
**Responsive research and community involvement
among the Brazilian Yanomami**
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Responsive research and community involvement among the Brazilian Yanomami

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This presentation chronicles the positive outcomes that have grown from initial efforts to document Yanomae, an underdescribed language of the Brazilian Amazon. It illustrates how a small pilot literacy project that was guided by a responsive and flexible research agenda expanded into unanticipated but far-reaching and productive directions. It also shows how linguistic research that is motivated by the specific needs of the host community can foster a cultural dialogue that informs both indigenous and Western perspectives. In this case, close collaboration among researchers, members of the indigenous community, and personnel of a supportive non-governmental organization (the Pro-Yanomami Commission-CCPY) provided the foundation for an ongoing process, through intercultural education, of increased empowerment of the Brazilian Yanomami as a people vis-à-vis the national society.

1. INTRODUCTION

An estimated total population of 33,000 Yanomami live in widely scattered villages in a remote region of the Amazon rainforest along both sides of the border of Brazil and Venezuela. In a society still based on oral traditions, most are monolingual speakers of their village dialect. Subsistence is based on a traditional hunter-gatherer and shifting cultivation lifestyle. Yanomae (also known as Yanomam) is one of four subgroups in the Yanomami language family, which also includes Yanomami, Sanuma (or Sanema), and Yanam (or Ninam). Henri Ramirez (1994) classifies Yanomae and Yanomamə as eastern and western “super dialects” of a single linguistic subgroup. Speakers of Yanomae represent 21% of the total population and are the largest linguistic subgroup on the Brazilian side of the border. Yanomami is spoken by most Yanomami living in Venezuela and its speakers comprise 59% of the total population. Speakers of the other two linguistic subgroups, Sanuma (or Sanema) and Yanam (or Ninam), represent only 17% and 3% of the total Yanomami population, respectively (Albert et al. in press, 2007: 11).

Although the number of Yanomami – young men, especially – who speak Portuguese or Spanish has increased due to greater contact with outsiders, most Yanomami speak only their native indigenous languages. Mutual intelligibility and intermarriage among speakers of neighboring languages and dialects are not uncommon; nevertheless, some distant groups find each other’s linguistic variants almost incomprehensible. My work on the Yanomae language began with the need to solve a practical problem: how to help Portuguese-speaking medical teams provide adequate care in monolingual Yanomami communities. Before continuing the linguistic side of the story, I must digress briefly to summarize

some events in the recent history of the Yanomami in Brazil and the founding of the Pro-Yanomami Commission-CCPY, the NGO with which I have worked closely over the years.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Until the 1960s contact between the Brazilian Yanomami and the outside world was sporadic and limited to individuals or small groups, such as miners, government personnel, and missionaries. During the decade of the 1970s, however, two events brought the outside world into Yanomami territory in a major way and with devastating effects. One was the beginning of construction of the Northern Perimeter Highway (BR-210) that cut through the southeastern part of their territory, and in the first year brought death, mainly from respiratory diseases contracted from construction workers, to 22% of the Yanomami living near the construction areas (Ação pela Cidadania 1990: 2). Even after the highway construction was abandoned in 1976, the effects of contact continued to devastate the Yanomami in these peripheral areas. In 1977–78, a measles epidemic killed half the population of four communities in the Upper Catrimani region.

The other event was the publication of the results of an areal survey, carried out by the RADAM (Radar Amazonia) BRASIL project that produced satellite photographs of the Amazon Basin, indicating the location of possible mineral deposits. This, of course, brought immediate attention to the development potential of the region, and illegal invasions of Yanomami territory by gold prospectors began in earnest in 1976 and culminated in the gold rush of 1987.

Between 1968 and 1978, anthropologists and missionaries petitioned the Brazilian government eleven times for a protected land area for the Yanomami, but to no avail (Ação pela Cidadania 1990: 4). Finally in 1978, outraged by the ever-worsening situation of the Yanomami people, a group of concerned citizens in Brazil (including anthropologists, ecologists, lawyers, clerics, and pro-Indian activists) established an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization, which they called the Commission for the Creation of the Yanomami Park (CCPY). The early fieldwork of three anthropologists in particular – Alcida Ramos, Ken Taylor, and Bruce Albert – provided the justification for the Yanomami Indian Park proposal in 1978 and led the advocacy work of the CCPY. The original goal of this organization was to promote the physical and cultural survival of the Brazilian Yanomami by providing medical care and by securing the establishment of a protected indigenous territory.

The greatest threat to the Yanomami's land rights and, in fact, to their very survival is the recurrent invasions into their territory by outsiders, especially wildcat gold prospectors and, increasingly, also ranchers and colonists. In 1987 at the height of a gold rush of genocidal proportions, the Brazilian government forbade researchers, medical teams, and missionaries to continue working among the Yanomami leaving the villagers (without medical care or outside help of any kind) at the mercy of tens of thousands of gold miners. Three years later, as a result of the international outcry over this grave situation, the Brazilian

government finally intervened to expel the miners, and an emergency health plan for the Yanomami was put in place in January, 1990. When support groups were finally allowed to return to Yanomami territory, they were shocked by the environmental degradation and by the appalling health situation in most communities. In 1992, after the long and intense international campaign on behalf of the Yanomami that involved the collaboration of numerous human rights advocacy groups and environmental conservation organizations in the U.S. and Europe and despite strong objections from the military and from mining interests, Brazilian President Fernando Collor signed the decree legally creating the Yanomami Indigenous Reserve, in 192,000 km² of tropical forests. In 1995, the Commission for the Creation of the Yanomami Park was re-named the Pro-Yanomami Commission-CCPY, retaining its original acronym.

3. LINKING RESEARCH WITH COMMUNITY NEEDS

Within this historical context, my linguistic research can be understood as a response to specific issues facing the Yanomami communities. In 1990 CCPY established its first permanent health post at Demini, and medical personnel soon realized the necessity of learning at least some basic Yanomami phrases in order to diagnose and properly treat their patients. Communication had always been a major problem for medical teams providing the Yanomami with adequate care because few villagers speak Portuguese and even fewer outsiders speak Yanomami languages. This led to my collaborative field research with the French anthropologist Bruce Albert to produce a medical phrase book that eventually grew into a bilingual (Yanomae-Portuguese) health manual. Our fieldwork was set in the village of Watoriki, the home of Yanomami leader Davi Kopenawa. Located nearby was the health post that CCPY had installed earlier at Davi's request. Over a period of several years Dr. Albert and I elicited data and discussed illnesses and treatments (from the perspectives of both Western medicine and traditional herbal and shamanistic practices) with villagers and with doctors and health workers. Numerous, ever-expanding drafts were discussed and revised until finally *Saúde Yanomami: Um manual etnolingüístico* was published in 1997 by the Goeldi Museum in Belém. Free copies were distributed to health posts and personnel working throughout the Yanomami Indigenous Reserve.

Our discussions with villagers on important health issues combined with the practical process of transcribing ideas and phrases from their oral language into written form and later revising the information with them captured the interest of many in the community. It is not a coincidence that in 1995 in the same village of Watoriki, a pilot project to teach literacy and basic math skills in the local Yanomae language was initiated by the CCPY. Davi Kopenawa was a driving force behind both the health and the education projects. As a logical next step to complement its ongoing health care and advocacy work, the CCPY turned to indigenous education. This set the stage for a process that has brought remote rainforest dwellers into the 21st century, technologically and politically, while supporting the maintenance of their traditional language, culture, and lifestyle.

From the beginning, education was closely linked to the village health care program as reflected in the title of its first (1997) publication, *Palavras escritas para nos curar* ('Written words to heal us'). This booklet combined five short, literacy primers, each of which dealt with a common health concern of the community. The booklet was illustrated by interpretive drawings by members of the community, and the text was the product of a group collaboration under the supervision of Dr. Albert. Specific content of the primers was based on oral narratives from the village headman and from interviews with medical personnel. Passages from these narratives were discussed, summarized, written, and revised by the indigenous members of the working group in the village. This collaborative methodology set the standard for future health and education programs of the Pro-Yanomami Commission up to the present.

4. YANOMAMI INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

As word of the pilot literacy project spread, Yanomami in other areas requested that schools be set up in their villages, too. Plans to prepare some of the newly literate Yanomami to become indigenous health workers and village teachers soon followed. These advanced training programs, which include instruction in Portuguese language, could ultimately alleviate several problems: the frequent absence of medical staff in the health posts, the challenge of finding Brazilian teachers willing and able to learn the Yanomami languages well enough to teach literacy and math skills in the local languages, and the difficulty of hiring individuals who are comfortable working within indigenous cultures and who can adapt to the isolation and rigors of living in remote rainforest villages. In 2005, ten years after the pilot literacy project in the community of Watoriki, the Yanomami Intercultural Education Program was supervising 30 indigenous teachers-in-training serving 490 students in 24 schools in 7 regions of the Yanomami Indigenous Reserve (Pro-Yanomami Commission/Programa de Educação Intercultural 2005: 6).

A distinctive feature of the education program is the intercultural and interdisciplinary nature of its curriculum. While literacy in the native languages is an important goal, the inclusion of traditional indigenous knowledge is just as important as the introduction to Western cultural concepts. Native literacy is taught using culturally specific texts that integrate knowledge about health, environment, ethno-geography, and ethno-history. These areas are highly relevant to the program objective of providing the Yanomami with knowledge that will strengthen their ability to think critically about the new reality that contact with Brazilian society brings to their lives. This interdisciplinary approach to native literacy is intended not only to promote and value the indigenous culture and identity, but also to promote the use of the native languages throughout the traditional school curriculum. This is clearly stated in the objectives of the program and illustrated in the texts and newsletters produced by the indigenous teachers and students. Contrary to many bilingual education programs, the

Yanomami languages are not mere stepping stones to the national language but are given priority throughout the educational process.

Another important aspect of the education program is the fact that the students themselves are directly involved in the production of the educational materials. Originally, their contributions were limited to illustrations and revisions of texts, but now students and teachers (who themselves are former students) play an integral part in developing the curriculum. Native teachers in the villages prepare their own exercises and teaching materials to supplement collaboratively produced primers. Intensive teacher-training and curriculum development workshops are regularly held for the Yanomami teachers, and supportive, supervisory site-visits from pedagogical advisors are major components of the program.

5. TRAINING TEACHERS AND WIDENING HORIZONS

The first inter-regional course for Yanomami teacher training was held in 2001 at the Catholic mission in Catrimani. This course brought together an unprecedented 56 Yanomami teachers from seven regions in Roraima and Amazonas states and was co-sponsored by the Pro-Yanomami Commission, SECOYA (an NGO devoted to service and cooperation with the Yanomami people of the regions of Ajuricaba and Marauiá), and the Catholic Diocese of Roraima. The theme of the course was Yanomami Territory, and it encompassed study of geography, indigenous rights, history, languages, and pedagogy. When asked what they would like to learn about in the next course, the Yanomami teacher-trainees chose money and time – two unavoidable priorities in Western cultures. The Yanomami wanted to learn how to deal with large numbers so that they can understand the monetary system, monetary transactions, salaries, budgets, private ownership, banking, writing checks, credit cards, and the value of merchandise. Regarding western conceptions of time, the teachers wanted to learn how a calendar works so that they can anticipate the day a flight is expected, when a course will be taught, when meetings and trips will be planned, and they need to understand how to tell time so that they can schedule taking medicines more accurately (Pro-Yanomami Commission/Programa de Educação Intercultural, 2001: 2–3). These questions reflect wider concerns of the Yanomami to comprehend and to be able to manage increased interactions with the outside world, and they point to the importance for the trainees of also learning Portuguese.

The broader objective of the Pro-Yanomami Commission's courses is to prepare the teachers sufficiently in a variety of appropriate subject areas so that the State Boards of Education will, by the year 2010, officially recognize the 24 Yanomami schools and their indigenous curriculum and integrate them into the national educational system. This regulatory process was set into motion with the official publication of a federal decree in May, 2007. Eventually, Yanomami teachers who have successfully completed all the course work will be eligible for state employment (with salary and benefits) as certified indigenous teachers.

The teacher and health technician training programs that grew out of the literacy education initiative contributed significantly to another longtime objective of the CCPY: to prepare literate, bilingual Yanomami to deal directly with the government officials, gold prospectors, ranchers, colonists and other outsiders who impact their survival and their future. Over the past decade Yanomami education has expanded far beyond the parameters of its initial stage as indigenous literacy instruction. By 2001, 24 Yanomami had completed training as microscope technicians and were certified by the Brazilian National Health Foundation (FUNASA) to diagnose specific types of malaria in their villages (Pro-Yanomami Commission-CCPY 2001: 1). In addition, an environmental program was established to train villagers in projects relating to agroforestry, recuperation of degraded forests, and beekeeping. Recently, a program in capacity building was developed by the CCPY to promote and reinforce the autonomy of the Yanomami people by supporting the development and participation of new as well as older, traditional leaders as indigenous representatives to a wide range of political and interethnic forums at regional, national, and international levels.

Many of the Yanomami teachers, health technicians, and forestry agents have become motivated to develop their skills to represent their people vis-à-vis the wider national context. With improved bilingual literacy skills, they are able to communicate their ideas more effectively to outsiders and share these experiences with their home communities. Village schools have become forums for both intra- and inter-community discussions, especially with respect to health care, environmental concerns, and land and indigenous rights. A pan-Yanomami consciousness has also developed as members of distant villages and even former enemies are brought together under special circumstances with specific goals, and the result is the creation of new bonds and social networks that in the past might have been impossible.

6. HUTUKARA AND BEYOND

A significant outgrowth of this new consciousness is the Hutukara Yanomami Association (HAY). It was created during an assembly of Yanomami representatives from 11 regions in November, 2004, and registered as an NGO with the Brazilian government in March, 2005. Its second general assembly, held in October 2006 in the city of Boa Vista, brought together an even larger group: 70 Yanomami representatives from 34 regions within the Yanomami Indigenous Reserve. At the end of November, 2007, the latest meeting of the Hutukara Yanomami Association is scheduled to take place in the region of Ajarani, where the ongoing occupation of land there by ranchers resulted in a death threat to Davi Kopenawa, President of HAY and outspoken defender of Yanomami rights, despite a 2004 ruling by Brazilian courts declaring the ranchers' presence illegal.

These regional assemblies of the Hutukara Yanomami Association (HAY) provide an opportunity for representatives from throughout the Yanomami Indigenous Reserve to meet and discuss issues that affect them individually and collectively, such as land rights and illegal incursions into their land by ranchers

and gold miners, problems with inadequate and inconsistent medical care, and government support of their schools. They prepare statements written in Yanomami languages and translated into Portuguese to document the specific concerns of the participants. These statements are sent to the appropriate state and federal agencies and also disseminated via email to their supporters.

Such written communications by this assembly of leaders from geographically distant, and in some cases linguistically disparate, Yanomami communities are evidence of the positive impact of village schools with an interdisciplinary education curriculum. In less than a generation the Brazilian Yanomami have moved from being victims of a potentially genocidal gold rush to inhabitants of informed communities with teachers, health workers, and representatives who are demanding their rights using the technological and linguistic tools of the 21st century. Their problems and priorities have not changed much since a potentially genocidal gold rush on their lands in 1987-1990 resulted in the deaths of an estimated 15% of their population. What has changed over the past two decades is the involvement of Yanomami communities and the roles of new leaders in voicing their needs and asserting their rights in regional, national, and international contexts. Education has been an important catalyst in facilitating this transformation.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

My experience as a linguist associated with the Pro-Yanomami Commission-CCPY has allowed me to approach language documentation from the perspective of a vibrant culture with a large community of engaged native speakers. The promotion of a written form of their languages provided a vehicle for greater cooperation among Yanomami communities, and it has stimulated interest in a wide-range of topics as indigenous literacy brought demands for greater indigenous participation, especially in dealing with health and land rights issues. I suggest that the experience of intercultural education among the Brazilian Yanomami demonstrates a powerful link between language description (or documentation) and the needs of native speakers. By involving the community from the outset in the linguistic (and/or anthropological) research process and responding directly to their concerns and evolving interests, far-reaching and productive positive outcomes are possible. What began for me as a list of useful phrases for medical personnel evolved into a multifaceted program of indigenous literacy education and training, which set the foundation for the Hutukara Yanomami Association. This fledgling organization has the potential to fulfill the goal of those who have worked with the Pro-Yanomami Commission-CCPY since it was created almost three decades ago: that a truly autonomous and representative organization of Yanomami would one day assume responsibility for the protection of their own indigenous rights and ensure the survival of their communities within the so-called modern world.

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