the miners demanded that if they couldn't be there, then the missionaries and other foreigners shouldn't be there either. The government buckled under the pressure and ordered the missionaries, anthropologists, and others sympathetic to the Yanomamo to leave the area. The miners then invaded the area in force- soon reaching approximately 40,000 in number. - Soon after, a group of miners clashed with a group of Yanomamo near Mucajai, killing four of them with guns and desecrating their bodies. One miner was also killed by the Yanomamo. - The miners used destructive hydraulic pumps that sucked the river bottoms of their gold-bearing ore, passed it through troughs into which the toxic mercury compounds were added to extract the gold from the mud, and let the poisoned residue flow freely back into the rivers. They occasionally raped Yanomamo women, and shot their men and children. - Massacre at Hashimo-Teri- In 1993, a group of Brazilian gold miners attacked and massacred 17 members of the village of Hashimo-Teri near the headwaters of the Orinoco River.

- In 1985 there was an acceleration of village fissioning to the point that some Yanomamo families were living in separate, square nuclear family houses. There appear to be two reasons why the larger villages are chronically fissioning into increasing smaller sub-groups. One of these reasons is that warfare is diminishing and is less and less a worry to those who live at the mission posts. The Yanomamo at the missions now have increasing access to shotguns and ammunition, which reduces the probability they will be raided by enemies who only have bows and arrows. - In this area, shotguns were originally obtained from the Missionaries or employees of the mission, but in recent years many have entered the area from Brazil via a long trading network involving several isolated, intermediate villages in the headwaters of the Mavaca and in the Siapa River basin. Even more recently some shotguns have come via the S.U.Y.A.O. co-operatives, which began stocking them in about 1989 but soon withdrew them after it was learned they were being used in killings. - In addition to the military security that shotguns provide, there is a second reason for fissioning into smaller communities or single-family households. This has to do with material possessions like machetes, cooking pots, axes, clothing, flash-lights etc. and what it now takes to obtain them: hard work, selling labour. - Initially the missionaries generously gave these exotic items away, usually freely or, at least, with trivial reciprocity required. Then the missionaries began preferentially giving them just the more important men or members of their families to encourage their co-operation. - Large numbers of Yanomamo, sometimes whole communities, are moving to the mission in order to be closer to the source of material goods. - The process of peasantisation? is starting here. The community is becoming less and less self-sufficient in an economic sense, and is increasingly comprised of non- or distantly related people. As this happens, new social problems are appearing, especially the widespread occurrence of theft- both among the Yanomamo themselves and especially from foreigners who visit these places. - Education and growing awareness of the outside world- The children of Bisaasi-Teri, including those in Kaobawa's village, now regularly attend school at the Mission and follow an academic year like that found all over Venezuela. They even have an equivalent of a school-bus system- a very large dugout canoe that goes to each of the 12 villages? each morning to pick the school-children up and returns them the same way in the afternoon. - Fluency in Spanish is developing at a rapid pace at Mission locations, as well as the ability to read and write both Yanomamo and Spanish. - The newest factor in this complex situation is the designation of the Venezuelan Amazonas as a new state in 1992. It is no longer federal territory. Coupled with this important political change is the parallel process in Venezuela of decentralising? the national government, which means giving state governments more control over what happens locally. Increasing secularisation of this area also means increasing interest in the development of this area. The resources logically available to the State government of Venezuela's Amazon area fall into just a few logical categories: Mineral wealth. Eco-Tourism. Federal subsidies. Whichever route is followed, the Yanomamo will become increasingly exposed to our kind of world and will be incorporated into it.

About the Author

