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yanomamö park proposal: A Critical Time for Brazilian Indians

The proposal to establish a 16-million-acre land area for the Yanomamö Indian nation has become a political football in Brazil. When the Commission for the Creation of the Yanomamö Park (CCPY) first submitted its proposal to the Brazilian minister of the interior last June, the government promised that a decision would be made on the park proposal by the end of this year. In recent months, however, the situation of Brazilian Indians, and particularly that of the 8,500 Yanomamö, has gone from bad to worse. This October, the civilian head of the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI)—a man who held office for only six months and who generally favored the protection of Indian lands—announced that he was going to leave his post. Then, in early November, the government named Colonel João Carlos Nobre da Veiga, an army officer who had no previous experience with Indian affairs, the new president of FUNAI.

At a time when many observers are praising the Brazilian government for its loosening of political repression, the nomination of Colonel Nobre da Veiga represents a new hard line in Indian affairs. The colonel is the former head of information and security for Companhia Rio Doce Geologia e Mineração (Docegeo), a mineral-exploration company affiliated with the powerful state-owned Companhia Vale do Rio Doce. Since 1976, Docegeo has been conducting mineral surveys in the Surucucus region of Yanomamö territory. It has also been active in exploration work on the lands of the Tupiniquin Indians in Espírito Santo. Father Egydio Schwade, executive secretary of the Indian Missionary Council (CIMI), told the Brazilian press, "The nomination of the new FUNAI president

demonstrates that the climate of political opening proposed by the government does not include the Indian communities, who are under a regime of pure dictatorship."

Several factors, in addition to the rich mineral deposits found on Yanomamö lands, seem to explain the recent abrupt change in the FUNAI leadership. More public attention has focused on Indian policy this year than at any other time since the scandalous Indian Protection Service investigation of 1968. Throughout the country, Indians have been organizing and making their grievances known to Indian agents and other government authorities. At the same time, non-Indian support groups have placed Indian policy on the national political agenda along with such issues as amnesty, trade unions, and the rights of women and rural workers. The nomination of an army officer with close links to one of the country's largest mining companies indicates a political closure that can only mean rough times for Brazil's remaining Indian tribes.

Recent changes in FUNAI also seem related to the Figueiredo government's interest in promoting a more "integrated" approach to Amazon development, based on the model of D.K. Ludwig's huge agricultural and forestry project in Amapá. Last January, the Brazilian press revealed a secret government plan to lease more than 40 percent of the remaining timber resources of the Amazon to foreign companies for exploitation. More recently, the government has considered a project proposed by the Association of Businessmen of Amazonia calling for the establishment of twenty cattle-ranching and colonization enterprises, some covering more than 500,000 hectares, on each side of the Santarém-Cuiabá highway.

Hydroelectric projects, many of them

financed by international banks, are also being planned in Brazil. Anthropologists Paul L. Aspelin and Sílvio Coelho dos Santos, in a survey of Indian areas threatened by flood-control or hydroelectric projects, estimate that at least 100,000 hectares of Indian lands are scheduled to be inundated or otherwise lost. "A loss of these proportions," they write, "represents a grave general threat to both [the Indians'] present and future survival as individual groups and as distinct cultural entities, as well as a threat to any possible policy of cultural pluralism which the nation might develop."

An effort is now under way to transfer some jurisdiction over Indian affairs from the federal to the state and territorial governments. The exact nature of these plans is unknown, but many Brazilians fear that state jurisdiction would make it even easier for private interests to gain control of Indian lands. The new policy threatens to institutionalize the principles of a decree for the "emancipation" of the Indians that was defeated last year.

These events indicate the importance of the international campaign on behalf of the Yanomamö and other Indian tribes. Over the past year, a broad-based international movement has emerged, comprising anthropologists, environmentalists, Native Americans, and human-rights advocates, whose rallying point has been the immediate creation of a single, integrated land area for the Yanomamö. Brazilian anthropologists have informed us that this international effort is vital to the work they are conducting within their country. It is imperative that we keep this movement alive, as a show of support for our anthropological colleagues and as an act of solidarity with the Indian peoples of Brazil.

Shelton H. Davis

Yanomamö:

The Long Struggle for a Demarcated Territory

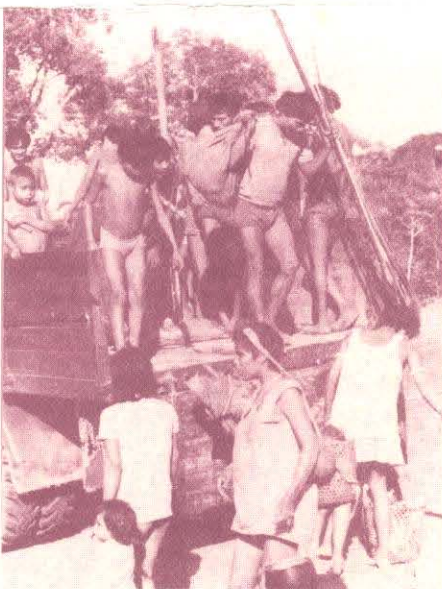
Over the past eleven years, the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) has received at least ten proposals calling for the official demarcation of Yanomamö (Yanoama) lands. We prepared a joint proposal for a Yanomamö reserve in 1968 to protect these Indians while they were still largely isolated from Western influence. The following year we added a supplement to our original proposal to include recommendations made by Catholic missionaries working in the Catrimani River valley. In March 1975, Kenneth Taylor, who was then preparing an official Yanoama Project, wrote to FUNAI that "it is urgently necessary . . . to carry out the immediate delimitation of the lands occupied by the Yanoama Indians." Similar recommendations were made in May 1975 and May 1976. Yet, on all of these occasions, there was no response from FUNAI.

Since 1973, the Brazilian Yanomamö have been faced with invasions of their territory on many fronts. The Northern Perimeter Highway, which was planned to cut through 600 kilometers of Yanomamö territory, has already caused social and economic disruption, begging, prostitution, disease, and death. Influenza and measles have swept the area; 22 percent of the Yanomamö Indians in the Ajarani River valley died within a year of the road's arrival; 50 percent of the population in the Upper Catrimani died from a measles epidemic. Onchocerciasis, or river blindness, previously quite rare in South America, has now infected between 25 and 62 percent of the population of certain Yanomamö groups.

Radioactive materials have been discovered on Yanomamö lands, and during 1975 and 1976 nearly 500 tin miners began operating illegally in the Surucucus region. Surucucus, with an estimated population of 4,580 people, contains the largest concentration of Yanomamö in Brazil. Following the removal of illegal prospectors in 1976, members of Docegeo—a subsidiary of the state-owned Companhia Vale do Rio Doce—began mineral-exploration activities in the area, and a second highway was planned in connection with the mining operations. Two million hectares of forest, half of which are in territory traditionally occupied by the Yanomamö, are also to be cleared for cattle

ranching.

Between late 1977 and mid-1978, General Ismarth de Araujo Oliveira, then president of FUNAI, declared as "areas of Yanoama Indian occupation" twenty-one small, discontinuous pockets of land in the federal territory of Roraima and the adjacent state of Amazonas. Far from providing protection, the FUNAI proposal established conditions for the maximum contact, deculturation, and contamination of the Yanomamö. Some 2,000 Indians, or 24 percent of the Brazilian Yanomamö



—from C. Dumenil

population, are left out of these reserves; nineteen areas are too small to support the population; and the two adequate areas include a total population of only fifty-five people. If implemented, this proposal would leave the Yanomamö with insufficient land for even their basic subsistence; their faunal resources would be rapidly depleted; their lands would be invaded and expropriated; their ethnic identity would be threatened by an exaggerated exposure to the most harmful effects of frontier life; and their health would be devastated by Western disease.

Last June, anthropologist Bruce Albert and lay missionary Carlo Zacchini, with the assistance of photographer Claudia Andujar, submitted a comprehensive counterproposal for a Yanomamö Indian Park. The counterproposal requires that a single, continuous area of 16 million acres be set

aside for the protection of the Yanomamö. This proposed park would avoid the disadvantages of fragmentation and be large enough to allow the Indians to continue their hunting, gathering, and slash-and-burn agricultural economy and their traditional sociocultural system. Most important, the park proposal would protect the delicate tropical rain-forest ecology. Many Brazilians and international organizations support the park proposal as the only adequate solution to the land problems of the Yanomamö.

Although the Yanomamö Park has not yet been delimited, federal authorities at first received the counterproposal sympathetically and apparently took some measures on behalf of the Indians. Entry to the Surucucus region has been restricted, and members of Docegeo reportedly left the area at FUNAI's insistence. Nevertheless, powerful forces within Roraima, including the new governor, some congressmen, and the white population in general, are totally against the creation of the park. Last August, Governor Ottomar de Souza Pinto declared that the "rich deposits of cassiterite at Surucucus . . . remain unexploited because that is an Indian reserve, which deprives the territory of an annual revenue of 4 million cruzeiros and Brazil of some hundreds of millions of dollars." His position is strikingly reminiscent of the notorious pronouncement by former governor Fernando Ramos Pereira that "an area such as that cannot afford the luxury of half a dozen Indian villages holding up development."

The influence of these Roraima politicians may be sufficiently powerful to squash any possibility for the creation of the Yanomamö Park. Recently, this influence has brought about the resignation of the FUNAI president and his replacement by a colonel who is former chief of security and information of Docegeo, the same company that is trying to gain access to Yanomamö lands. Concerned Brazilians now believe that only international pressure may have a positive effect. A new wave of publicity abroad, they suggest, should be launched if the Yanomamö are to have their traditional territory effectively guaranteed and if they are to be granted at least a chance of survival.

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