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LAND REQUIREMENTS AND ETHNIC CONTRAST AMONG THE YANOMAMI OF BRAZIL

Alcida R. Ramos

Kenneth I. Taylor

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Introduction

In present day ethnographic reality the contact situation of the Yanomami Indians in Brazil and Venezuela is indeed a rare case. As the largest lowland South American Indian group who are still monolingual and retain most of their traditional lifestyle, most of the approximately 18,000 Yanomami have so far been spared intensive contact with national societies due primarily to the difficulty of access to their environment; most of this consists of rain forest-covered mountains, the Parima range, accessible mainly by small aircraft.

Although this privilege of being the masters of their own destiny is being quickly undermined by the increasing encroachment on their territory by Whites, the Yanomami are still a precious exception amidst the extraordinary recurrence of breach of the basic rights of Indian groups both in South America and elsewhere. They are still a living example of a people capable of extracting sustained livelihood from the Amazon environment using means of subsistence not yet tampered with by modern technology or overpopulation.

From another point of view -- that of ethnic identity -- they also represent a rare case: the sharp contrast Indian/White, common to practically all existing Indian populations in the

continent, has not yet been established among the Yanomami. Nevertheless, the emergence of the Indian/White categories is already perceptible, at least in the sub-groups most intensely exposed to such phenomena as road construction, mining or agribusiness (Ramos 1979a, Taylor 1979). The Yanomami thus provide us with a strategic case for the understanding of the process of category formation, the transition from a traditional to a new set of concepts about self and others, particularly about how such categories are constructed by the actors of a contact situation.

In this paper we shall concentrate on these two aspects of Yanomami life, namely, 1) their own use of land and other natural resources as contrasted with the constrictions imposed upon other populations in Amazonia by outside pressures; and 2) their own system of group classification before and during the emergence of the antinomic Indian/White categories.

1) Land requirements

(Written by Kenneth I. Taylor, to be inserted here)

2) Ethnic contrast

The Yanomami language family has been divided into four main language groups: the Sanumã, the Yanomamí, the Yanomam and the Yanam (Migliazza 1967, 1972). The degree of mutual intelligibility varies amongst them and the Sanumã seem to be the farthest apart in percentage of cognates. Within each of these four languages there are a number of variations we can call dialects.

This linguist's classification is not necessarily the way each of the sub-groups sees the picture. To begin with, not all Yanomami have knowledge of the existence of all others. The furthest apart, such as the Sanumã in the north and the Yanomam in the south of Yanomamiland use, if at all, a general, diffuse term to refer to those who might presumably exist many miles away. Second, social and geographic proximity play a more important role in the local classifications. For the Sanumã, for instance, the Parahurí Yanomamí are closer to them than some of the distant Sanumã communities. This factor seems to be socially more relevant than linguistic similarity.

It should be made clear that the blanket term Yanomami is an outsiders' construct to designate the entire language family, differently from the names for each of the specific languages which are their own auto-designations.

Although much of what is discussed here may apply to many Yanomami, at least in Brazil, we shall focus the analysis of identity on the sub-group with whom we are most familiar, viz., the northern Sanumã of the upper Auaris river valley; a brief reference will be made to the southern Yanomam of the upper

Catrimani river valley by way of comparison.

As has been stated in the introduction, the Yanomami as a whole have not been sufficiently exposed to regional societies to the point of perceiving and adopting the concepts of Indian and White or "civilizado". It is of interest to explore what their own identity categories are and contrast these with the vastly widespread Indian/White opposition.

We shall begin with the Sanumã categories, proceeding from the most general to the most specific, although the reverse order would be equally valid.

At the most inclusive level of contrast the Sanumã make the distinction between 'Sanumã' and 'Non-Sanumã'. We may take these terms to mean "people like us" and "other people". Included in the 'Sanumã' category is a series of concepts related to the Sanumã themselves and to peoples who are similar to them and yet distinct in one or more characteristics: linguistic, regional, or in lifestyle (eg., Kobali, Samatali, Waikia). We shall return to these shortly. 'Non-Sanumã', or "other people", are, at this level of contrast, non-Yanomami; they are primarily represented by the neighboring Carib-speaking Maiongong (Nabi), and by Whites (Setenabi).

Within the 'Sanumã' category, i.e., "people like us", we find a large number of distinct terms related to village identity, on the one hand, and descent unit identity (lineage, sib) on the other. Villages tend to take on the name of one of their resident lineages (eg. Lalawa, Kadimani, Mosonawa, Sogos) and from this results yet another level of contrast, that is, different lineages within the same village (Ramos 1979b). For the present purpose,

however, we may disregard this terminal level of contrast. Schematically we would have the following arrangement:

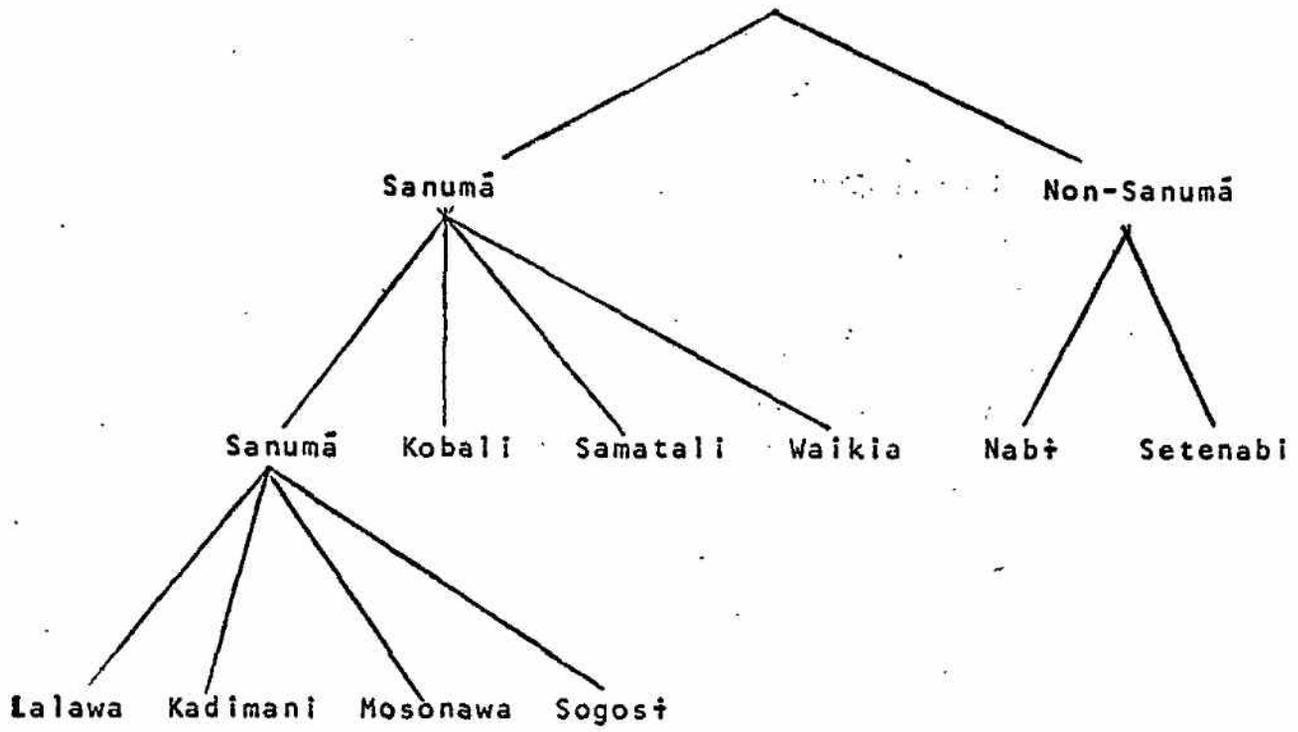


Figure 1: Sanumá identity categories I

Before going any further, it is necessary to examine certain concepts used by the Sanumá which are flexible enough to allow the speakers to change levels of contrast and points of reference as convenient. A person may refer, for example, to his own family as iba dibt ("my people"; dibt = plural), or as.

kamišamak ("us", "we"); by contrast, other families are ai dībī ("others"). This same person may refer to his own village (or lineage) as kamišamak (or iba dībī, depending on a more or less ego-centric emphasis) in contrast to which other villages (or lineages) are ai dībī.

There is, however, another term, tiko dībī, which is the concept of "otherness" par excellence. It establishes categorically the contrast between any "us" and any "non-us". Its flexibility derives precisely from this capacity to be applicable at different levels of contrast. Behind the notion of tiko dībī is an attitude of cultural relativism and social tolerance for things "different" which finds no equivalent in the surrounding national societies, not to speak of the typical intolerance of the Indian/White contact situation. The importance of this concept will be stressed below (see also Ramos 1980: 63-4).

Let us return to the category of "people like us".

In its broadest usage this concept includes the Sanumā themselves -- Sanuma dībī --, the Kobali dībī, Samatali dībī, Waikia dībī, etc. Who are then these people?

The exact limits of each one of these categories remain rather vague to us (and perhaps to the Sanumā as well). One aspect which seems certain is that none of them is an auto-denomination. The term Kobali dībī is used to refer to a group of villages to the south of the Auaris valley with whom the upper Auaris Sanumā have fairly frequent contact and are well informed about their inhabitants. The term carries a slightly derogatory tone of backwardness. But it can also be used as a device to establish distance between communities that are quite close. For

Instance, while the residents of the Auaris mission station refer to the Kadimani villagers to the south (about six hours' walk through the forest with only one intermediate village) as Kobali dībī, the Kadimani people do not consider themselves as such and pass on the designation to other villagers further south.

The term Samatali dībī refers to people who live to the southwest of the upper Auaris river. They seem to be somewhat more remote to the upper Auaris Sanumá than the Kobali dībī. The history of the upper Auaris Sanumá includes a phase of warfare with the Samatali dībī about two generations ago when the Sanumá lived in the Cuntinamo river valley in Venezuela. Both the Samatali and Kobali clusters speak Sanumá (from a linguist's point of view) but there are definite dialectal differences between all of them.

Within the Kobali and Samatali categories there are named subdivisions which consist of villages or clusters of villages (eg. Hogomawa dībī, Omawa dībī, Hazatagidili dībī, etc), as there are also other village clusters which are not included in those categories (eg. Šīkoi dībī, Walema dībī, etc). Furthermore, there are still other broad categories which seem to refer to historical clusters that have dispersed while their member-villagers maintain a sense of "sameness" (eg. Saulagidili dībī, Monopidili dībī, Pasotagidili dībī, etc.). To avoid an overload of the text, we have concentrated on the categories as shown in Figure 1 above which are sufficient to demonstrate our point.

The Waikia dībī seem to be the Yanomam speakers of the Surucucu region in Brazil. The closest Waikia community to the upper Auaris Sanumá is the Parahuri local group who in the late 1960's and early 1970's lived at a

location 6 or 7 days walk southeast of the upper Auaris Sanumá. Of the Waikia dibi the Sanumá say they have bad manners especially in trading.

All of these categories represent people with whom the Sanumá have or have had tense relationships which include accusations of sorcery or hostile shamanism and even the possibility of armed attacks.

Certain of the identities contained in the category 'Sanumá' can be grouped together with the 'Non-Sanumá' categories if context so requires. If what is meaningful is to distinguish the Sanumá themselves (kamišamak) from everyone else, then all other components of the 'Sanumá dibi' category together with the 'Non-Sanumá' categories become tiko dibi. We would then have the following figure:

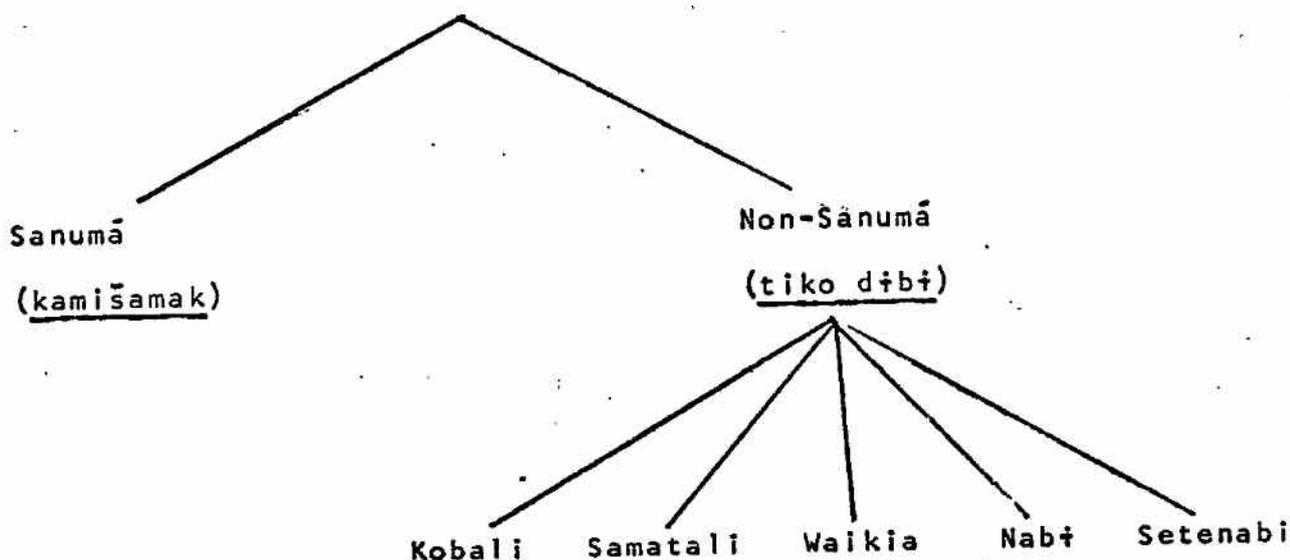


Figure 2: Sanumá identity categories 11

The expandable quality of the concept tiko dibi permits a certain element of interchangeability among the various categories, or rather, a certain reductibility among the various terms. This does not mean, of course, that a Maiongong or a White person can

become part of kamišamak or a Sanumã, along with the Sanumã themselves¹. But the logic operation which lumps together Sanumã speakers, other Yanomami, other Indian groups and Whites indicates that these categories are not irreversibly antagonic. And this is a major difference between Sanumã identity categories and the contact-generated Indian/"civilizado" categories, setting them apart as the results of diametrically opposed mental (and emotional) processes.

A brief comparison between the upper Auaris Sanumã and the upper Catrimani Yanomam shows an interesting twist in the interethnic experience of both sub-groups. While the Sanumã reserve the term Nabi for the Maiongong (and, it seems, for other non-Yanomami Indians²), the Yanomam use this same term to refer to any "foreigners", particularly Whites.

For about a century the Sanumã have been in close contact with the Maiongong as a result of their territorial expansion northward from the Cuntinamo region and subsequent invasion of what had been Maiongong territory (Ramos 1980). To these non-Sanumã people the Sanumã applied the term Nabi. Several generations later, in the 1950's and 1960's white travellers and missionaries came into contact with the Sanumã. To these they applied another term, Setenabi. The Yanomam, in turn, use the term Nabi for Whites since they do not have the experience of close contact with a non-Yanomami

1. This is a remote possibility and would require very special contexts or circumstances such as, hypothetically, the sharing of a common danger involving Sanumã, Maiongong and Whites in the same community, as, for instance, an imminent threat of raid by enemies.

2. By showing postcards of upper Xingu Indians we noticed that the upper Auaris Sanumã identified them as Nabi dibi.

Indian group. It is as if the Sanumā, having perceived the similarity between different "Indians" and, as a corollary, the difference between "Indians" and "Whites", made the distinction between Nabí and Setenabi, a prelude, so to speak, to what is yet to come: the opposition Indian/White, generated by another kind of contact, no longer inter-tribal.

The underlying meaning of the tiko dɨbɨ category is not primarily political, is not an expression of power. The identities expressed by the concepts of Kobali, Samatali, Waikia, Nabí and Setenabi are social and cultural identities which operate to establish social distance or proximity, not necessarily a distribution of power relationships. Surely, there are antagonistic (or perhaps even agonistic) relationships between the various categories in question, but this antagonism is contingent upon the balance of allegiances at any given moment in time, and lacks a quest for hegemony on the part of any of those involved, with the possible exception of the relationships with white missionaries.

All of this is drastically different from the realities of the Indian/White contact. The category "Indian" is always mutually exclusive and irreducible to the category "White" (or "civilizado"). Under no circumstances is it possible for Indian and White to be lumped together in the same category, such as occurs with the Sanumā tiko dɨbɨ concept, for Indian and White represent the ultimate contrast. The political dimension of the contact situation is encapsulated in the very expression of the Indian/White opposition. The power relationships that are established in this kind of contact reflect not only an unchallenged White hegemony but an outright power of domination. The Indian/White contrast is, in other words, above all a political expression, as

it cries out power, a linguistic power which articulates in the form of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination the profoundly unequal position of Indians and "civilizados" in the contact situation.

The category "other" is as deep rooted as the category "self". A change in the basic meaning of such categories cannot be made without a profound mental and emotional readjustment. And the imposition of such a change is precisely what is involved in the imposition of the new Indian/White pair of categories. For a concept is not an empty designation; it is socially created and shared and carries denotations and connotations which transcend individual interpretations. A Sanumã person, still unfamiliar with the Portuguese language, when confronted with the regional society, will soon perceive that the word "Índio", when uttered by Brazilians, carries a meaning which is not quite the counterpart of what he means by Setenabi, his term for "White". Yet, it will take him a lot more exposure to the effects of contact for him to grasp all its implications, the political dimension of the Indian/White or "Índio"/"civilizado" opposition. He does not realize that he has entered into a relationship of domination until he sees himself being denied basic rights and negated as a legitimate "other". It is then that the opposition Indian/White hits him with full force. He begins to understand that the series of stereotypes that accompany the concept "Indian", loaded as they are with emotion (to be Indian is to be dangerous, dirty, treacherous, lazy, stupid, etc.) are but hints of a deeper level of unreconcilable antagonism where he will find the basic impasse: to be accepted by Whites he has to stop being Indian; yet, even if he

wants to, he cannot stop being Indian because the Whites will not let him, never forgiving him for his "Indianness". Obviously, this sort of double bind can only produce mental and emotional confusion, if not collapse, for there is nothing in his previous experience that prepares him for such an unresolvable contradiction. Whereas before he handled concepts of classification which admitted "otherness" as part of the "natural order of things" (*ordem natural das coisas*), now he finds himself excluded from this order; or worse, that there is no such order. Contact has destroyed even that.

The possibility of an Indian group to resist the pressures from Whites to give up their lands and their ethnicity is in large part a measure of its success in retaining its own language. A linguistically coherent community can keep alive its basic categories of thought and feeling much better than a group that has lost its own language and lacks complete command of the imposed national idiom. As is well known, "words are not enough to understand a way of thinking" (Cardoso de Oliveira n.d.), and even if an Indian individual or group can communicate in Portuguese it does not mean that he perceives all the nuances of the language and the many-layered, underlying meanings of its concepts.

And here we come back to the question of how important it is for Indian societies to maintain their territories. With their own land, sufficiently large to permit a sustained livelihood, Indian communities will have the opportunity to hold together, a prerequisite for the exercise of their own language, the medium of expression for their own concepts and categories of perception and understanding.

Both positive and negative examples can be found in Brazil. For instance, the Shavante, despite all the vicissitudes

of nearly 40 years of intense contact with Whites, have managed to preserve a considerable portion of their original territory and are one of the most successful Indian societies in maintaining and defending their ethnic identity. Part of their interethnic strategies is to intentionally use their own language as a political vehicle in their dealings with the Brazilian authorities. By contrast, a number of Indian groups in the Northeast have lost their original languages altogether as one of the consequences of loss of territory and desintegration of their traditional way of life. Interestingly enough, the Pataxô in Bahia have made a special effort to learn the language of the remotely related Maxacali in Minas Gerais with the purpose of adopting it as their own. Portuguese, which they speak, is not regarded, obviously, as the most appropriate means to communicate legitimate "otherness" to Brazilians.

The Yanomami are now in the situation in which the antinomy Indian/White is beginning to filter into their universe; so far it has significantly affected only a few individuals. The full impact of the political power of the Whites' discourse of contact -- epitomized by the Indian/White contrast -- has not yet been felt by the Yanomami population as a whole. The degree of disruption which the imposition of the antagonistic contrast inherent in these categories will have is going to depend on whether or not the numerous Yanomami communities are given what is their due: their own land and the right to continue to be what they have been for time immemorial: a truly linguistic world of auto-determined communities.

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