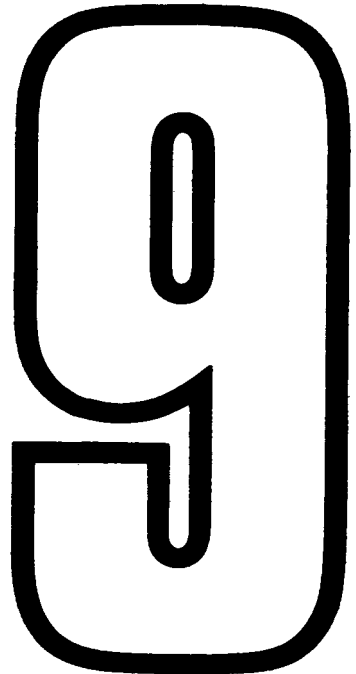


Walter Coppens:

**The Anatomy of
a Land Invasion Scheme in
Yekuana Territory, Venezuela**





Walter Coppens

THE ANATOMY OF
A LAND INVASION SCHEME IN
YEKUNA TERRITORY, VENEZUELA

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For the Secretariat of IWGIA
Peter S. Aaby Helge Kleivan
Editors of the series.

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Introduction

In 1971, various Venezuelan newspapers reported the invasion of an extensive section of Yekuana territory, located along the Upper Ventuari river of the Amazon Federal Territory. The area, situated close to the confluence of the Ventuari and Parú rivers, opposite the Cacuri savanna (cf. map 2), had been appropriated by a group of settlers with a view to contributing to the development of the South, in close cooperation with their Indian "brothers". Such was, at least, their more or less explicitly stated purpose.

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After providing a short introduction to some pertinent aspects of Yekuana culture, we will document the Parú-Cacuri invasion on the basis of newspaper reports, and documents submitted to various official authorities. We thereby hope to substantiate the Yekuana viewpoint regarding the significance of their land, and to outline their own attitude toward the development projects being elaborated for application in southern Venezuela, one of the most isolated regions of the country.

By singling out the Parú-Cacuri episode, we do not mean to imply that the case constitutes an isolated phenomenon in aboriginal Venezuela, nor do we suggest that this affair would, per se, be more critical than other invasions which may occur among other indigenous groups. We are only trying to assert that the Parú-Cacuri case exhibits some of the most significant traits which enter into the picture of traditional land invasion strategies suffered by many aboriginal groups of the Americas and other continents. This means that the conclusions arrived at in this report, have a much wider application than just the Yekuana or, for that matter, the Venezuelan case.

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The Yekuana Indians, also known in the ethnographic literature as Makiritare, today number approximately 1.500. This Carib-speaking group was contacted for the first time by Spanish conquistadores around 1758-1759, when an official border commission came across various Yekuana settlements along the lower Padamo river, one of the affluents of the Upper Orinoco (cf. map 1). Being very proficient river navigators, various Yekuana groups soon started commercial relations with the important Lower Orinoco area. These friendly contacts, however, did not last beyond 1776, when the Yekuana rebelled en masse against military reductions intended to fend off Dutch territorial claims on Guyana, and put an end to repeated slave-raiding incursions of local indigenous groups by Dutch-dominated Caribs.

After this episode, the Yekuana retreated into their hinterland, which is strategically situated in the headwaters of various affluents of the Orinoco river. It is important to recognize that navigation in these areas is out of question without the assistance of Yekuana guides, because of the presence of numerous rapids.

Thus the Yekuana had gained a first battle against white man's attempts to conquer their territory. Having severed their commercial relations with the Spaniards, the Yekuana extended their trade circuit toward the Essequibo area, where they established initial contact with the Dutch. After the Dutch departure from Guyana in 1814, the Yekuana started trading with the English colonists. The main commercial interest which provoked such extended journeys, was the acquisition of shotguns and iron goods in general which would facilitate their technological and subsistence pursuits.

The expansion of their foreign and trade relations coincided for the Yekuana with an extended period during which their territory was exempted from massive penetration by outsiders. This privileged situation lasted until the second half of the 19th century, when the Yanomami Indians from the Upper Orinoco area started pushing strongly toward the North. Around the turn of the century, the Yekuana were faced with yet another threat from the outside, which again required some territorial adjustments. This was the rubberboom, which led to gross exploitation of the indigenous labour force. Many Yekuana who lived downstream had once more to take refuge in safer headwaters.

Which is the present habitat of the Yekuana tribe? From their place of origin in the Upper Cuntinamo region the Yekuana have

extended northward and westward. The contemporary tribal area is grosso modo bounded by parallels 3° and 7° North and meridians 63° and 66° West (cf. map 1). Moving clockwise from the Upper Orinoco area, the Yekuana inhabit some 30 villages scattered along the following rivers: Cuntinamo, Padamo, Cunucunuma and Ventuari (Amazon Federal Territory); Erebató, Caura and Paragua (Bolívar State). There remains one Yekuana village in Brazil, along the Upper Auari river, affluent of the Uraricuera.

The major indigenous groups which surround Yekuana territory, are the following (cf. map 1): to the West, the linguistically independent Piaroa; to the South and the Southeast live the Yanomami, who are also still classified as independent language speakers; and to the East are the Carib speaking Pemón. The Yekuana, who are culturally very close to the Pemón, maintain brisk commercial relations with their eastern neighbours. But the everyday focus of economic interest of many Yekuana villages concern the Sanemá, who make up the northernmost Yanomami subgroup.

After almost a century of hostile relations between both groups, for which we have documentation since the second half of the 19th century, the Yekuana and Sanemá-Yanomami have established a kind of symbiotic relationship. The Sanemá Indians, whose material culture is less elaborated than is the case with their northern neighbours, constitute a prime unspecialized labour force on which the Yekuana draw quite frequently. The Sanemá are indeed made to perform a host of menial tasks which the Yekuana are unwilling to accomplish by themselves. For payment, the Sanemá are most interested to obtain iron tools, even used ones.

Thus the Sanemá find themselves in a subordinate economic and social position toward the Yekuana. This is not to say, however, that these Yanomami groups function as an enslaved labour force, notwithstanding their material inferiority. In fact, as soon as the Sanemá have satisfied their economic demands for which they have settled close to a Yekuana village, they feel completely free to return to the forest. In this sense, the Yekuana-Sanemá relations are quite comparable to the prevailing relationship between Negro cultivators and Pygmies of Central Africa.

The daily Yekuana subsistence derives basically from a slash-and-burn agriculture, in which the cultivation of bitter yuca ranks foremost. The horticultural resources are supplemented by hunting and fishing. Little time is spent on gathering activities.

There prevails a rather strict division of subsistence labour according to sex. The men are in charge of cutting and clearing the fields, while the women perform most of the planting and harvesting. The exploitation of the fields is an extended family matter, in which are involved the mater familias and her married daughters. Hunting, on the other hand, constitutes basically a male activity, whereas both men and women dedicate themselves to fishing.

Yekuana social structure is characterized by the prevalence of local endogamy and matrilocal residence. The most extensive political unit is the village, which is internally autonomous and functions under the guidance of a headman who has little power to enforce local decisions.

The Parú-Cacuri affair

On February 15, 1971, the Caracas daily newspaper El Nacional reported for the first time the ongoing invasion of Makiritare (Yekuana) land. We may quote the following excerpts of the article:

"Makiritare lands have been invaded by outsiders who are attempting to dispossess these Indians of the hunting and fishing preserves which they have held for centuries ... The invaders are miners and presumed colonists, including persons who claim to be powerful

The situation was reported directly to the Minister of Justice (in 1970), who then decided that the group which had illegally settled in Parú-Cacuri should be withdrawn immediately, at a time when the Makiritare of the Upper Ventuari and neighbouring regions were planning to establish a large settlement in the same area. More than six months after the decision of the Minister of Justice, however, the open defiance of the official mandate persists"

On February 16, 1971, the same newspaper published a contrary statement by D.B., who is the author of various anthropological publications on the Yekuana. According to this specialist:

"It would be absurd to say that three thousand Makiritare, divided into small isolated groups, have the right to a surface of 100.000 km², from the Upper Orinoco to the Lower Paragua

The area of Cacuri has a savanna exactly 20 kilometers long by 12 to 15 kilometers wide Actually no one (i.e. Yekuana) has settled there. Now, 15 kilometers from Cacuri, but on the left bank of the Ventuari, by the Parú river, there are other savannas in a site called Rancho Pando, where a naturalized Venezuelan has taken up residence, and desires to collaborate in the march of the nation towards the South, without detriment to the native communities.

B. stated that this area of the Parú river belonged to the natives in pre-Colombian times But since then there have been no Indians there, because the region is unsuitable for hunting and is malaria ridden"

On the very same day, another important Caracas newspaper, El Universal, relayed a strong warning formulated by several Yekuana of the Ventuari region:

"Isaías Rodríguez (Yekuana representative in Caracas) explained that long before the arrival of Christopher Columbus to our shores, the Makiritare have occupied the Upper Ventuari

For approximately two years now, two French brothers in Cacuri have occupied the savannas located between the Parú and the Ventuari rivers, comprising an area of 20.000 hectares, which are vitally important to us, since this is where we do our hunting and fishing. The invaders have turned this area into their private hacienda, which they are exploiting with native labour. They are trying to throw us off our own land

This time we are going to Congress to ask them to study what is happening to the Makiritare family We want to know if this occupation is legal and what our fate will be.

"And if the Congress doesn't solve your problem either?"

"We want everything to be settled peacefully, but if this does not happen, we will be obliged to go to war, practically, and we are giving them (i.e. the invaders) 40 days to clear up the situation"

Agustín Pusshaina, representing the Guajiro tribe, added that all tribes of the Guajira (western Venezuela) are ready to lend their Makiritare brothers any assistance which they might need."

On February 17th, 1971, the same Yekuana made known once again their point of view in El Nacional:

"We have applied to the Ministry of Justice, but ... our complaints have not been heard. The fact is that if we do not get some attention and if our property is not restored to us, our despair will be so great that we will be obliged to defend at the cost of our lives and with any resources available the territory which our ancestors held before the coming of white man.

"You mean you will go to war?"

"Not exactly. But if this country does not protect us as it should, because it considers us second-class Venezuelans, then we will take the measures necessary to win respect. The Government and other authorities should not forget that we are the only one hundred per cent Venezuelans in this country"

They said that up to now they have been patient and resigned in the face of abuse, but that now they have realized that they will have to assume the same belligerent attitude towards the new conquistadores as their ancestors did when the Spaniards came ...

"Is it true that you claim property rights over 100,000 km²?"

"No one has ever said that. What we are asking is to be left with the territory which is indispensable for our subsistence. The area which has been invaded is in the centre of our own territory."

Because of the contradictory data regarding the Parú-Cacuri affair, published on February 16th, 1971, a group of anthropologists elaborated a joint document under the editorship of N. Arvelo who, in 1968-1969, spent some eighteen months conducting field work among the Yekuana of the Upper Ventuari region. El Nacional published large extracts of this rejoinder on March 1st, 1971. The complete text of the document, which was endorsed by a great many Venezuelan anthropologists and ecologists, is as follows:

"In 1970, Isafas Rodríguez, a Makiritare Indian born in the vicinity of Cacuri, came to the La Salle Natural Science Foundation to complain about a serious problem, the invasion of Makiritare tribal lands by outsiders. Isafas explained that this intrusion would interfere with the plans which the tribe itself had concerning this area, plans which dated back

to 1959 and 1960. At that time, the first settlement of Makiritare and Sanemá (Waica) was founded in the area of Cacuri-Parú. This settlement lasted three years, but finally failed due to the lack of official support. The savannas of Cacuri were temporarily evacuated, and the Makiritare founded a new settlement called Curaawa about 6 kilometers downstream from Cacuri. However, they continued using the vicinity of Cacuri and the Parú river as hunting and fishing grounds.

In 1969, the Makiritare again planned to make a permanent settlement in the Cacuri area. Immediately after their discussions of this project, in April 1970, several Makiritare families from Tencua and the Upper Ventuari began to take up residence in Cacuri. Later, other Makiritare descended from the headwaters to the vicinity of the Mono Falls, located about three hours (eastward) from Cacuri.

The Makiritare will perhaps be joined by several hundred Sanemá, who also live in the region of the Upper Ventuari, and who are accustomed to cluster with relative flexibility around larger Makiritare settlements.

Around the middle of 1969, the Makiritare were surprised to note the arrival at Parú-Cacuri of groups of "conquistadores" and miners, who started exploiting the area without the least concern for the tribal settlement project. Isaías Rodríguez was elected as the delegate of the Makiritare villages of the Upper Ventuari and instructed to denounce what the Yekuana call the "savage" abuse by those "civilized barbarians". Isaías asked whether the private colonization of the Ventuari was a part of the Venezuelan southern development policy.

Informed of the situation in Parú-Cacuri, the Minister of Justice agreed that this area is legally a native area, and that the occupation of this area by unauthorized outsiders is illegal. The Minister gave emphatic orders, in the presence of a delegation representing the Makiritare and the La Salle Foundation, for the immediate withdrawal of the invaders. That was six months ago. But nothing remotely resembling this order has been carried out. On the contrary, what has been observed is an increase in the mining population, which is unlawfully exploiting this area, under no control at all.

We wish now to rectify certain mistakes which have appeared

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Makiritare, in accordance with their semi-nomadic economy which does not demand the permanent and visible occupation of any specific sector of their territory. Rather, land occupation proceeds seasonally or after a regeneration period during which the Indians allow the area to restore its ecological equilibrium which has been upset by their exploitation of the environment.

3. The impression is being created that the defence of the territorial rights of native populations is tantamount to "stopping the march of the nation towards the South."

Our understanding is that the policy of the Government concerning the development of the South implies the subordination of applied programmes to the requisites of national planification. It is furthermore our understanding that the basic philosophy behind development programmes for the South recognizes the fundamental duty of the State to protect and promote - and by no means to ignore, violate or destroy - the cultural, social and economic assets of the indigenous groups; and that it recognizes their right to be the principal participants in their own development, which in no ways can be dissociated from the progress of the region or that of the country. Unlike development programmes in other regions and other countries, we should learn from the errors of the past, which have culminated in the genocide of native populations and the ethnocide of their cultures.

Our moral and professional responsibility toward all indigenous populations of this country is undeniable. Precisely because unlawful invasions of lands belonging to other native tribes have occurred and are occurring, we wish to alert the Government, which aims at altering the tendency which we observe in certain spheres to perpetuate arbitrary and illegal procedures in relation with minority and marginal groups in our country."

Document endorsed by:

N. Arvelo, H. de Chalun, E. Izaguirre Sarfati, S. Strozzi

in the press concerning the problem of the Makiritare of the Ventuari:

1. It has been suggested that the Makiritare are demanding "a surface of 100.000 km², from the Upper Orinoco to the Lower Paragua."

In reality, the area which the Makiritare of the Ventuari are claiming as protected ecological zone has an extension of approximately 9.200 km², not 100.000 km².

The demarcation of an area extending from the Upper Orinoco to the Lower Paragua has never been contemplated, although parts of this area are ancestral lands of the Makiritare.

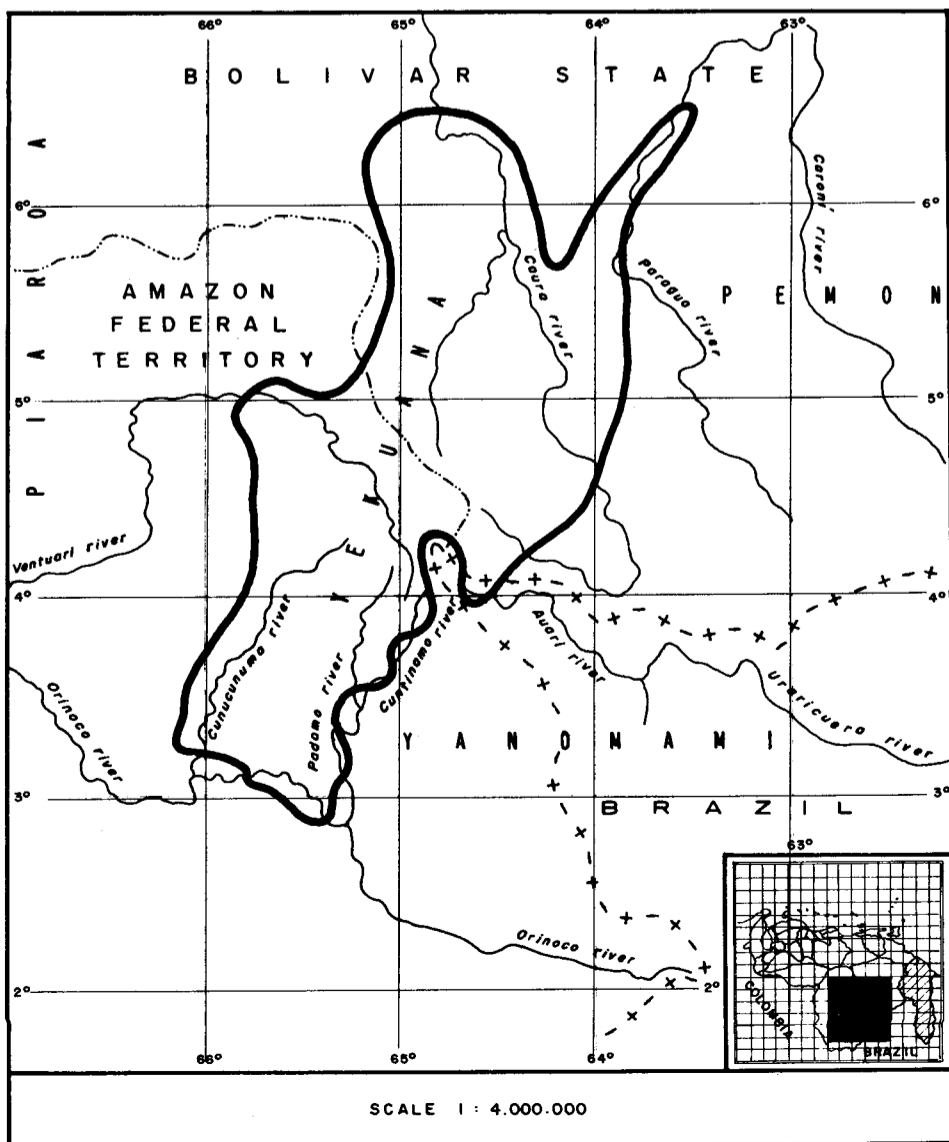
Thus we explicitly recognize that the South is in the process of development.

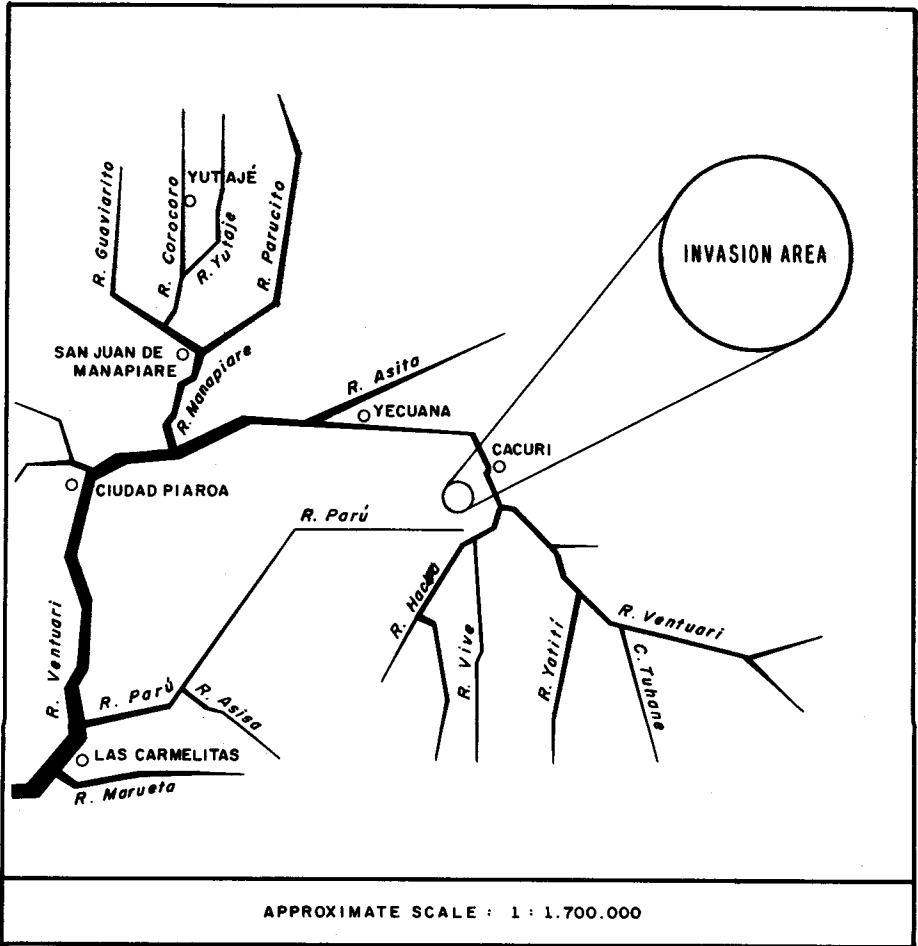
2. It has been stated that "no one is settled in Cacuri" and that "the area of the Parú river belonged to the natives in pre-Colombian times, inasmuch as it contains some rock carvings. But since then there have been no Indians there, and besides it is unsuitable for hunting."

On the contrary, an advance group of Makiritare has already taken up residence in this very same area of Cacuri. Moreover, we wish to emphasize that we have only been referring to the recent history of the movements of the Makiritare along the Upper Ventuari. The history of this area actually dates back much farther.

Establishing the past history of the Cacuri-Parú area exclusively on the basis of the evidence of rock carvings is an erroneous and distorted approach to the cultural history of the Amazon region. The presence of a native population in this area is archeologically documented back to 1.000 years before Christ; and corroborated by the chroniclers of the Indies, by explorers and naturalists of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, and by contemporary explorers such as Félix Cardona, A. Gheerbrandt and J. Wilbert. It is furthermore evident from the toponomy of the area; and if this were not yet sufficient evidence, the mythology and beliefs of the Makiritare are inexhaustible sources for the cultural history of this area.

It is therefore anthropologically incomprehensible that





MAP 2 : PARU - CACURI REGION

Source : Ministerio de Obras Públicas, 1970.

V. Fina Puig, J.A. Verburg.

The La Salle Foundation: W. Coppens.

The Institute of Anthropology and History of Aragua and Carabobo: H. Peñalver (Director).

The Venezuelan Society of Applied Anthropology: O. González Náñez (Secretary General).

The University of Oriente: M. de Civrieux.

The Central University of Venezuela: J. Clarac, R. Lizarralde, E. E. Mosonyi, J. Mosonyi, R. López S.

The National Association for the Defence of Nature: E. Mondolfi.

The Venezuelan Society of Natural Sciences: R. Avelledo Hostos (President), F. Tamayo.

With the direct support of the great majority of Venezuela's anthropologists, the Yekuana kept sensitizing the national public opinion. On March 7th, the weekly journal Momento published a revealing interview of Isaías Rodríguez:

"Interviewer: "Who are the colonists who have settled on your territory?"

Rodríguez: " ... two brothers... They are fencing in 20.000 hectares of land. There are people who say that we don't need 100.000 km², that we don't need the land we are claiming. We are not asking for this much. One man, however, is claiming 20.000 hectares. So we, who are many, how much do we need?"

I.: "Who has awarded this land to the B. brothers?"

R.: "That's exactly what we are trying to find out. They have said they expect to get a loan of 300.000 bolívares (approximately US \$ 65.000) from the National Agrarian Institute for the promotion of agriculture and cattle raising. We don't believe it ... If the policy of the National Agrarian Institute is to encourage foreigners to colonize our lands, we will oppose this policy. They say they want to work the land in collaboration with us, but we don't believe that because we have been deceived for many years. Thus we want to remove them, formally or informally. We will not allow them to stay. We need this land. For generations the Makiritare have hunted and fished around Cacuri; we have never left it except for short periods to avoid exhausting the food supply."

I.: "Have the Frenchmen threatened them (i.e. the Yekuana)?"

R.: "Yes. About three weeks ago they forbade us to hunt in the area. They also forbade us to fish in the area where we

usually fish, a backwater where we have always fished."

I.: "So they are keeping you from getting your food?"

R.: "That's right. So we consider it a threat, because tomorrow another sefior will come and fence off more land, and eventually drive us into Brazil."

One week after the interview of I. Rodríguez, the March 14th edition of El Universal referred to some comments made by W. Coppens which were meant to develop points already touched upon by the joint anthropological document published two weeks before. The comments went as follow:

"Certain statements concerning Parú-Cacuri have created the impression that an irreconcilable contradiction exists between the defence of native territorial rights and the requisites posed by the development of the South. In other words, the economically strategic importance of the region would be incompatible with the presence of the native population which has always lived there.

Hence it is not surprising that certain people defend the right of a few persons to usurp the ancestral lands of several hundred natives under the pretext that the area is vacant. We are facing hereby a theory of development which outlines, however timidly, the strategy traditionally invoked to justify the genocide of the native population of the American continent. We can summarize this strategy as follows. The "parasitical" presence of native groups in strategic areas constitutes an a priori obstacle to the economic development of these areas. Consequently, it is indispensable that these groups disappear by one means or another. Since the Indians cannot be expected to commit voluntary suicide, the legal fiction of vacant land is invented (this fiction is now being invoked for the Cacuri region). If the natives dare to resist the forceful invasion of their ancestral lands, they confront the right of self-defence of the colonists, who are now on "their own" land

Contrary to some statements which have been made, we wish to establish that the anthropologists do not intend in any way to hinder the historic march of the nation towards the South. Neither do we intend to assume towards the aboriginal cultures a paternalistic attitude, that of locking them in museum-reservations. We fully support the public efforts being made to further the socio-economic development of groups which at

present live on the fringes of Venezuelan society.

But it seems to us essential that this evolution take place principally in function of the very aborigines, when the regions to be developed are legally indigenous areas which the Indians keep exploiting in accordance with the possibilities afforded and the limitations set by their semi-nomadic economy.

We also request that the supposed existence of vacant land be established by anthropologists who are familiar with the respective aboriginal cultures, taking into account that the native criterion of land vacancy does not at all correspond to ours. In the present case of Parú-Cacuri, we emphatically affirm that, to the Makiritare, this area by no means constitutes a vacant land."

In the meantime, steps were taken to muster up political support for the solution of the Parú-Cacuri affair. A delegation of anthropologists went to denounce the invasion before the Permanent Commission on Social Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies. Following this initiative, the Permanent Commission decided to summon the Minister of Justice, Dr. Orlando Tovar, to answer questions concerning the alleged invasion of Yekuana land by unauthorized persons.

On March 27th, 1971, El Universal commented that Minister Tovar, in his presentation to the Permanent Commission, had said "that he could not deny the unlawfulness of what had taken place." He added that studies were being made in Parú-Cacuri to implement development programmes in favour of the local Yekuana population.

This unequivocal statement about the unlawfulness of the ongoing "colonization" of the Parú-Cacuri area coincided more or less with the 40 days' deadline given by the Yekuana themselves for reaching a peaceful solution to the problem. As the ministerial statement suggested that action would soon be taken in the Cacuri area, the Yekuana adopted a waiting attitude.

But soon the news came that the "colonists" persisted in exploiting the invaded area. For this reason, the La Salle Foundation submitted on April 15th, 1971, a memorandum to the Minister of Justice, in which the major legal and anthropological arguments of the Parú-Cacuri case were synthesized:

"... the Makiritare have from time immemorial used the Cacuri region for hunting and fishing, alternating the extensive exploitation of the region with periods of fallow-

ing and withdrawal, to allow the regeneration of the natural resources exhausted by their semi-nomadic techniques of exploitation. It is important to emphasize, however, that the Makiritare continue to consider as tribal land the area which they temporarily evacuate when its resources become scarce ..

The presence of colonists in the Parú-Cacuri area is illegal for the following reasons:

1. The National Agrarian Institute, which is the only Government agency empowered to award land, has not granted any title deeds in the Cacuri area.

It must also be emphasized that this area is protected by article 2, section d. of the Agrarian Reform Act, by virtue of the fact that the Makiritare are still using the region of Cacuri for hunting and fishing.¹⁾ The Parú-Cacuri area, in other words, is by no means vacant land.

2. Decree No. 250 of 1951 establishes that the entry of private persons into an indigenous area may only take place with the previous agreement of the Ministry of Justice.

The persons who have invaded the Parú-Cacuri area have no authorization from the Ministry of Justice.

3. The Cacuri region is an area legally reserved by the Ministry of Mines and Hydrocarbons, so that prospecting in this area is strictly prohibited.

In spite of this provision, the invaders of Parú-Cacuri have brought in prospecting equipment last year, as appears from several direct testimonies

We can testify, on the other hand, that the motive invoked to justify the entry of outside elements into Parú-Cacuri has no foundation whatsoever. The intruders' project of developing the area on the basis of a "cooperative" system with the local indigenous population, is in fact a mere pretext to seize surreptitiously the Parú-Cacuri region

The invaders have already gone so far as to prohibit hunting and fishing on the area which they have seized ... The so-called "cooperative" of Parú-Cacuri, then, constitutes a mere subterfuge, destined to camouflage an openly unlawful and arbitrary colonization. Thus the colonists of Parú-Cacuri have registered no cooperative with the Ministry of Development,

although this is required by the Cooperative Associations Act.

Although we know that powerful private interests are at stake which are attempting to hinder by any means at their disposal (including the intimidation of Makiritare informants) the enforcement of the law, we appeal to the Government to set up a clear and unequivocal precedent:

1. The Makiritare, who in the 1910's suffered in their own flesh the bloody despotism of Tomás Funes²), would receive a psychologically disastrous shock if they were shown that the Venezuelan Government is unable to guarantee their territorial rights which for them are literally a matter of life and death.

2. The Makiritare, who prove to have a great desire to integrate themselves into the dynamics of this country, are perfectly capable, with proper technological assistance, of developing the Parú-Cacuri area themselves. It should be sufficient to point, for example, to the Makiritare village of Santa María de Erebató, which has become one of the model villages of the entire Gran Sabana area (southern Venezuela), and the standard of living of which is higher than that of most rural communities of this country

4. The Parú-Cacuri area is by no means vacant land. To claim the contrary is to insinuate that the development of the South can only take place by means of the genocide and ethnocide of the native populations and their cultures ...

For these reasons, we request that the "colonists" of Parú-Cacuri be directed to another area of the Amazon Territory which be effectively vacant, and that the Government adequately support the Makiritare movement towards integration, talking into account that in addition to proper technological assistance, semi-nomadic groups need a proportionately larger living space than do sedentary populations."

Some time after remittance of this document, the spokesman of the colonists made known their point of view, stating among others in the daily El Universal:

"Since I have started working in the southern part of the country, I have tried to have the Venezuelan authorities

pronounce themselves as to the legality or unlawfulness of my action. I never have received a reply³⁾. This has been taken advantage of by certain factions, who pretend to speak in the name of the indigenous communities of Amazonas and Guyana, to attack me and distort the facts

The fact of viewing the conquest of the South as a task which would be the sole responsibility of the Venezuelan Government, is an absurdity from several points of view To entrust (the conquest of the South) to this sector solely, would mean marginating the common citizen who is interested to take part in this vital enterprise We should not overlook, indeed, that our Amazonas and our Guyana are particularly attractive to our neighbours "4)

Epilogue

At the present time, some sixteen months after the first denouncement of the Parú-Cacuri invasion, the so-called colonists of the area have presumably withdrawn. The National Agrarian Institute has now entered the Parú-Cacuri region and is taking steps to incorporate the area into its jurisdiction. Since, from the legal point of view, the Parú-Cacuri constitutes an "uncultivated waste land" ("tierra baldía"), it is liable to be affected by the Agrarian Reform. Once the area referred to has been transferred to the jurisdiction of the National Agrarian Institute, it will be possible to apply the above mentioned article 2, § d. of the Agrarian Reform Act, which, as already stated, assigns to indigenous groups who have preserved their communal or extended family status the right to exploit their lands, forests and waters.

It is important to keep in mind that the Parú-Cacuri episode is taking place in the area which is actually being covered by the so-called "Conquest of the South" movement. This Government-sponsored programme aims at bringing about the political and socio-cultural integration of the hitherto isolated Amazon Federal Territory and the Cedeño District of the adjacent Bolívar State. One of the most significant characteristics of this southern territory, which is mostly covered by rain forest or semi-deciduous forest, resides in the fact that about 43 percent (approximately 22.000) of its total population is indigenous.

Seen in retrospect, the Parú-Cacuri invasion displays some interesting diagnostic features which we like to discuss brief-

ly.

The area under discussion, which traditionally has been used by the Yekuana according to the requirements and limitations of their semi-nomadic economy, is legally defined as "tierra baldía" or "uncultivated waste land".

It is unquestionable that this legal definition could be refined from an ecological and anthropological point of view, for the effective land use conditions of the area by the Yekuana do not coincide with the normal semantic implication of "uncultivated waste lands".

Two basic anthropological criteria should be taken into consideration upon reviewing this legal category. First of all, semi-nomadic economies based on the resources of slash-and-burn cultivation, fishing, hunting and gathering do not permit the continuous and visible exploitation of the same tracts of land. Secondly, it is known that the indigenous conception of land tenure rights and obligations may diverge quite radically from our own legal criteria. As far as fallow lands are concerned, it is of fundamental importance to realize that aboriginal groups who temporarily evacuate certain sites situated within their traditional homelands, do not relinquish their permanent territorial claims. In other words, tracts of land which enter the regeneration phase of shifting cultivation cycles, are in no way considered to be vacant "no man's land" by the aboriginal population.

Going back to the Parú-Cacuri episode, it is obvious that, upon referring to the area as an uncultivated waste land, the invaders of Parú-Cacuri meant to equate this legal definition with the notion of vacant land.

Any observer now, however little familiar with the history of aboriginal populations throughout the world, knows that the fiction of vacant land has been traditionally invoked to justify the usurpation of native settlement and subsistence areas.

We believe that as anthropologists we are partly to be blamed for this problem, which is also one of communication. Generally speaking, quite a few studies of aboriginal land tenure systems have been carried out. Up to now, however, we have obviously failed to disseminate the ecological and anthropological findings regarding the significance and function of land in pre-industrial, aboriginal societies. The necessity to publish on a massive scale all pertinent anthropological information on indigenous land tenure, is made more urgent because many economic developers of "colonization" areas arrive, bona fide, at the conclusion that they are

entering vacant land.

It is particularly imperative to gain access to the printed communication media used by the various sectors who take part in economic development programmes, and whose planning is likely to impinge upon the territorial rights of local native populations. Definite attempts should be made to present the cultural-ecological perspective in those journals which reflect the interests of investment groups who are dedicated to expanding key economic sectors of developing countries, which is where much native land usurpation takes place. Given that the "developmental" exploitation of such strategic reserves as oil, mineral and forest resources cannot proceed without affecting in one way or another the land itself, attention should be drawn to the moral implications of any such land use scheme. It is unacceptable, in other words, to have interested economic developers earmark, a priori, a given human habitat as uncultivated or vacant land, without their consideration of specific ecological and anthropological criteria.

We like to draw the attention to a final matter of strategy. In order to be politically effective, it appears essential that protest movements against indigenous landinvasions be channeled in the first place through national pressure groups: the Indians concerned and any interested, national institutions or persons.

In this respect, it is important to politically sensitize regarding their land tenure rights, those indigenous groups which are being drawn into the dynamics of acculturation. They should indeed be made aware of the fact that the retention of their own land may mean the difference between cultural and even physical survival or extinction.

Given the political configuration of most Latin American countries, it is very unlikely that international protest movements will have any chance of succeeding, if set in motion without prior national initiative and backing.

NOTES

(1) Article 2, section d., states the following:
This (Agrarian Reform) Act guarantees and recognizes the right of the indigenous populations which de facto retain their communal or extended family status - without prejudice to the privileges to which they are entitled as Venezuelans, according to previous paragraphs - to hold the lands, woods and waterways which they occupy or which belong to them in those sites where they customarily dwell, without detriment of their incorporation to the national society according to this and other laws.

(2) A dreaded caudillo, who rebelled in 1913 against the central Government and who took over the entire civilian and military command of the Amazon Territory. His reign of terror ended in 1921.

(3) This assertion strangely ignores the public ministerial statement of March 27th, 1971.

(4) Without pronouncing on its political credibility, this is the main argument put forward by many private investors who wish to impress upon the Government the idea that they also should receive a share in the development opportunities of the South.

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