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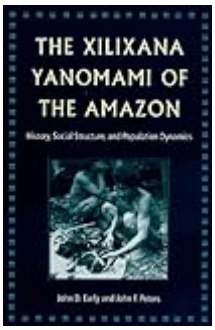

John D. Early, John F. Peters. *The Xilixana Yanomami of the Amazon: History, Social Structure, and Population Dynamics.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xii + 323 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1762-4.

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New Data, Old Debates: Rereading Yanomami Demography, Contact History and Indigenous Politics in Brazil

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Early and Peters, like all anthropological writers on the Yanomami since Chagnon, write in a charged theoretical and political context, made more charged still by the rumbling controversies provoked by the journalist Patrick Tierney's book on the history of research among the Yanomami, Darkness in El Dorado, with its depressing apparatus of AAA investigative committees, press coverage, and self-serving public statements by the participants. So let it be said immediately that Early and Peters' book is an important contribution to the literature, and that the data at its heart, an extraordinarily detailed micro-reconstruction of the demographic history of the Xilixana Yanomami before, during and after direct physical contact with Brazilian society, is of a richness and historical interest that goes well beyond the relatively small population that forms its subject matter. The travails of individual Xilixana villages before and after contact reflect a central experience of indigenous peoples in South America over the last five centuries, but one which has never been documented in as much demographic detail as Early and Peters achieve in this volume. In so doing, they focus a cool empirical light on a number of polemical issues, of which the best known are infanticide, Yanomami "warfare" and levels of violence. The book's faults and deficiencies, which lie more in the realm of the context in which the data is set and interpreted, should not be allowed to offset this central achievement. This is a fascinating and important, if occasionally forbidding, piece of work.

More than most books on the Yanomami–and that is saying something–it is difficult to assess without knowing a little of the authors' background. John Peters lived as a missionary among the Xilixana continuously from 1958 to 1967, spent a further extended period of fieldwork with them in the early 1970s as an anthropologist, and revisited them regularly until very recently. Although Early's experience with the Xilixana is less extensive, it is still considerable, dating from the early 1980s. Between them, especially in Peters, they have dedicated

large portions of their lives to the Xilixana, and the richness of the data reflects both Peters' privileged position among the Xilixana and a time-depth which allows genealogies to be reconstructed with a fair degree of reliability back to 1930, a generation before physical contact with non-indigenous outsiders began, at least in this historical phase of their existence.

The Xilixana are a sub-group of the Yanomami living in the western part of the Brazilian state of Roraima, in dense tropical forests around the Mucajai river. Part of a wider population of Yanomami groups currently probably numbering around 12,000, divided roughly 60-40 between Venezuela and Brazil, specialists class them as part of the Ninam Yanomami language group, one of three Ninam dialect groups, bordered by the Xiliana to the north and the southern Ninam to the south. In 1930 they lived in three villages and numbered 96; in 1996 they lived in six villages and numbered 361. The bulk of the book, around two-thirds by volume, reconstructs the population history of all Xilixana villages between 1930 and 1996, a period which the authors divide into four historical periods, "precontact" (1930-1957), "contact" (1957-1960), "linkage" (not a helpful term, it seems to me: intermittent contact is what the authors mean, and it lasts from 1960 to 1981), and "Brazilian" (again, an unhelpful term, since the authors mean intensive contact, and it lasts from 1981 to 1996). The demographic history of each village is reconstructed in enormous detail–the book has dozens of tables–and the mass of empirical material is bracketed by methodological chapters which are models of their kind, lucidly explaining complex technical issues and allowing even demographic novices like myself to make a reasonable stab at charting a course through the sea of statistics. They are open about the possible limitations and omissions of the data, and scrupulous in drawing the reader's attention to methodological problems.

No summary can hope to do justice to the volume of material presented. The overall picture is of a population which gradually increased during the "precontact" period, held almost steady during the brief "contact" period, increased considerably in the "linkage" period, and fluctuated, but still moved upwards overall, during the "Brazilian" period. This general summary obscures the variety of experiences by village; some grew until fissioning at between 70 and 100 for cultural reasons, others, shattered by deaths from infectious disease contemporaneous with contact, ceased to exist as the survivors scattered. Compared to most other Yanomami groups in terms of mortality associated with contact, the Xilixana were rather fortunate, thanks to a combination of luck–distance from roads and major centres of gold mining–and the presence of medically skilled missionaries during the critical years.

Some details, especially the mortality data, are of great interest to longstanding debates about the Yanomami. Chagnon, reflecting his increasing isolation among his peers, will find little support for his views here. In the sixty-six years covered by the study, only five raids took place, resulting in less than ten deaths. A fascinating discussion of infanticide (pp. 205-12 and 218-222) shows that it accounted for just over 50 percent of infant deaths over the period. Preferential female infanticide, long suggested as an explanation for skewed male/female sex ratios among the Yanomami, is quantified at around 5 percent of all deaths, insufficient by itself to explain unbalanced sex ratios. A general point, here and elsewhere, is the emphasis on the importance of fission, fusion and migration, as well as births and deaths, in reconstructing village population dynamics. One side-effect of Early and Peters' discussions is to cast considerable doubt on the population data of many of their predecessors who worked at the village level without properly incorporating these factors in historical reconstructions. Ironically, the consequence is to limit the extent to which they can make comparisons with other Yanomami groups, since the quality of most other population data gathered by anthropologists suffers so much by comparison.

Nevertheless, there are important flaws in the book, and they immediately manifest themselves whenever the authors move away from their home ground on the Mucajai. Perplexingly, the authors cast their data as an extended test of Darcy Ribeiro's model of ethnic contact and its impacts on indigenous society in Brazil, here cited in its first version in English in 1967 but first published in Portuguese as *Os Indios e a Civilizaao* even earlier, in 1966. This proposed a typology of contact fronts and a sequence of contact stages, ending either in extinction or assimilation. This is a model which, for obvious reasons–most Brazilian Indian groups, despite their vicissitudes, still being very much with us, and the Brazilian Indian population sharply increasing–has been discarded as a explanatory tool for at least a decade. It is thus more than a little irritating to have the concluding summary of each chapter devoted to a reconstruction of a Xilixana village history solemnly enumerate how it differed from what the Ribeiro model would have led us to expect. Even more perplexingly, the authors then produce their own theoretical model of contact dynamics, hardly illuminating in proposing stages (initial, intermittent, permanent integration) and then rendering the exercise meaningless

by asserting "there is no necessity that all contact situations pass through all these stages, or that the process be linear skipping of stages and reversals can take place" (p. 277). Leaving aside the issue of what a non-linear contact process would look like according to this model (permanent back to initial?), this clearly makes it useless as an analytical tool.

The concluding chapters of the book reinforce the impression that the authors have focussed so tightly on the Mucajai they have let developments elsewhere, inside and outside academia, pass them by. My heart sank on reading the title of the final section of the book "The Yanomami in the Planetary Web" and not without reason. As if anyone who had progressed thus far in the book was likely to know nothing of its context, we are treated to an undergraduate-level trot through Brazilian history since 1500, using all the source-books undergraduate students are fed (Skidmore, Scheper-Hughes, Wagley, Hemming), with the Rip van Winkle feeling reinforced on p. 244 by the reproduction of a table with data on income equality in Brazil running from 1960 to 1970. For a book published in the year 2000, when income data up to and including the 2000 census is freely available on official websites, this is extraordinary slackness.

But it gets worse. The interpretation of developments in the 1990s in Roraima demonstrates the incongruous convergence between conspiracy theorists of extreme left and extreme right, the latter best represented in Brazil by military strategists who regard the full demarcation of a Yanomami reserve as the prelude to the setting up of an independent Indian republic, a diabolical plan concocted by international (for which read American) mining companies. To those who suspect I'm joking, see the collection of articles in Portuguese, many of them from officers of the Brazilian equivalent of West Point, the Escola Militar da Guerra, to be found at www.brasil.iwarp.com/amazonia.html. The very same international mining companies, presumably, as Peters and Early speculate could have been behind the wildcat miner invasions of Yanomami territory so that they could spread infectious disease, degrade the environment, and clear the way for the multinationals (p. 297). One hardly knows whether to laugh or cry at such ridiculousness. But it points to a number of serious points.

The first is that there seems to be a growing generational gulf in Amazonian anthropology between many (but not all) of those whose formative field experiences were in the 1970s or earlier, and those who have come after. The 1970s generation was marked by the peculiar horrors of what was happening in Amazonia during that period, especially to indigenous peoples, and many of its members were forever after predisposed to theories which ascribed full explanatory power for everything affecting indigenous peoples to the expansion of capitalism, pace Eric Wolf, and reserved a special place in their demonology for multinational companies. While this was useful and innovative a generation ago, this archaic worldview is now an active impediment to the ever more urgent task of understanding the Amazon's modern history and the place in it of groups like the Yanomami. It also blinds Peters and Early to the importance of developments in the recent past to the Yanomami's demographic future, the central concern of their book.

To complete, or at least move on to the next stage of the narrative which Early and Peters take to the mid-1990s, the Yanomami now have a demarcated, fully legalized reserve of fully 9.6 million hectares, all of which had been fully ratified by late 1993. Responsibility for health care, as Early and Peters note in their conclusion, was stripped from the governmental Indian agency FUNAI and handed over to an NGO, Urihi, directly funded by the federal ministry of health. Urihi is now the largest private sector employer in Roraima. On the Brazilian side of the border, in what must seem a miraculous development to the Yanomami, malaria has, at least for the time being, been eradicated. The Yanomami, along with other indigenous groups in Roraima, enjoy a considerably higher level of medical care and access to health facilities than most non-indigenous rural Roraimans. There are no gold mines in Brazilian Yanomami territory, and given the level of media interest in the Yanomami it is inconceivable that invasions of the scale which happened in the past could take place in the future. In other words, although one would never imagine it from this book, the story of the last decade is an inspiring one of cultural renaissance, political victories, successful external alliances and now, there is every prospect, of rapid population growth.

One would never guess this from the author's analysis of events in the 1990s, however. The extended discussion of the creaton of the Yanomami reserve (pp. 289-295) does not even mention the final legal ratification and registration of the Yanomami reserve in 1993 and argues that the superimposition of the Yanomami reserve with various kinds of conservation unit effectively reduces the Yanomami to 25 per cent of their traditional territory, saying, for example, the national forests contained within the reserve are "lands lost to the Yanomami" (p. 294). This is quite wrong. A registered indigenous re-

serve exists through presidential decree; conservation units, including national forests, through fiats by the various state agencies involved. Presidential decrees take legal precedence over departmental rulings in Brazil, and the other conservation units in Yanomami territory exist only on paper. Far from being evidence of sinister conspiracies, they are the products of incompetent bureaucracies who do not coordinate their drawings of lines on maps with each other. Around 1.5 million hectares of Amazonian conservation units are superimposed on other conservation units, for example. The Yanomami, far from being reduced to a fraction of their territory, live in what is by far the largest protected area of any category in the Americas. Contrary to the situation a decade ago, it is now effectively protected.

Yet Peters and Early (and others, Chagnon and Sponsel in particular, to restrict the discussion to anthropologists who have written on the Yanomami) continue to work with theories and worldviews which foresee only physical destruction, integration and assimilation as the fate awaiting Amazonian indigenes. This is unfortunately more than an academic error. It leads to the promiscuous use of words like "genocide", as on the back jacket of this book, where Leslie Sponsel uses the phrase "in the context of the ongoing genocide in the Amazon" as part of his blurb praising the book.

Genocide is a word with a specific meaning, which we need very badly. Cheapening it is a serious thing. It usefully captures the horror of the recent history of Rwanda and ex-Yugoslavia, for example. But the fact is that in the last decade census and other data suggests Brazilian Indians have become the fastest-growing element in Brazil's population, growing by over a third between 1991 and 2000, to around 350,000 (see _Povos Indgenas do Brasil 1996-2000, Instituto Socioambiental, Sao Paulo: 2001, for the latest detailed statistics). While some groups have suffered falls in population over the last decade, this almost certainly does not include the Brazilian Yanomami, who are probably about to enter a period of population growth unprecedented in modern times. So brandishing the word genocide, in this context, makes it easy for any half-competent Brazilian diplomat to make the purveyor of such hyperbole look ridiculous, pointing to the undeniable fact that the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso has been responsible for more than doubling the area of legally ratified indigenous reserves in the Amazon to the astonishing current figure of 22 per cent of its total land area. For American anthropologists, of all nationalities, to accuse the Brazilians of genocide against this background leaves a bad taste in the mouth. In making themselves look ridiculous, the users of such hysterical rhetoric also make it more difficult, in the particular case of Roraima, to bring international pressure to bear to solve the one remaining major indigenous land issue in the Brazilian Amazon, the continuing non-ratification of the demarcated Raposa-Serra do Sol reserve in the northwestern corner of the state.

One final criticism. Towards the end of their description of Roraima in the 1990s, the authors make what seems to me a crass overstatement. In talking of the role of missionaries frequently more than honourable, as all familiar with the area know they assert, "Although these qualities [physical presence, linguistic skills, being trusted by the Yanomami] are not necessarily restricted to missionaries, in Roraima few besides the missionaries have displayed them" (p. 288). This is, at the very least, a distortion. As they themselves point out on the following page, the Comissao para a Criaao do Parque Yanomami (CCPY), a Brazilian NGO, was crucial in mobilising media attention on the plight of the Yanomami, and also, although this they do not mention, in the successful campaign for the ratification of their reserve and the creation of Urihi, the Yanomami health agency. Let me be clear. John Peters, as missionary and as anthropologist, has played an immensely honourable, and at times literally life-saving role in his years among the Yanomami. So have other missionary/anthropologists, notably Ernest Migliazzi, demonstrating a level of commitment to the Yanomami which puts one or two of their secular anthropologist colleagues to shame.

But this abrogating of credit to missionaries does a disservice to the several anthropologists who played an equally important role as cultural brokers, and, much more to the point, were able, unlike the missionaries, to devise and manage a political campaign which was largely responsible for the conquests of the late 1990s. They have combined intellectual gifts and equally formidable contributions to the literature with an activism that for many years was unrewarding, largely unnoticed, and occasionally dangerous. At a time when any discussion of anthropologists and the Yanomami is overshadowed by sensation and journalistic charge and counter-charge, it is a pleasure to pay public tribute to those anthropologists, who have been a model of engagement in every sense: Alcida Ramos, Bruce Albert, Kenneth Taylor, Claudia Andujar, Nadia Farage. Missionaries are not the only people who work on the front line, as the Yanomami have better reason than most to know.

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