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MISSIONARY INFLUENCE IN SOUTH AMERICA:
A CASE STUDY OF THE YANOMAMO

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Since the time of the Conquest, the greatest rationalization for the subjugation of the native peoples has been the need for the Christianization of all mankind. The Roman Catholic Church, which represented the official religion of the conquerors, has had the greatest impact historically, not only on the religious conversion of the Indians, but of their economic and political transitions as well. Only within the last one hundred years have the Evangelical Protestant missions made their impact as well. Most recent history demonstrates a fierce competition growing between the two. In this paper I would like to describe the climate of current day mission work in South America in general terms; and then examine with more depth the case of the Yanomamo, especially significant because it is one of the largest, relatively unacculturated groups left on the continent. I will then turn to a discussion of the relationship of anthropologists and missionaries, and their respective philosophies of development. Finally, I will look at the future of the missionary as an agent of change.

The work of the religious missions implies by its very nature a colonial situation in which certain values of the dominant group are assumed to be superior to those of the subjugated group. Specifically missionaries are interested in converting all people to the Christian religion, but as a means of achieving this end they are involved in all other aspects of culture as well. Social structure, economic patterns, diet, technology, and political organization are some of the areas of culture directly affected by the imposition of a new religious system. Though these areas are secular in nature in our own society, often times they are closely intertwined with the spiritual world of the indigenous

culture. Likewise, missionaries have preconceived notions of proper means of behavior that are in fact unrelated to religion per se but that are part of western morality and ethics. Clearly it is an impossibility to change one value without upsetting the balance and affecting the entire value system as well.

South America is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic today as in the past. While most national governments are actively involved in the accultuation process of indigenous groups through agencies created to provide necessary services, it is a fact that most of this task has been delagated to the Church. Various Catholic orders have established mission stations on Indian territory and created settlements that are dependent on them for trade items and cash through work. Typically, large plantation-style establishments are devoted to farming, stock-raising, or woodcutting, and the Indians provide the labor. It is by means of this dependency that the Church has held its power as an agent of change. Unfortunately, corruption has been common, and great amounts of wealth have been known to accumulate in the hands of the Church and in the pockets of its personnel.

The Catholic mission tends to emphasize education through which it seeks to indoctrinate the children of a community who are more easily molded into new patterns of thought than are the adults. Fairly tolerant about specific customs and practices of the indigenous group with which they are dealing, the mission concentrates on organizing the economic patterns that tie into the national market.

Protestant groups are present in South America to do the job that they see Catholics as unfit to do. Roman Catholicism is to

them a perverted form of the Christian religion, no better than the pagan religions of the natives they wish to convert.¹ Nearly all these groups are U.S. based and are characterized by a fundamentalist fanaticism. They seek to enact change immediately and unlike the Catholics, their missionaries learn indigenous languages with the ultimate goal of translating the Bible. Reflecting their own cultural heritage, Protestants openly display pro-U.S. attitudes and promote distrust of all other outsiders by the Indians. This naturally leads to antagonisms with government officials and Catholic missions.

As the number of uncontacted tribes rapidly decreases in South America, Protestants and Catholics have become more competitive with each other for monopolies over potential converts. On certain occasions the clash of cultural as well as religious ideology between the two has become rather viscious. While both groups have provided the Indians with valuable services through their altruistic intentions, much harm has been done as well, as a result of a lack of understanding of indigenous patterns of thought and behavior.

Missionary Impact on the Yanomamo

While most of us are familiar with the Yanomamo through the work of Napoleon Chagnon, an American anthropologist who has done many years of research among them, the extensive role that the missionary has played in the process of acculturation may come as a surprise. My sources of information come from French anthropologist Jacques Lizot, who has spent more than six years among the Yanomomo, recent material of Napoleon Chagnon, an article by a Salesian Priest, P. Cocco Luis, and direct correspondences with

several of the evangelical missions in the area.

Very briefly, the Yanomamo Indians live in southern Venezuela and northern Brazil, in the dense forest region on the border of Guyana, and the grassy savannah of the northern parts. Their total population is estimated to be about 10,000 spread out in some 125 villages with populations ranging from 40 to 250 inhabitants.³ Missionary penetration came late among the Yanomamo. It wasn't until 1950 when the New Tribes Mission set up the first settlement on the banks of the Orinoco River. In 1957 came the Salesians, a Catholic order assigned by the Venezuelan government to the Federal Amazonas Territory as its mission field. Later other evangelists have moved in and set up the Orinoco River Mission as well as several others. The simultaneous presence of these various groups, each with different ideas about the proper approach to take⁴, has artificially divided up the Yanomamo territory and perpetuated a fierce competition for fields of influence.⁵

The Protestants, as I mentioned earlier, are from U.S. based organizations that clearly represent U.S. values. They seek to save souls and are willing to go to great costs to achieve this end. Indeed, they have achieved great success in this regard. They claim that approximately 95% are Christianized.⁶ In addition to soul saving, the Protestant missionaries are dedicated to improving the standard of living for the Indians through education, nutrition, medical care, and improved technology. Unfortunately, the priorities set by the Missions often reflect their ethnocentric point of view and are not based on the actual needs of the community. A film on the New Tribes Mission made in 1974 demonstrates their

educational program. A group of bored looking youngsters ranging in age from about 7 to 14 are seated around a large table or at school desks learning to read and write in Spanish, sing hymns, and write numbers, and listening to Bible history and Christian doctrine in their own language. While bilingualism and literacy will perhaps be useful to the young Indian in the rapidly changing future, it must be made more relevant to the present and introduced in a manner more integrated with his traditional lifestyle. Education has also meant prohibition of certain cultural traits by the missionaries. Drug taking, ceremonial feasts and dancing, and nudity are only a few examples.

Nutrition, medicine, and technology have also been approached in terms of ethnocentric value judgements rather than intrinsic need. Lizot, after studying traditional diet and recent changes brought about by missionaries, is appalled at the damage being done. He interprets the missionary claim of Indian malnutrition as simply a rationalization for intervention. As a result of the change in settlement pattern instigated by the mission stations from fairly mobile to permanent, the traditional diet has indeed become impoverished, so the dependency created is ultimately justified. The introduction of higher technology, while attempting to make work more efficient has sometimes had the opposite effect. The introduction of the gun, for example, has resulted in scarcer game and less meat consumption than before.

Medical services have been useful and appropriate, and the evangelical groups have been diligent at providing them. Once again however, the need is somehow connected with the presence of the mission since it is the foreigner-carried disease that causes epi-

demios. Since foreign invasion of indigenous cultures is apparent-inevitable, the medical benefit have paid off.

A typical mission is begun by contacting a village accompanied by an Indian from a "saved" village. A landing strip is cleared with the help of the local host Yanomamo, and then a family moves in and establishes a post. Trade items are introduced and various dependencies are thus created. The Protestant Work Ethic is emphasized. As one missionary wrote, "We train them for the inroads of the Venezuelan culture which includes showing them what a day's wage is worth and enabling them to barter through the use of the Venezuelan monetary system for their goods and services."⁷ Unfortunately, this value is impressed on them by making them work for other people, namely the missionaries themselves.

The Salesian Mission, headed by Padre Cocco Luis for fourteen years, has similar goals but slightly different methods. Essential to their scheme of acculturation is the Esmeralda Boarding School.. Lured away from their parents by boat rides down the river, Yanomamo children are virtually kidnaped and brought to the intensive deculturization program at La Esmeralda. Their hair is cut, their bodies clothed, and their every minute regulated by religious personnel who instill in them the shame of being Indians in a nation of "nabes" (whites). According to Lizot, the defection rate of the students is so high it is embarrassing to the missionaries.⁸ Parents as well as students swear never to allow their children to be taken again.

Economic dependency is clearly the tactic of the Salesians to attract a community to their mission station. They try as do the Protestants to instill an appreciation of Western values and technology so that the Indians will be better prepared to inte-

grate into the national sphere without being stepped on. Concerned with affecting change slowly, the Catholics tolerate trance-inducing drugs, and polygamy among the natives. Anyway in the next generation the fruits of their most intense work will come to bear.

Latest developments in both Protestant and Catholic missions has been an upsurge of visitors who have discovered the location of landing strips and stop by to vacation.⁹ Several Catholic missions have been extremely receptive to this kind of thing because of the money it brings in as well as the impetus it gives to the whole acculturation process. Special houses to accomodate guests have been built by both denominations. One Salesian priest cited by Chagnon went so far as to create a booming tourist center complete with speedboats and modern facilities. Tours were organized in Caracas and directly from Europe that advertised to make a stop in the Stone Age.¹⁰ The Indians of the area soon picked up and moved, leaving the site to the 40-50 Brazilians who presently make up its permanent population. Protestants, who are more wary of outsiders, have refrained from much complaining because of the generous donations to their work so often made by rich visitors.

Though merely a glimpse of the dynamics of missionary influence on the Yanomamo, this case study serves to demonstrate the importance of their role as change agents. It must be emphasized that while they must report their activities yearly to the national government, they have enormous leaway to do as they see fit. Except for a few anthropologists, other researchers, and an occasional official, missionaries are the sole representatives of western civilization. Because of the inevitable future of integration it is extremely important to make this a good first impression.

In January, 1971, a unit of the World Council of Churches together with the department of Ethnology of the University of Bern sponsored a symposium to discuss the future of the indigenous societies of Latin America. They attacked both the missionary and the anthropologist for being the tools of colonial domination and ethnocentric imperialism. The declaration published at the symposium's conclusion calls for a new responsibility of the State, the Missionary, and the Anthropologist to allow the Indian to develop as an "agent of his own destiny." True liberation, it advocates, must come from within, it cannot be imposed. Since this time a wave of reverberations has been felt on all fronts. Missionary school catalogues require anthropological training of their students, anthropologists are breaking away from the pristine society fallacy and delving into acculturation studies, and the governments are increasingly sensitive to issues of ethnocentrism in policy making. The question is, can these agents of change complement each other or are they necessarily antithetical?

The missionary is not concerned with the culture per se but in the human being, his physical, mental, and spiritual needs. Of course the perception of these needs is subjective. A Protestant missionary once told Chagnon that if he must risk exposing 200 Yanomamo to some infectuous disease in order to save one from Hell, he would do so.¹¹

Governments have traditionally given free reign to missionaries. Already changes are being made to secularize some of the contact. However, a major obstacle exists. Missionaries are dedicated to do a job that other people don't want to do. They dedicate their lifetimes while anthropologists and government

officials come and go. Clearly, to drive away their services, no matter how inadequate, is to permit exploitation by the developers and land monglers, and leave the Indians with nothing. Either a new breed of dedicated secular change agents must arise or compromises must be met. It seems to me by much of the literature I have received from Church organizations involved in mission work that socio-political action is growing in importance as an end in itself.¹² Perhaps by developing a better understanding and mutual tolerance amongst the various change agents themselves as well as an effort to support an internal development initiated by indigenous leaders, will a smoother assimilation emerge.

Footnotes

¹Thomas Neely, South America: A Mission Field, (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1906), p.39-40.

²Sorry, no 2.

³Napoleon Chagnon, Yanomamo: The Fierce People, 2d ed., (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977), p.1.

⁴The main ideological difference is between Protestant and Catholic, not between the Protestant groups.

⁵Jacques Lizot, "The Yanomami in the Face of Ethnocide," IWGIA Document No.22, (February, 1976), p.6.

⁶Orinoco River Mission, personal correspondence .

⁷ibid.

⁸op.cit., Lizot, p.22.

⁹op.cit., Chagnon, p.145-151.

¹⁰ibid., p.148.

¹¹ibid., p.151.

¹²Wherever, Vol. 3, No. 3, (Winter, 1978)

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