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of the Ye'cuana („Maquiritare“)
Political System: Stability and Crisis**

12



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POLITICAL SYSTEM: STABILITY AND CRISES

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INTRODUCTION

The Ye'cuana or De'cuana, better known in the anthropological literature as Maquiritare¹), are approximately 1500 Carib-speaking, tropical-forest people. Their villages²) are scattered along the upper course of the Caura and Paragua Rivers, or branches of the latter (Bolivar State), and along the Ventuari, Cunucunuma, Padoma and Cuntinamo Rivers and their affluents (Territorio Federal Amazonas) in Venezuela (cf.map). In Brazilian territory there is one other village along the upper course of the Lebarejure River.

The Ye'cuana are classified under the Guianas subdivision of the Amazon Basin (Steward, 1948) which is more a geographical reference than an anthropological one. It is a fact, however, that all societies included in this subdivision have in common a lack of centralized political power. It has been suggested for such societies that in the absence of secular mechanisms for socio-political control, beliefs and institutions, which are primarily religious in nature, take their place and exert indirect control over the social behavior of individuals (Gillin, 1936; Fock, 1963; Butt, 1965/66; Dole, 1964 and 1966).

My data is based on two stages of research of the Ye'cuana Political System. Stage one was carried out between January 1968 and April 1969. My inquiries then were meant to test the hypotheses formulated by the above mentioned specialists and if proved wrong, to elucidate which were the Ye'cuana secular mechanisms of socio-political control. The invasion of Ye'cuana land, late in 1969 (Coppens, 1972), generated a host of political sequels and made further probing into Ye'cuana political institutions a necessary step. From this second stage of research, new and

hitherto unreported political phenomena, which were not in agreement with my first generalizations (Arvelo-Jiménez, 1971) were unraveled. Thus, this essay shows how the same political system behaves under two different social conditions. I will first examine the structure and operation of the Ye'cuana Political System under its own internal dynamics in the pre-invasion period. Its operation in the face of political power relations external to the system, that is, the situation brought about by the land invasion, will be thereafter examined. This invasion, which began in 1969, has and still interferes with different planes of social action. However my analysis concerns only political behavior.

THE YE'CUANA POLITICAL SYSTEM AND ITS OWN INTERNAL DYNAMICS

In Ye'cuana society the village is the structural unit of its political system. For the individual the village embodies all meaningful socio-political relations. It means that the process of village formation, i.e. the growth, disintegration and reconstitution of villages, shapes up Ye'cuana political life and that village history is political history.

Three stages can be observed in the development of a village: incipience, growth and maturity. Each local community eventually passes through a phase of attracting and gaining new members in order to augment its population and thereby assure its continued independence. One of the most useful criteria for ascertaining the degree of autonomy of a village is the size of its population. The population of incipient villages ranges from eight to twenty-seven persons. A village in the process of achieving stability as a politically autonomous community has approximately doubled its original population to about 30 to 40 people. The population of consolidated or politically mature villages ranges from 50 to 70. Villages with populations between 60 and 70 inhabitants are on the threshold of becoming parent villages giving way to a new cycle. The gradual breakup of large villages and the birth of smaller ones continually goes on. Nevertheless, new villages do not exclusively spring from politically mature villages, as will be discussed later on (cf. p. 8-9 and also footnote 4).

Ye'cuana villages are sovereign autonomous political units.

In their structure there is no authority or political power that can cross their own boundaries and exert control over other villages. Sixty people, the standard population of a village with political maturity, is the largest sphere of political control a leader can covet.

The Village as a politically autonomous community.-

The social structure of each village includes several statuses the incumbents of which influence the political life of the community even though their roles are of short duration, or are not defined as primarily political in nature. The only status that is both enduring and primarily political in its functions is that of village headman.

The village headman.- A headman is the recognized leader of a village. Management of political relations at the intra-village level of relations is the shared responsibility of the headman and the senior-male circle. Headmen come to office either by having been the leaders of splitting groups and thus founders of new villages, or because of their unique personalities which combine wisdom in handling people by way of example and persuasion, courage, generosity, high technical proficiency and greater ritual skills than commoners. At the intra-village level, a headman's duties are the prevention of social disruption (meaning open confrontation) and leadership in executing the policies agreed upon at the meetings with the senior-male circle. A headman is the authorized person to establish communication among the different household³⁾ groups and lead them into reaching decisions. At the inter-village level, a headman must zealously keep good relations between his village and other communities of the Ye'cuana nation. Eminently good relations with other villages are achieved by a headman's ability as a host and by virtue of the bonds he creates performing ritual services to members of other villages.

Headman's deputy.- This position is appointed by the headman himself. The deputy does not make opposition to the headman. He is expected to help the headman in any possible way by siding with him, thus providing reinforcement to whatever point of view the headman adopts. Once a decision has been reached in the senior-male circle the headman's deputy is in charge of handling the operational side of the approved policy.

The senior and junior male circles.- The senior-male circle operates as an ad-hoc council. It becomes a political body only upon the headman's initiative or on that of his deputy. Otherwise its members do not meet to discuss politics. The majority of the members of the senior-male circle are household heads. As representative of his household before the local community, a household head has the right to approve or veto decisions that affect the whole village.

The junior-male circle is composed of young men, married or unmarried, who are politically subordinate to the senior-male circle segment at community level, and to the head of their domestic group at household level. Junior men follow the policies approved by their elders.

Leaders of trading parties and hunting trips.- Trading and hunting trips are the most common occasions for mobilizing a large group of village men. On such occasions, Ye'cuana feel the need of a leader who will take care of the group of travellers for as long as the trip lasts. The leader of a trading group occupies a transitory political position (without title). He fulfills the duties of a temporary headman managing the internal and external relations of the trading or hunting group. He comes to office by virtue of his seniority over his companions and holds it for the duration of the trip.

Ritual specialists.- They hold a differentiated status in Ye'cuana society, but it is not inherently a political one. They are leaders not because they handle groups of people but because their roles promote socially approved behavior.

In short, in the management of village life both enduring and transient political roles work for the prevention of overt social disruption. Ye'cuana society has no institutionalized means of dealing with open conflict. Prevention of disruption is a recurrent social mechanism at different levels of inclusiveness in social relationships.

Handling of political issues within the community.-

The affairs discussed in the senior-male circle are mostly those involved with communal labor and hence the mobilization of in-

dividuals from all extended families. It is a headman's duty to raise those issues at the meetings of the senior-male circle. During the latter, each member is pressed to exercise his political rights and thus play a part in shaping decisions which are reached by consensus. On the other hand, discussions of frictions between individuals which belong to different extended families, or between the community and one of its extended families, are not objects of deliberation by the senior-male circle. Discussion and resolution of those issues entail penal and juridical powers which neither the senior-male circle nor the headman have.

Differences of opinions and social frictions between two extended families of a village appear in the political arena when there is a breach of Ye'cuana moral rules, by violations of etiquette and when the principles ruling the allocation and reallocation of individuals and groups of people are not observed. These issues are the typical elements of factional struggle. Despite the lack of formal courts there are redressing mechanisms whose function is to prevent the rise of rife factional conflict and, otherwise, try to prevent the division of the village community.

Modes of Settlement.- Offenses are settled in different ways according to the degree of criminality involved. While slander, unreasonable gossip and troublemaking can generate village splits, minor problems tend to be solved through other mechanisms such as gossip, indirect complaints and temporary isolation.

1. When the difference is between two individuals, no direct complaint is ever made to the alleged wrongdoer. Redressing mechanisms are manipulated by the aggrieved person who relies on the political support of his extended family. The intervention of this group is crucial for the individual because it is his extended family the only supporting unit when facing problems with other members of the community. Furthermore, the interposition of the extended family is of great political importance for both the group and the village. Thus, the intervention of the extended family goes beyond a solidary support for its members: it protects the family's own public image and political status vis-a-vis other pressure groups which are also extended families. For the village, the pressures put in by an extended family attempt at restoring social equilibrium within the community for if the imbalance of forces

remains unchanged, village solidarity undergoes progressive deterioration and eventually a village split takes place.

The forces of the gossip circle are put to work by commenting on the alleged offence to the women of the aggrieved person's household who will then gossip about it. The asocial behavior is scrutinized, its motives hypothesized and censured. As a given complaint goes around two, three or more, rounds in the gossip circle, additional evidence accumulates to bring out the truth. This procedure takes the place of the cross-examination technique used in formal courts. Moreover, in this way the wrongdoer is warned and society's values indirectly reasserted. The offended person may also state his grievances in a monologue at dawn when his fellow-villagers are still in their common sleeping quarters. With this procedure personal confrontation is also avoided, the wrongdoer is warned and the community informed and pressed to give a verdict. A temporary withdrawal from village life as for example when individuals or even nuclear families take unplanned hunting, fishing or gathering trips, also avoids open confrontation and is a means of opening a way to the restoration of social equilibrium.

2. Some disputes pit the community against a particular household group. There are times when members of a household are systematically ignored on important decision-making and are not requested to participate in communal activities. One of the reasons for this partial ostracism is punishment for accumulated minor transgressions incurred by members of the household. Another reason for isolation is recent engrafting into village life. An absorbed household usually goes through several partial isolations before gaining a firm hold in the host village life.

The use of the aforementioned mechanisms is both common and frequent. However, if they fail to restore equilibrium within the community, village split is the only way out. A repeatedly aggrieved extended family slowly detaches itself from village affairs until it definitely breaks up. Or an absorbed extended family which is ill-engrafted may find pressures upon it unbearable and decide to drop membership in the village permanently. The secession of a household group from a village, although an extreme measure, is another mode of settling disputes. Fission due to such internal tensions is characteristically carried out by an extended family

and the probability of its survival as a politically autonomous community depends on its degree of development at the time fission takes place. Those splits occur in mature and in non-mature villages or upon the political crisis which a headman's death brings about⁴).

Inter-village conflict.- Every Ye'cuana village tries zealously to keep its political autonomy to such an extent that its members manipulate whatever social, spatial and religious mechanisms might add political distance from other villages.

Friction with other villages is displaced to supernatural planes through accusations of witchcraft, and ritually acting physical and verbal hostility during festivals. Other than in these occasions physical hostility is never displayed. But when it is done, it reflects inter-village animosities and, sometimes, hints at conflicting principles of organization or antagonistic values in Ye'cuana society.

When people from two different communities meet, they try to ascertain which community is the best. Besides wrestling and verbal contests, other forms of controlled standardized violence during the celebration of festivals are: physical struggle between men and women for the possession of meat; destruction of small gardens surrounding a village by visiting men; spilling of fermented drink (yaraaqui) made by women and the symbol of their role as horticulturists.

Besides standardized violence a rigid etiquette must be observed when people from different villages meet. Non-villagers are considered foreigners. A foreigner is not entitled to political right and he is only allowed the privilege of enjoying the hospitality of a host village. Hospitality is the responsibility of the village headman as representative of his local community. Religious beliefs reinforce political distance by explaining disease, misfortune or death as caused by manipulation of supernatural forces from outside, that is, from other villages. Accordingly, the safest place to live is one's own natal village. Because disease and death come from a mystical power manipulated from outside, it is a moral duty to support consolidation within.

In sum at the village level of relations Ye'cuana emphasize separateness. Although they are conscious their villages are embodied in an interdependent web of social relations comprising the whole social system and that this network has no tangible ends at the village or at the societal levels, they establish arbitrary limits by manipulating socio-political, spatial and religious mechanisms which conceal an underlying, all inclusive and far reaching network of relations. The mechanisms which stress separateness are: a) the political sovereignty of each village by which political rights can only be exercised in one's own natal village; b) the post-marital residence rule which prescribes locally endogamous marriages and forbids locally exogamous ones; c) the emphasis which is given to localized kinsmen which in some cases produces structural amnesia by unreckoning kin ties with relatives settled elsewhere; d) the belief in the ill will of non-villagers and in their alleged ability to manipulate supernatural forces in order to undermine one's health and well-being; e) the spatial and structural arrangements within the round-based communal house which fit with and symbolize the structure of the universe as it is understood and visualized by the Ye'cuana. Because the round house is the characterizing feature of a Ye'cuana village, by permutation, the village is interpreted as a small replica of the universe. A belief which obviously reinforces the model of village autonomy; f) the widely scattered settlement pattern and economically independent nature of each village which also strengthen political distance.

From the preceding description there are some regularities in Ye'cuana political behavior worth remembering in order to better understand the results of the second section: 1) A Ye'cuana most valuable riches are a) a cohesive extended family, the group which in intra-village affairs supports and defends an individual when his behavior has been questioned and made subject of gossip; b) birth membership in a politically mature village. The latter increases the probabilities that one's own extended family will not be wandering in search of fusion with a "foreign" village. 2) Regarding the formation of villages, the core founding group of a new village (which is the splitting group from a parent village), is an extended family. The more advanced the developmental process of a splitting extended family, the greater the probabilities it has to achieve political maturity. 3) Socio-political heteroge-

neity is undesirable because "strangers" by cultural dogma are malicious and unreliable. Hence, the core founding group of a new village, in its process towards consolidation, tries to attract as many close relatives as possible in order to avoid heterogeneity in its social composition.

Our next step is a careful scrutiny of the political phenomena which have taken place after the land invasion. Such analysis will throw into relief how all the mechanisms which reinforce a model of politically independent and socially homogeneous villages, had to be modified or radically changed, thus giving birth to socio-politically heterogeneous villages.

POLITICAL CRISIS UNDER EXTERNAL PRESSURES

Towards the end of 1969 fourteen Ye'cuana villages were located along the Caura, Paragua and Ventuari basins: seven along the Ventuari River, four along the upper Caura and three along the Paragua. About the same time, Ye'cuana land was illegally invaded at the level of the upper Ventuari (see Coppens, 1972 for a detailed account of the invasion). The repercussions of this event on Ye'cuana society have been many, and in varying degrees it has affected the different planes of social life. My focus, however, is concentrated on the changes that took place in the political structure of Ye'cuana society.

The most important changes have been: a) an increase both in number of villages and in the tempo in which they were being founded; b) a proliferation of internal migrations in close correspondence with the emergence of increased rates of mobility; c) socio-political heterogeneity in the composition of new villages due to the appearance of new patterns of village division and of group fusion.

Fourteen months after the land invasion, eleven villages out of fourteen had been affected by emigration and/or immigration and in the process had given way to four new villages plus two more which were to be founded shortly afterwards. The results of the redistribution of people were as follows: two new villages in the Caura River area; three villages in the Paragua but with different socio-political composition, and four new villages in the

Ventuari River area.

The above figures are an index of the accelerated tempo in which new villages were being founded and of the higher rate of mobility. However, they fall short of reflecting the political turmoil and the crises of anxiety which were provoked by the adoption of a way of life that is in opposition to salient socio-political values. Travellers and messengers repeatedly criss-crossed the Ventuari-Caura-Paragua area with the latest news and decisions about the re-location of new sites and/or the splits that were to happen. The village of Wajuna'ña divided into four groups each of which joined a different foreign community and most other villages underwent an average of 3 divisions in the short span of fourteen months.

Furthermore, the post-invasion political life entailed a departure from the pattern of village fission of the Ye'cuana political system when behaving under its own dynamics. Based on the rule that governs the formation and disintegration of groups such as the extended family and the village, the extended family always acts en bloc. However, the post-invasion pattern of division made the fragmentation of the extended family obligatory. The splitting (or emigrating) groups were not factions or whole extended families but rather small numbers of members of the extended family thus violating the aforementioned rule. Moreover, the divided villages were not ready to undergo a natural fission but with one exception and even that village divided along different lines and not according to the structural strains that usually generate a division.

Besides the increased number of villages founded in accelerated tempo and the new patterns of fission, the migrant groups also fused in a different manner to found new villages. In sum, division during the post-invasion period were neither in agreement with my early fission generalizations nor with established fusion patterns. Interpretation of the unexpected political heterogeneity which appeared in the social composition of new villages was difficult because socio-political heterogeneity goes against the salient political values that govern the formation of groups and villages in Ye'cuana society. In this case, heterogeneity was the result of the mixture of small migrant nucleuses

which, coming from different villages, founded new ones.

In trying to find an explanation for the new political phenomena, I examined Ye'cuana ethnohistory reviewing historical documents, and most important, analyzing Ye'cuana oral tradition. I found two previous cases with which I could compare the present post-invasion situation: A) invasion of Ye'cuana land by Sanema or Guaharibo⁵⁾ at the end of last century; B) incursions of the creole Caudillo Tomas Funes into Ye'cuana territory during the first decades of this century. Besides, there was one more occasion in which external pressures had provoked the foundation of politically heterogeneous villages, namely, rubber exploitation in the beginning of this century.

Rubber exploitation hired Indian labor as well as creoles. The Ye'cuana had their share in that exploitation, and several temporary villages were founded in the middle and lower courses of the rivers which flow into the Orinoco. Villages were of mixed composition, since Ye'cuana from different upstream villages came to settle downstream within the rubber exploitation area.

In the villages created downstream during the rubber boom the Ye'cuana were in regular contact with creoles. Several are said to have died of diseases introduced by the creoles; but according to Ye'cuana exegesis the heaviest death toll was due to black magic, the practice of which is reported to have been rife in those politically heterogeneous Ye'cuana settlements. Under the economic incentives of the rubber boom the Ye'cuana lived in larger, politically heterogeneous villages. However, none of those villages survived, and the sorcery that supposedly took a considerable death toll was given to me in 1968 as a reason not to repeat the experiment.

A) The Guaharibo. The Guaharibo, coming from the upper Orinoco and Brazil, raided Ye'cuana villages over a period of 40 to 50 years⁶⁾. In the beginning, according to oral tradition, the Ye'cuana fled to the North and Northeastern section of the Venezuelan Territorio Amazonas leaving behind their villages and their fields. By migrating in small groups the Ye'cuana avoided an open confrontation with the enemy for a long time. They sought to remain invisible to the invaders and, to this purpose, they changed temporarily

ly⁷⁾ some of their habits and their social organization. While some were on guard, the rest of the group slept during the day and cooked, hunted and fished at night. They abandoned the sedentary way of life which is linked to a solidly built village. Instead they travelled, and increasing their mobility tried to erase as much as possible the evidence of their presence in a given site. The organization chosen - small numbers of members of extended families - proved a better adaptation to the nomadic life the Ye'cuana had selected as a defensive mechanism. This strategy also proved effective to avoid unnecessary losses of lives⁸⁾. Also, the Ye'cuana saved some of their territory for themselves. Although these defensive mechanisms did not stop the infiltration of groups of Guaharibo into Ye'cuana land, they made the study of the culture of the invaders possible. The Ye'cuana learned of Guaharibo habits and of their military weakness due to the lack of firearms. They also took notice that the invaders craved for the products of Ye'cuana fields, especially the manioc, and for the industrialized goods which the Ye'cuana obtained through barter with Creoles or Europeans⁹⁾. When all this information became common knowledge, some 30 years after the first raids, Calomera, the headman of a Ye'cuana village on the Ventuari River, proposed an attack on the Guaharibo. He succeeded in getting together a large body of Ye'cuana men. They attacked the Guaharibo by surprise and caused decimation in a large contingent of the invaders. The confrontation made clear which group was militarily stronger and opened the way to negotiations. The last twenty years have witnessed a gradual and ever-increasing economic partnership between the two groups. Today, although the Ye'cuana do not control either the political nor the social or religious life of the Guaharibo, the latter¹⁰⁾ have become dependent on the Ye'cuana to obtain industrialized goods. It is the Ye'cuana who, through their fine crafts such as canoes, paddles, woodwork, basketry, etc., obtain industrialized goods and then play the middlemen between the creoles, providers of such goods, and the Guaharibo. The latter get paid with desired industrialized items when working for the Ye'cuana. There is a real division of labor between the two groups inhabiting the same territory. While trekking on the vast territory of Amazon and Bolivar States, the Guaharibo gathers natural products (resins, fibres, etc.). In addition, they help in the clearing and burning of Ye'cuana fields and in the clearing of trails and Ye'cuana villages. These tasks in spite of being time consuming and involving hard physical work, do not demand

a continued and exclusive dedication. Part of the products the Guaharibo obtains from hunting, fishing and gathering he exchanges for those of Ye'cuana labor as horticulturists or fine artisans. At all times the Guaharibo is free to decide what course of action to take, whether to help the Ye'cuana urged by his need of industrialized items or to leave on trek to the inland forests of the territory.

B) The incursions of Tomas Funes. Funes' incursions into Ye'cuana land sometimes coincided with Guaharibo invasions. The invader, a rubber merchant, became a caudillo by rebelling against the Territorio Amazonas local authorities in 1913. Funes reasons for seizing political power were absolutely personal: he wanted the abolition of the monopoly that was in the hands of the local politicians and the capture of Indians who could work in his rubber exploitation business. Funes assassinated the politicians and justified such violence by accusing his victims of political disloyalty towards the central power. For the second part of his plans, Funes selected the Ye'cuana who had a high reputation as hard-working people.

Funes met with temporary success but in 1923, as a result of a creole revolt, he fell in the hands of his political enemies and was assassinated.

During Funes incursions the Ye'cuana intensified their internal migrations and divided their villages once more into small groups. Some Ye'cuana were subdued by the invaders and chose to serve as guides into the hinterland of Ye'cuana territory. Others committed suicide before being deprived of their freedom. But the largest number of the population fled and sought refuge in the least accessible areas of the Territorio Amazonas and of the Venezuelan guayana, repeating the style of life they had led at the time of the Guaharibo raids. The strategy was once more relatively successful allowing a large part of the population to remain invisible and hence avoiding enslavement by the invader.

DISCUSSION

In order to explain the political phenomena which appeared after the land invasion of late 1969, two alternatives were considered: a) Either my first generalizations have a lesser predic-

table value than the one I had assigned them, or b) they are only applicable when Ye'cuana political system behaves under its own internal dynamics. In the light of this latter possibility, the post-invasion political changes could be interpreted as defensive mechanisms to come into being only under external aggression.

Through a comparison of three similar situations which involved land invasion and of one more, the rubber boom, which provoked the formation of politically heterogeneous villages, the structural fluctuations undergone by the Ye'cuana political system were isolated. The system had moved from jurally sanctioned situations to drastic departures from them, and back to situations which conform to the ideals. In each of the cases examined, Ye'cuana social groupings, in spite of the realignments which had taken place during the invasion crises, slowly reverted to the old guiding political principles. The reversion of the system to jurally sanctioned patterns was the key factor in understanding the patterns of political behavior both under stability and crisis.

When the political system behaves according to its own internal dynamics, its structural units are independent villages; each village is internally divided into extended families whose members are close kin; in the political arena those extended families become pressure groups or factions that run the political life of the community; the extended family is both the splitting group when secession is necessary and the core founding group of a new village; the core founding group of a village in its process of growth attracts preferentially close relatives in order to convert that incipient community into a genuine Ye'cuana village devoid of social heterogeneity.

On the other hand, in the face of external aggression Ye'cuana political system adopts temporary political principles which represent drastic departure from jurally sanctioned patterns of political behavior: internal migrations proliferate; villages go through an accelerated process of division; the number of villages increases and their size decreases; village fission fragments the atom of the political system, the extended family; new villages are of mixed social composition made up of small nucleuses of people coming from different villages which fuse and produce political heterogeneity; marriage which regulates recruitment into

socio-political groups (such as the extended family and the village) is contracted under new terms. The rule of allocation and reallocation of people, the highest controversial issue in socio-political relations, is generally ignored and the political balance of Ye'cuana social groupings is lost. However, those marriages either reinforce or create kin ties among groups of kinsmen which had not been in close contact in pre-invasion situations. Those newly created and/or reinforced social bonds integrate the politically independent villages of the stable system in a socially interdependent whole. And this social bondage in turn reinforces "Ye'cuana-ness".

Based on the preceding evidence, I interpret the political phenomena which emerged after the invasion of late 1969 as part of a political crisis, but not one heading toward disintegration and anomie in Ye'cuana society. The latter has its own political mechanisms and institutions to cope not only with internal problems, as provoked by its own internal dynamics, but also with crisis generated from outside.

It is important to ponder on how efficient the defensive mechanisms of the past will act under today's aggression.

Funes was not interested in Ye'cuana territory per se but in the people. Hence, for avoiding being captured and enslaved, the Ye'cuana defensive mechanisms proved efficient. The Guaharibo raiders were primarily interested in obtaining industrialized goods and the products of Ye'cuana gardens. If it is true that Guaharibo infiltrations provoked, in addition, a geographical relocation of Ye'cuana villages and a partial loss of Ye'cuana territory, by a planned population dispersal hostilities were never escalated to open warfare with irreconcilable sequels. Perhaps a massive Guaharibo invasion would have made the dispersal technique ineffectual. But the Guaharibo invasion carried out as it was, made possible the success of Ye'cuana defensive mechanisms.

The land invasion of late 1969, contrary to earlier ones, is supported by modern technology and aims to take over Ye'cuana territory on permanent basis.

The southern Venezuelan States, Bolivar and Territorio

Amazonas (in which the bulk of the Indian population lives) had been customarily neglected from all points of view. One good example of the disconnection, physical and otherwise, between the southern territories and the rest of the country, is Funes rebellion as late as 1913 (cf. p. 16). Though in more recent times political control had been tightened up, it only reached the periphery of that vast territory, the towns located on the fringes of the jungle area proper. The Administration which came into power in 1969 decided to put an end to the southern States' marginal status through its programme 'Conquest of the South' the administration works to physically connect the South with the rest of the nation, it sponsors studies of natural resources (fibres, resins, minerals, timber etc.,) and is promoting creole colonization of the area. Prior to that officially sponsored programme, a few pioneers had already invaded the lands of the Piaroa and Yabarana Indians. However, after 1969, the economic potentialities of the South heightened and consequently the flux of private entrepreneurs increased.

Very few Ye'cuana are bilingual and those who understand the economic and political interests behind the land invasion are even fewer. In fact, those Ye'cuana who have some knowledge about the creole standpoint favor the amalgamation of Ye'cuana villages. However, the bulk of the population, the Ye'cuana who are monolingual and unacquainted with official programmes and private interests in the South, is the one who put the traditional defensive mechanisms to work.

The 'Conquest of the South' will proceed: the roads and airports which are under construction will gradually made physically accessible today's remote regions. The cartographic and edaphic studies as well as those in economic geographic will reveal not only the most promising economic areas but a detailed distribution of Indian settlements. The Ye'cuana have no place to retreat, to flee and resettle. This time they have to carry on a legal fight for their ancestral land; for that struggle they need legitimate tribal leaders empowered to speak on behalf of the Ye'cuana people as a whole.

Before this modern type of invasion, the Ye'cuana are greatly handicapped by the lack of a tribal-wide political cohesiveness.

Their traditional political institutions emphasize separateness and that determination to limit the sphere of political authority to the village level, interferes with the birth of nation-wide legitimate leadership. Because of their knowledge of Spanish some village leaders have been sent to Caracas as emissaries, others have recently been able to achieve some influence over a limited number of villages. This latter type of leaders may well represent the beginnings of a tribal-wide political cohesiveness. If this assumption is correct, the Ye'cuana may achieve not a physical concentration of villages in a given area, but the development of a tribal-wide political cohesiveness which if accomplished will facilitate the appearance of legitimate tribal leaders¹¹). The latter will be empowered to fight before the Venezuelan authorities for Ye'cuana territorial rights.

NOTES

- 1) Drs. M. Durbin and H. Seijas in an exhaustive review of the literature for linguistic purposes, have found 53 different names by which the Ye'cuana or De'cuana had been referred to in the literature (personal communication).
- 2) I use the terms village, community and local community interchangeably.
- 3) The terms household and extended family are roughly equivalent.
- 4) Upon a headman's death a severe political crisis ensues: it may precipitate the disintegration of a village. The general tendency is to split into extended family groups but in more acute cases the splitting units are nuclear families.
- 5) The Guaharibo are also known as Shirishana, Xiriana, Shirana, Waica Yanomami and Yanomamö.
- 6) Since Schomburgk's trip (1841) we have news about strained relations between the Yanomami and Ye'cuana: however the first written source which documents Guaharibo raids on Ye'cuana territory is Rice, 1908 (cited by Spruce).
- 7) The meaning of temporary is relative because some two to three decades passed by before the Ye'cuana could revert to their own traditional political institutions and way of life.
- 8) The invaders were by far numerically stronger than the Ye'cuana.
- 9) During the Conquest and Colonial times, the Ye'cuana obtained industrialized goods from the Dutch, the Portuguese and the Spaniards.
- b) The Yanomami population have been estimated to probably approach 6,000 to 10,000 (Chagnon, 1968; Lizot, 1970). Out of this, those who strictly speaking live within Ye'cuana territory cannot be more than 1 % of the total population. My statements concern only the Guaharibo people within Ye'cuana territory.
- 11) The anthropologists who are interested to see the problem solved would enthusiastically welcome the rise of tribal leaders among the Ye'cuana. This position springs from our conviction that it is the Ye'cuana who must become the principal agents of their own liberation. Our interventions in the Ye'cuana problem have been unfavorably judged by politicians and entrepreneurs. Some of them had argued that we want the Indians to remain isolated because otherwise we would not have what to study or work with. Others, suggested that since the Indians cannot think for themselves, we are using them to safeguard our own interests!

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