

# The Washington Post

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## Primitive Peoples' Diminishing World

### *Plight Poses Ethical Issues*

By Boyce Rensberger  
Washington Post Staff Writer



BY H.A. CHAGNON

Adorned with parrot and hummingbird feathers, Yanomamö father and son relax in a hammock.

The Yanomamö Indians of the Amazon rain forest, who plant simple gardens of banana and cassava and hunt with bow and arrow, are one of anthropology's best-known aboriginal societies.

The tribe's 15,000 members live naked in smoky, thatched huts deep in the jungle straddling the Brazil-Venezuela border and constitute the largest primitive human society left on Earth. Some villages are so remote that their inhabitants still use stone tools and are unaware of any other humans in the world except themselves and the occasional missionary or anthropologist.

Now, according to anthropologists who have studied the Indians and Roman Catholic missionaries who have worked for decades to protect them from the worst effects of Western civilization, the end of their existence as a people may be near.

The plight of the Yanomamö, like that of many aboriginal peoples around the world, illustrates

an ethical problem that is becoming more acute with the spread of industrialized cultures—how to protect the integrity and dignity of primitive societies without turning their members into second-class citizens in cultural zoos.

As the last major group of people still largely untouched by modern society, the Yanomamö face this situation most acutely. Gold and other valuable minerals have been discovered in Yanomamö territory in Brazil, and in the last two years about 15,000 to 20,000

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# South American Yanomamö People Face an

YANOMAMO, From A1

prospectors and miners have entered the vast region, which is officially off-limits to non-Indians. Thousands more are expected to arrive within months.

With the outsiders have come measles, influenza, malaria and whooping cough, which are often fatal to Indians and have nearly wiped out whole villages.

Violence between prospectors, who have little understanding of Indian ways, and the Yanomamö, who have a reputation for ferocity, has flared several times. In one incident last fall, four Indians and at least one prospector were killed.

In another threat, which experts say would likely seal the fate of the Yanomamö and dozens of smaller tribes in the region, the Brazilian government has begun a major project to militarize and develop a 93-mile-wide strip along the country's 4,000-mile northern border.

The so-called Calha Norte ("northern headwaters" of the Amazon) project, which would take in most of the Yanomamö land in Brazil, involves a number of army and air bases, each to include the families of military personnel in a settlement with shops, schools and health facilities. Eventually roads and electrification would follow, opening the Brazilian frontier to settlers from the overcrowded south much as U.S. Army outposts secured the American West for easterners in the last century.

"This would be the end of the Yanomamö—not just the culture but the people themselves. They have no resistance to white man's diseases," said a priest who has worked among the Indians, mainly delivering medical care but also shielding them from most western influences. "Unless something big happens to protect them, they'll be gone in 10 years."

The ethical dilemma is understood by most anthropologists and some missionaries.

On one hand, to protect a primitive society from the larger world's goods and ideas is to treat its people as second-class citizens, denying them rights and comforts enjoyed by others. People in primitive societies may thus be imprisoned in a kind of cultural zoo or turned into human museum pieces.

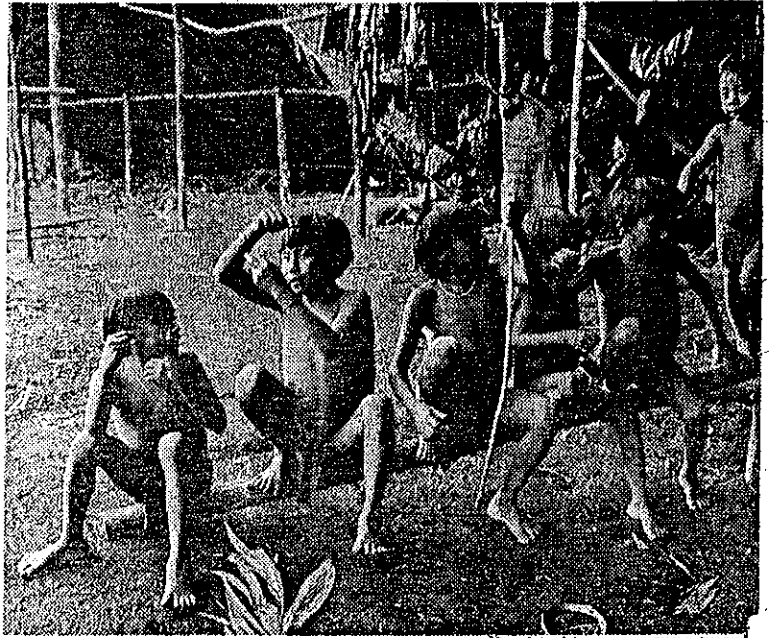
On the other hand, failure to restrict the flow of outside influences into a primitive society often leads to the collapse of its traditional values and the dissolution of its family and group life. A once proud and independent people may quickly become the indigent, unproductive jetsam of a larger, culturally alien world.

The killings last fall prompted the Brazilian government's Indian agency, FUNAI, to close several missions in the area and expel the missionaries, charging them with inciting the Indians to violence.

Dom Aldo Mangiano, bishop of Roraima territory, which includes Yanomamö land, angrily disputed the charges. He said the real reason for the expulsion was to keep the missionaries from observing further encroachment by the prospectors and their attempts to exploit the Indians. Mangiano said the prospectors and miners, called *garimpeiros*, have the support of major political and commercial interests.

"It's become absolutely clear to most anthropologists that the primitive world is going to disappear before very long," said Napoleon Chagnon of the University of California at Santa Barbara, who has studied the Yanomamö in Venezuela since 1964. "But there are ways you can ensure that the tribesmen are given a fair shake, things you can do so that they keep some cultural identity and dignity."

The missionaries who work among the Yanomamö differ on how to achieve this. Some fundamentalist Protestants and some Catholics of the Salesian order want to "Christianize" the Indians and integrate them quickly into the larger Brazilian society.



BY N.A. CHAGNON

Young members of the South American Yanomamö tribe congregate on a log.

Others such as the Consolata missionaries, the Catholic group whose mission was closed, take the opposite approach. "Our philosophy is to try not to upset their culture," said a Consolata priest. "We know that we cannot stop change. It will come, but we try to let it happen slowly, so that the Yanomamö can accept new things at their own pace. We must respect the Yanomamö culture. There is 10,000 years of cultural change between our way of life and theirs."

The Consolata Fathers also take pride in respecting the Yanomamö religion. "We don't preach the Gospel. We don't baptize anybody," the priest said. "The Yanomamö are very happy. They have their own religion. They have their freedom. Why should we take it away from them?"

The chief purpose of Consolata missions is to provide medical care and to offer training in practical matters. For example, the mission-

aries have introduced the cultivation of avocados, pineapples, cashews, oranges and other foods suited to cultivation in clearings near small villages. Until the missionaries taught them, the Yanomamö were afraid of the water and did not fish. Now they have a new source of protein. A few Indians have been taught to read and write.

Some missions also have trading posts. The Indians can earn money by selling meat they have hunted or by working in the mission's vegetable gardens. With the money they can buy axes, knives, metal cooking pots, mirrors, salt and other basic items. Over the years the range of items available has been enlarged with deliberate slowness.

Consolata priests say they are careful not to sell items that could disrupt Yanomamö life. For example, although the Indians depend heavily on hunting, and although shotguns are sometimes available from other sources, the mission will

SEMI-ANNUAL SALE

# Encroaching World

not sell them. This is because the Yanomamō have a long tradition of "blood feuds" between villages. Usually these end with a single killing by bow and arrow; guns could dramatically escalate the level of bloodshed and social disruption.

The forces that threaten the Yanomamō also threaten their habitat.

The Amazonian rain forest is the richest biological zone in the world, harboring a greater variety of species of plants and animals than any other place. Although the Yanomamō live in harmony with their environment, the government's effort to open the frontier is considered certain to exterminate hundreds if not thousands of species, most before they can be studied or their usefulness determined.

There is already evidence that the gold rush is causing ecological damage. Most of the gold is in alluvial deposits, flecks of the metal mixed with ancient sands and gravels. To get at the gold, the *garimpeiros* pump jets of water at stream banks, eroding them into a slurry that can be panned. Natural stream boundaries are being widened and the vegetation washed away.

The miners are also introducing highly toxic mercury compounds into the Amazon ecosystem. This is a result of a method of gold extraction that relies on its ability to dissolve in mercury. In the process the mercury is heated with a torch, producing so much mercury vapor that several *garimpeiros* have come down with mercury poisoning. Substantial quantities of mercury vapor are going into the rainforest ecosystem.

A spokesman for FUNAI, the Brazilian Indian agency, said the missionaries were expelled as part of a plan to remove all non-Indians from Yanomamō territory, including the *garimpeiros*. Speaking through Pedro Rodrigues, news media officer of the Brazilian Em-

bassy here, the FUNAI official said an area of about 35,000 square miles would soon be set aside as a Yanomamō reserve.

Rodrigues conceded, though, that because of the dense forests it is hard to tell how many *garimpeiros* have entered the area or been removed.

He said the reserve would be included in the Calha Norte project zone but that it would not necessarily be developed.

"The philosophy of Calha Norte project," Rodrigues said, "is to try to avoid the kind of devastation" that has happened in other places in Brazil where settlers and entrepreneurs arrived and began trying to clear the forest before the government could establish a controlling presence.

The project is in keeping with Brazil's historical desire to "conquer" and "develop" its vast Amazon region, an often impenetrable wilderness that has long prevented the nation's government from patrolling or even visiting its border.

Over the decades, Brazil has made many attempts to develop the Amazon region. Forests have been cleared to make way for cattle, leading to the discovery that the soil is too poor. Highways have been pushed deep into the forest only to be abandoned and reclaimed by the jungle. Satellite images, however, show an accelerating pace of deforestation.

The Brazilian government also has said Calha Norte is necessary to defend the nation against the spread of communist and other insurgencies in neighboring countries and to stop the flow of illegal drugs into Brazil.

"We can try to slow the changes that are coming in Brazil and to some extent in Venezuela, and we can try to help them prepare," Chagnon said, "but we don't have much time. There is an impending disaster for the Yanomamō now."