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THE TERRITORIALITY OF THE YANOMAMI  
INDIANS IN THE NORTH OF BRAZIL

ETHNOGEOGRAPHIC AND GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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One approach to an ethnogeographic research project may be to attempt to better understand the relations between a people and the different aspects of its territory, to grasp the way a people presents or represents its territory to itself and, simultaneously, to show the role played by space in that culture, be it at a material, socio-political, or cosmological level.

By taking such an approach, the researcher is able to attain three goals:

- to advance scientific knowledge in a domain that has until recently hardly been considered in a systematic or specific fashion in indigenous Amazonia;
- to engage a dialogue on a theme that is clearly pertinent to the indigenous counterpart;
- to provide useful data for the defense of the territory of the concerned ethnic group.

These three dimensions each have their importance and are interdependent. By working on a subject of great interest to those that provide the primary data of his or her thought, the geographer becomes somewhat an accomplice of his or her informants given that the question of land is of primordial importance to both parties. The dialogue, which is sought by the researcher and the informants, becomes richer and more free. This

allows the researcher to enter more easily into the indigenous way of thinking - in which reflection and intervention are one.

In this paper, I would like to demonstrate the three-fold relevance of the study of Yanomami territoriality. Raffestin defines this latter concept as "All the relations a society maintains with "exteriority", all the abiotic and biotic factors, and with "alterity", the other groups to satisfy its needs in order to attain the greatest autonomy possible that is compatible in the long term with the system's resources. This autonomy, in turn, may be defined as the capacity to maintain uncertain relations with "exteriority" and "alterity." (Raffestin 1991:3). This definition is broad enough to cover the territoriality of an indigenous people.

#### **THE YANOMAMI, THEIR TERRITORY AND TERRITORIALITY**

Some 22,000 Yanomami live in southern Venezuela and the extreme north of Brazil in a territory of approximately 190,000 square kilometers that is located at the headwaters of the Orinoco on one side and at the headwaters of the Negro and Branco rivers, principal tributaries of the Amazon's left bank, on the other.

There are roughly 370 Yanomami villages composed of one or more multi-family dwellings that hold 30 to 400 inhabitants, depending on whether they are situated in the north/north-east or south/south-west of the territory. They are located in different natural environments that nonetheless all belong to the Guayana shield. A succession of mountain ranges, the average altitude of which varies between 1000 and 1200 meters, constitute the backbone of Yanomami territory. One of them, the Sierra Parima, is its geographic, historical, mythical and demographic heartland. On each side of these highlands and as one moves down progressively along the course of

the rivers, the landscape changes. At first, it is marked by a succession of hills with abrupt slopes that are sometimes separated from each other by high plateaux. Below 500 meters and down to the periphery, the relief disappears almost entirely and the very diffuse and branched network of the highland streams is transformed into rivers up to 60 meters wide well before they join the Branco or Orinoco rivers.

Essentially forested, Yanomami territory is characterized by important variations in altitude, climate, vegetation and availability of resources from one region to another. In the lowlands, the hunter can reasonably hope to bring back some kind of game after a few hours spent hunting in the forest. This is not the case in the mountainous areas where expeditions of several days may be necessary to attain the same results.

Consequently, in the highlands, the role of gathering is more important; shrimp, crab, larvae, caterpillars, termites, and mushrooms often replace peccary, tapir, deer or monkey meat. As far as fish are concerned, their size can vary from a few centimeters to one meter in length according to whether one is upriver or downriver. The flora is also very different in quantity and quality according to the altitude. This is particularly true of palms which constitute an appreciable nutritional contribution both in proteins and lipids.

Like most of the indigenous peoples of the Amazonian interfluves, the Yanomami are simultaneously slash-and-burn agriculturists, hunters, fishers and gatherers. It is the mobility of their territorial use that allows them to ensure the subsistence of all without threatening either the regeneration of the ecosystem or the peace between communities.

The rotation of the gardens that the men clear each year avoids exhausting a generally acidic and mineral-deficient soil. When the gardens are located too far from the communal house, the latter is abandoned or

burned and another one is built near the new plantations. By doing this, the Yanomami allow the forest to regenerate and this, in turn, encourages the game to return to the area. At the same time, they find more game in their new location. The same process holds true as far as gathering is concerned.

During the annual subsistence cycle, mobility is the norm and the Yanomami spend as much time in the forest as they do in the communal space constituted by the communal dwelling(s) and by the gardens. During funeral celebrations, for example, to which other groups are invited, or when a given fruit is ripe in the forest, or when an old garden has stopped producing enough and the new one has yet to come to maturity, the men (or the entire community) may travel 30 or 40 kilometers from the village, where they camp, in order to use another part of the forest that remains unexplored during the rest of the year. Here too, the length of the stay and the distances that are covered depend on regional factors, such as, population density, resource distribution in the forest and between communities, and political relations.

Other forms of mobility are due precisely to intercommunal relations. Each residential unit is always politically and economically autonomous. It is linked to its closest similar unit by a network of ritual relations as well as matrimonial and economic exchanges. This network covers the entire Yanomami territory, grouping together the 4 linguistic sub-groups (Yanomamö, Yanomam, Sanuma and Yanam) independently, of course, of the Brazilian - Venezuelan border. Each village is thus situated at the intersection of several paths that reveal the quality of the relations between the neighbouring residential units - depending on whether they are easily practicable or, on the contrary, are "tangled up" with vegetation, baïmi according to Yanomami terminology. In order to maintain peaceful relations,

it is important to constantly renew visits and invitations and therefore to use the paths. The distances that are covered in this way may vary from a few kilometers to more than a hundred according to whether they are situated in the center or at the periphery of Yanomami territory.

When intra-or inter-communal disputes surface, a village or a fraction of a village may decide to move. If there is the risk of a grave conflict, real or symbolic, this group may move tens of kilometers before clearing new plantations and building a new house. Here, too, the distances vary according to the population density, intercommunal relations and resource availability.

According to Lizot, on the basis of data he gathered on the Venezuelan upper Orinoco, until 1950, the Yanomami population was growing (Lizot 1984 : 27 ). This led to a geographic expansion that was made all the easier by the fact that the lowlands had lost their traditional inhabitants as a result of the Spanish and Portuguese penetration into the valleys of the Negro and Branco rivers in the second half of the 18th century. As the population grew, the territorial expansion developed through a process of communal fissions. The contrary, i.e. the fusion of residential units, also occurs when the latter are too small and their reproduction or security are threatened.

#### **THE PERTINENCE OF ETHNOGEOGRAPHIC STUDIES IN INDIGENOUS AMAZONIA**

Let us now look at the question of the pertinence of ethnogeographic studies in indigenous Amazonia and in particular among the Yanomami. I will start by considering the lack of interest that ethnogeographic studies have received from ethnologists and geographers.

Then, I will attempt to show their potential.

When questions about territory have been considered by researchers studying the indigenous cultures of Amazonia, in most cases and with few exceptions (Narby 1989), they have been treated in a partial and non-specific fashion. Generally speaking, up until now, this field of study has been limited to the analysis of how social relations or mythology are reflected in the organization of the village layout (Levi-Strauss 1968; Cresswell 1975) and, much more rarely, of the global communal territory (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981; Chaumeil 1984). Other research, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, has focused uniquely on territoriality in order to support or to contradict different theories relative to the origins of the peoples being studied (Wilbert 1963; Zerries 1969) or to their adaptation to an environment considered to be poor (Stewart 1977; Meggers 1985; etc.) Cultural materialists have thus attributed the mobility of the interfluvial indigenous peoples to a quest for subsistence, marked notably by a supposed protein scarcity (Gross 1983) or by competition for resources (Harris 1984). Cultural anthropology, meanwhile, has attributed it to warfare and violence (Chagnon 1968).

These last theories have in common the reduction of key elements of the indigenous way of life in the interfluves to a single cause, be it either purely environmental or purely socio-political. They are also based on data that are not always sufficient and that are often incomplete. As Vickers notes: "Although there has been considerable emphasis on environmental factors in the interpretation of Amazonian societies through the years, it is only recently that detailed ecological studies of specific communities have begun to appear" (Vickers 1983: 451). This lack of reliable data has caused a very clear imbalance between the empirical base on which

these determinist theories have rested and the dimensions of the long and drawn-out argument they provoked.

Furthermore - and what is most surprising - these theories attempt to explain a phenomenon that pertains to territory, namely mobility, without really taking it into account. Vickers, who does not note this paradox, nonetheless states that "little attention has been given to the spatial parameters of Amazonian adaptation" and "the lack of emphasis on territorial spaces and their associated resources has hampered the interpretation of human ecological data from Amazonia" (ibid.: 451, 452). What Vickers says about Amazonian studies is particularly true for the studies concerning the Yanomami, who have been at the center of the debate considered here.

Finally and as a consequence of the deficiencies discussed above, the regional differences outlined at the beginning of this paper have been completely ignored. Given that the authors have studied sets of communities that were in most cases neighbours or of the same geographic and genealogic origins, they have often confused the parts with the whole and have extrapolated their characteristics to the entire ethnic group. Above all, they have given them an explanatory value that is, to say the least, premature.

Therefore, to paraphrase Albert, I would say that the specificity of a purely ethnogeographic approach is not so much to understand *why*, in this particular case, the majority of Amazonian interfluvial societies are or were semi-sedentary but *how* they occupy, travel through, use, name and own their land, that is to say "to establish the logic of the cultural variability of these activities" (Albert 1985: 28-29). Or, if one wants to find a compromise, one must first of all start by studying the detail and the specificity of how the Yanomami occupy, travel through, use, name and own the land, taking into

account both physical and cultural factors, before attempting to determine the causes of their mobility.

The lack of interest in the territoriality of the Yanomami is all the more surprising in that their demographic importance relative to the other Amazonian indigenous groups, as well as the almost integral survival of their traditional culture, has led to a great number of ethnographic, ethnological, anthropological, linguistic, ethological, genetic, dietary and medical studies. Only one of these, by William Smole, is explicitly geographic. It belongs to "cultural geography" (Smole 1976). Remarkable when it comes to the observation and the description of the use of territory for subsistence and innovative in its approach to Amazonian landscape, its conclusion on the anthropic savannas' origin of the Sierra Parima is however premature.

Nevertheless, a relatively unrecognized pioneer had already demonstrated in the fifties and the sixties the value of a geographic point of view on the indigenous and Boni cultures of French Guiana. The geographer-engineer Jean Hurault carried out research that not only contributed to the scientific knowledge of these ethnic groups but also promoted a policy of landscape management that was adequate for them (Hurault 1989).

The ignorance of ethnologists concerning the territoriality of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon is due to the fact that they are not well equipped for this kind of study. As for geographers, they are troubled by a landscape where the transformations that have been brought about by its inhabitants are difficult to perceive visibly. What is more, these transformations are temporary, because the indigenous peoples of Amazonia attempt to return to the land its potential as soon as possible so as to be able to use it later on at a lesser cost. In so doing, they are perfectly coherent with their world-view that the transformation of landscape elements predominates;



they are not fixed in an unchanging and pictorial landscape. The indigenous world-view perceives vital transformations that go from birth to decline via growth and maturity. It is sensitive to the metamorphosis of these elements and to their passage from nature to the super-natural, from human to animal etc.

However, it is not sufficient to note the lack of interest shown toward a field of study to justify its newly-found pertinence. One must also establish a few paths of investigation to show its potential. As ethnology and linguistics advance in the study of indigenous societies, they discover bit by bit that space can play a real role in the organization of these cultures and sometimes even a role that provides structure.

As far as the social system of the Sanuma of Brazil, a linguistic sub-group of the Yanomami, Ramos, for example, felt already in 1972, that the basic political unit of the society is the village and not the lineage or any other category relative to kinship : "It is the village which interacting together as a group constitutes the political unit of the society" (Ramos 1972: 117). In case of conflict, it is the territorial unit to which an individual belongs and not the kinship network that is the determining factor.

Even though Lizot has repeated more than once that "each residential unit is a social group that is politically independent, divided into lineages and factions but that is solidary towards the outside" (Lizot 1984:23), it was not until the works of Albert and Alès that one started to perceive the structuring role played by spatial factors at the levels of memory, intercommunal and intracommunal relations.

Albert seriously puts into question the existence of lineages within Yanomam society in Brazil, where genealogical memory is very shallow since it is forbidden in all Yanomami societies to pronounce the

names of the living and even more so the dead. He shows that it is the toponymic chain that constitutes the back-bone of memory, by which successive places of residence are remembered by the older generation. Starting from place names, the Yanomami remember the main historical events such as conflicts and fissions but also happy moments as I noted myself among the Yanomami of Surucucus, also in Brazil. According to Albert, what is important in political relations are what he calls the "historical categories of residence," which juxtapose themselves only partially to consanguine or affine kinship networks (Albert 1985:112).

Moreover, each residential category is defined in relation to another according to the distance that separates them from each other. Thus, from "residents" one passes to "allies" constituted by close neighbours, then to "current enemies," who are further away, then to "old or virtual enemies," and, finally, to those that are so far away that one does not know them, which is equivalent to considering them as "unknown enemies."

This framework is partially corroborated by Alès, who, from her study of the Yanomami of the Venezuelan Parima, distinguishes just three or four categories and notes that social distance and spatial distance interact in the relations not only between villages but also at the intra-community level (Alès 1984:104). If the spatial distribution of communal dwellings is, among other things, the result of the manipulation of alliances and of conflicts, simultaneously, the identity of individuals and groups is defined in relation to the place of residence.

At a linguistic level, Mattei-Muller analyses the great number of morphemes - generally verbal suffixes - in terms of space, a dimension that is widely found in the Yanomamö language of Venezuela. "Space is one of the most crucial parameters in any communicative situation in Yanomamö. Quite

apart from the lexical representation of space, Yanomamö makes use of a rich set of grammatical morphemes which denote spatial dimensions" (Mattei-Muller 1991:1). The position of the interlocutors to each other, their movements, their distance and their position in relation to the things or the persons they are evoking as well as vertical, horizontal, frontal dimensions, centrifugal or centripetal orientation, and the fact that a movement is punctual or spread out in space - all of these are expressed by morphemes that are sometimes reduced to a single sound, which often refers etymologically to a spatial or a corporal notion.

Given the close relationship between territory and memory, on one hand, and the importance of the spatial dimension in the socio-political and linguistic domains on the other, one may ask oneself at which point the conceptual system of the Yanomami refers more to the notion of space rather than to time and whether, as a consequence, a great part of their knowledge is not metaphorically articulated around spatial relations. This leads to the following question: would the apprehension of territoriality using Yanomami concepts not give one access to the ecological, social and mythical structures that constitute them?

In order to support my argument, allow me a few more quotes taken from studies of other indigenous groups of the Amazon or in areas neighbouring the Amazon.

Concerning the Wayapi in the region of the Oyapock of French Guiana, Grenand stated, as early as 1972, that toponymy constitutes "one of the paths of access to the knowledge of the Indian world. It is a historical, geographic and botanical moment that is basic and that each young Wayapi learns through his or her travels. It gives them the essential informations on the past of their people, the particularities of nature and also its mysteries.

Besides, the monsters, as we will see, with which the Wayapi have peopled their domain, are revealing symbols of a certain security contract between man and nature, setting thus the boundaries of his ownership of the universe" (Grenand 1972: 22).

Next, in a very elegant article about shamanism, Losonczy describes the paths of the Embera shaman in the Colombian Choco, made of "paths of spirits and animals, of the souls of the dead and the living and of evil-intended projectiles that the shaman frequents, crosses, opens and closes during his different rituals. These paths build and rebuild the symbolic geography of a cosmos that appears in the many myths of indigenous shamanic societies as imperfect in its own creation" (Losonczy 1980: 77). The shaman finds this oneiric space, in which he seeks to ally himself with certain spirits in a state of "normal consciousness" and during which he learns "to name these places and identify them to points of the territory of his community. That is when he will try to attract the spirits by the strength and the seduction of his songs in order to fix them there" (ibid.:82 ). Thus Losonczy attributes to shamans the role of the "creator of topographic symbolism." "The shaman cuts out of the daily territory, the supernatural and the human body (his own or of that of his patients), a structure of space-signs that are differently marked, and to which the metamorphosis reassigns each time the limits and the openings of the territory and the human body" (ibid.: 75 ).

This brings us to Jean-Paul Dumont, who states, concerning the Panare of Venezuela : "Without ever obliterating one of these poles, there are societies that, it seems to me, are situated more on the side of time, such as our own, for example, with its accumulations of events where one is always wasting one's time without ever being able to find it except in fantasy. There are other societies where one is situated more on the side of space and, in my

opinion, this is the case of the Panare Indians of the Venezuela Guayana who, one could say, take their time" (Dumont 1976: 47).

## THE PERTINENCE OF THE STUDY OF TERRITORIALITY FOR AMERINDIAN SOCIETIES

The interest of the hypothesis of a yanomami conceptual system metaphorically articulated around spatial relations lies fundamentally in the fact that it brings us closer to Amerindian discourse. This one attaches a great importance to the theme of territoriality even if this theme only takes a directly explicit form for us when the Indians' relation to land is threatened. Were this not the case, it would hardly enter their minds to affirm how much the free and exclusive disposal of their ancestral territory is important to them. Before the arrival of the white colonizer, it was never put into question in such a fundamental and dramatic fashion.

Thus, during my first stay among the Yanomam of the middle Uraricoera - in communities that had never witnessed a permanent non Indian presence other than missionaries - I had to approach the theme of my research indirectly, through precise facts relative, for example, to subsistence activities or migrations. It was only under these conditions that my informants would be talkative.

On the other hand, a few years later, when I arrived on the Plateau of Surucucus, the atmosphere was totally different. In this area 500 tin prospectors had occupied and destroyed the land and its resources for a

period of over a year and a half 11 years before (they were expelled afterwards by the Brazilian authorities). As soon as I explained the point of my research, I had the active collaboration of several leaders who were already fluent in a discourse to "protect their land, their forest." After this, they enumerated the main resources it contained and stated that they wanted to preserve it. Urihi, "the forest, the land" became iba urihi, "my forest, my land." The subject seemed so important to them that one of the leaders even organized a collective meeting, where he invited the main headmen of the area to express their commitment to expell the invader, the destroyer of their land, in case he reappeared. Even though they had never seen a film, the example of a sound recorder was sufficient for them to understand that a video camera would capture their images and their voices. They then asked me to transmit them to my "chiefs" for them to intervene with the "Brazilian chiefs."

In other words, their experience of contact, far from being negative for research as one sometimes thinks, had, on the contrary, led them to make explicit what would traditionally have been a matter of course. Under these conditions my research became a dialogue. What is more, they gave me their words, not for me to keep, but to transmit so that they could have an operational value.

And what do these words say ?

Firstly, territory relates to all the essential aspects of their lives, one of which is subsistence. Far from considering the forest an unfriendly and poor milieu, they see it quite to the contrary as an unending source of foods and other materials for artwork, medicine, and magic.

Then they explain that this land is theirs because it is where they were born, where they grew up and became adults, just as their ancestors did.

In the same way as their ancestors, they have cleared and planted their gardens, constructed their houses and fought their enemies. The forest is thus filled with the acts of their people and contains their memory. It is the witness of past events, both historical and mythical.

This is also the land of their children; it is the land they have occupied for a very long time and that, consequently, their descendants will occupy. The word yutuha in the Yanomami language is used to express "a long time ago". Yutuha literally means "very far into the past and into the future". In other words, urihi ("the forest, the land") ensures the continuity of the group, even in the case of a semi-sedentary people like the Yanomami.

Finally, they insist on the fact that the forest is the home of different types of beings belonging to the Yanomami cosmos. It contains, for example, the animals with their houses, their paths, and their resting places. A multitude of spirits also live there, including the auxiliary spirits of the shaman that live in the rocky spurs and travel paths that must not be destroyed or else they will no longer return to the chest of the shaman when he needs them.

Urihi is therefore not only the habitat of human beings but also of other beings that are part of creation and with whom the Yanomami enjoy all kinds of relations. Consequently, if the land is destroyed, all of these natural as well as the supernatural beings will disappear. Omam, the creator-hero of Yanomami humanity, will leave for ever and the Yanomami will no longer exist.

Combining these few purely Yanomami elements with those gathered in ethnological works cited above and assuming the hypothesis that space is a key element in the indigenous mode of conceptualization, one better understands that the destruction of an indigenous territory and

territoriality can, in the Amazon, have consequences on the whole society. Another hypothesis can be proposed : being at the same time the depository of the group's food, its memory, its mythology and as a structural element in its social and political system, the territory - in the absence of hierarchy and coercive authority - is one important element which guarantees the cohesion of the community, the group, and its relations to the cosmos.

But let us return to those who have expressed themselves in keeping with this hypothesis. For them, the facts of the cosmos cannot be separated from those relative to the physical and cultural survival of the community. When they shared their knowledge and their own discourse with me, when they guided me in the forest, when they accepted a dialogue beyond my wildest hopes, they did so in order that I would transmit it to my people so that their efforts would serve everybody, not only the researcher.

One of the means at the geographer's disposal to transmit the knowledge that has been conveyed to her is the cartography of territorial occupation - substituting the great white spaces on the national maps by a document that shows precisely what fills this space considered a desert by those who do not know it. She can add her technical expertise to the indigenous discourse in order to provide an accurate representation of an obscured territoriality.

If there was a time when a white patch on a map meant that no one dared to go to these far away places, today this is no longer the case. Indeed, whereas the first barely reliable localization of the Brazilian Yanomami villages was carried out in the 1988 (without giving their names or indicating their presence in any other way), the localization of mining, agricultural, and botanical resources date from 1975. The toponyms on these maps often have nothing to do with the Yanomami world. They allow



newcomers to orient themselves, especially those arriving by air, without taking into account the inhabitants in any way.

In seeking to represent what the national society does not want to see, one comes up against another "geography," that is extremely cursory and that fails to understand almost everything related to territories and the populations to which it is supposed to apply. Geopolitics is found not in universities but in military headquarters.

#### **GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS**

It is not possible, within the framework of this paper, to elaborate in detail on South American geopolitics. Nevertheless, an understanding of the latter is essential in order to fully understand the frontier politics that have led, since 1987, to the beginning of the destruction of the Yanomami people, both in Venezuela and in Brazil.

Let us simply say that, in Brazil, geopolitics is above all a military question and only after that is it a question of diplomacy; similarly, the location of national frontiers is above all a result of de facto conquests that were only consolidated afterwards by the Baron of Rio Branco and his successors according to the principle of uti possidetis. In Brazil, geopolitics does not seem to interest many social scientists. This may explain why it seems closer to a group of notions that aims to increase the domination of the Brazilian state over the continent than it does a scientific discipline related to geography that is to say which takes into account the different factors that characterize a given space.

As a result, the concrete consequences of geopolitical actions may turn out to be dramatic, as the colonization of the Amazon Basin since 1968 has shown. Even the economic exploitation of resources is subordinated to geopolitical goals, which have been "planned" while ignoring the physical and cultural characteristics of the region.

The Calha Norte Project is one of the most recent examples of this process. It is a good illustration of the interest that the Brazilian generals have taken in this part of the country since the 1930s. This interest goes beyond governments, be they civil or military. Conceived on the eve of the New Republic to defend the northern frontiers of the country, this plan followed the failure, in the 1970s, of the construction of the Perimetral Norte road, parallel to the Transamazon, the only justification of which was strategic. It was followed by the Proffao plan concerning the western margins of the country, and then by the "Our Nature" (Nossa Natureza) program. All these projects attempt to ensure the continuity of military hegemony in this part of the country. They combine a series of actions that are at once diplomatic, economic, social, ecological and indigenist, but all of which are subordinate to the objectives of national security.

The Calha Norte Project was designed in 1985 under very secret conditions. It is a vast defense plan for the 6500km-long frontier that Brazil shares with the Guianas, Surinam, Venezuela and Colombia. According to its author, the ex-National Security Council, this project seeks to reinforce the expressions of national power, the verification of the actual frontiers and the integration and development of the northern region. Under the Calha Norte Project 14% of the national territory is beyond any democratic control; 53,700 Amerindians belonging to 56 different ethnic groups and representing 25% of the indigenous population of the country (CEDI/M.N. 1989 : 1), become the

object of a forced sedentarization program and territorial expropriation in the name of national security.

There are two sides to the issue of national security. Externally it is turned towards threats like the Colombian "guerrillas" and drug traffickers, the governments with "marxist influence" in Surinam or Guiana and the territorial dispute between Guiana and Venezuela concerning the Essequibo. Internally it concerns the security of an area considered to be demographically empty, the indigenous population of which is acknowledged only when it is seen to constitute a threat to national integrity. One of the justifications of the Calha Norte project is that the Yanomami, with the support of their Brazilian and international supporters - made up essentially of religious people and scientists - could create an independent state at the expense of Brazil and Venezuela. One might think that this threat was only a pretext had not Miyamoto, a political scientist at the University of Sao Paulo, shown how much this conception was a part of the Brazilian strategical military thought concerning the Amazon and of the "Realpolitik" conceived by General Geisel in 1974, out of which the Treaty of Amazonian Cooperation grew (Miyamoto 1988: 1).

The latter, signed by Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guiana, Peru, Surinam and Venezuela has the following objectives: firstly, to affirm that the Amazon belongs to the states that contain it and that no outside interference will be admitted and secondly, to develop the area without prejudice to the sovereignty of each country signing the treaty by guaranteeing juridical equality of the states and by protecting the natural and cultural environment.

By taking the initiative, Brazil sought to avoid frontier conflicts that were latent among its neighbours and to answer the two most frequent

accusations formulated against it. One of these accusations came from its immediate neighbours and referred to its traditional territorial expansionism via its policy of "living frontiers" that is, in fact, still in operation. The other accusations came from international organizations that deplore the ecological and cultural devastation of the greatest tropical forest on the planet. Finally, by disengaging themselves from the Plata Basin and by orienting themselves towards the Amazon, the Brazilian leaders had two objectives (both of which remain current) : an alternative source of oil (by interior prospecting and by importation from Venezuela ) and an increase in the sale of manufactured products to the neighbouring countries to the north.

In reality the treaty constitutes, rather, a plan for action that is yet to take shape. In the face of this inefficiency, it was becoming indispensable from the Brazilian government point of view, to intervene on the northern frontiers that cover particularly large areas and are not under military control.

" Whereas the Amazonian Treaty of Cooperation integrates itself, on a diplomatic level, in the Amazonian context as a global geopolitical entity", says Miyamoto, "the Calha Norte Project represents the military putting the treaty into practice". "It is important to understand", he adds, "that strategical military thought, when it considers the Amazon, only takes into account the security factors and hardly any other variables. Naturally, it is said that the indigenous communities must be respected, that they are important, etc. but in reality this is secondary. This means that the Indian is considered only in as much as he does not contradict the armed forces and their proposition of occupation, of populating and integrating the national territory. This is the way that they conceive it" (Miyamoto 1988: 15).

Consequently, for the Yanomami the Calha Norte Project would mean their extermination. By refurbishing a few landing strips, situated in the

interior of their territory, without controlling their use by mining pilots and despite the establishment of military platoons, the armed forces allowed several tens of thousands of gold prospectors to establish themselves, with all the "Far West" consequences that it implies. To this, one must add more modern consequences like the massive pollution of the rivers with mercury. The result was 1500 deaths or 15% of the population of this indigenous group in Brazil in less than 2 years (between 1987 and 1990).

Simultaneously, the civilian authorities in charge of indigenous affairs have cut the Yanomami territory into 19 parcels that cover only one third of their ancestral space. Despite contrary judgements by federal courts and intensive activity on the part of the Attorney General of the Republic to enforce the country's constitution, which guarantees the indigenous peoples their traditional lands, President Collor de Mello confirmed during his inauguration that the Calha Norte Project would be continued. That same day the Superior College of War published a report in which "the too big number of (indigenous) territories", their "scattering" and their "isolation" along the frontiers are stigmatized as a danger that could lead to the internationalisation of the Amazon. (ESG 1990 : 182).

In April 1991, the decrees dividing the Yanomami territory were revoked but, simultaneously, the creation of the Yanomami Park was postponed. It is the only measure included in the national legislation that would bring about the protection of the physical and cultural environment of this indigenous people, a measure that had already been enacted by the preceding administrations without however leading to the final step of approval by the President of the Republic.

This contradictory game seems to result from the necessity to conciliate the pressures of public opinion (mainly international) with the

demands of the military. International pressure included the personal intervention of the Secretary General of the United Nations as well as that of a commission of experts from the International Labour Organisation, whose Convention 107 relative to the rights of tribal peoples was signed by Brazil.

In November 1991 the government directive (portaria) finally creating the Yanomami Park was signed by President Collor de Mello. Just before this, the widespread declarations of the conservative generals indicated that they had not renounced their northern plans. Under the allegation that Indian reserves would be transformed into "liberated zones" under international control and consequently threaten the national territorial integrity, the Superior College of War declared itself ready to resort to war if necessary.

Now, in reality it was the Calha Norte Project which created new centers of frontier instability. Since 1988, several thousand Brazilian gold miners have been abusing national frontiers and exploiting gold at the headwaters of the Orinoco with the same consequences for the Yanomami of Venezuela as for their cousins in Brazil. In response to these violations that were widely denounced in the press, the Venezuelan army was obliged in turn to build its own military outposts on the frontier. Consequently, it is certainly not a coincidence that President Perez of Venezuela was the first one to create, in his country, a Yanomami Biosphere reserve in August 1991.

The invasion of Yanomami territory was not spontaneous just as the colonization of the Amazon Basin in the 1970s was not spontaneous either. It was made possible by the creation of a military infrastructure and was directed by leaders that continue to enjoy ample political and financial support at levels that are at least local and national. This invasion continues to be based on the contempt for the Indian which I often witnessed and that directly

contradicts the myth of "tolerance towards different customs, religions and skin colours" (Valladao 1990: 195). A similar situation is being repeated in the western part of the country among different indigenous peoples of the Upper Rio Negro and of the Javary Valley, on the borders with Colombia and Peru respectively.

If the Brazilian state really wants to prove that it has abandoned concepts such as "living frontiers" (SG/CSN 1985:13), it has to continue the demarcation of Indian land along its international border. Colombia has already recognized the indigenous people living on "its" Amazonian frontier by giving them the titles to the lands they have traditionally occupied and which cover considerable areas. The creation of such interstate buffer zones is perfectly compatible with national sovereignty and with the existence of programs of eco-or ethnodevelopment such as those designed by the Indian communities themselves.

(Translation : Dr. Gale G. Gomez and Dr. Jeremy Narby).

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