

Only Change Is Inevitable

by Dennison Berwick

(Extract from Savages, The Life & Killing of the Yanomami)

There is nothing inevitable about the destruction of tribal societies. What is happening today to the Yanomami in the Amazon, and to many other peoples worldwide, is the deliberate theft of land and killing of people, as has happened wherever Europeans have landed on foreign shores. Apologists seeking to explain this subjugation as the unhappy consequence of "evolution" or "progress" are only giving themselves excuses; conquest by these forces is our own killing-machine by another name.

The statistics for mass deaths of indigenous peoples since 1492 are often quoted but worth repeating. An estimated 3.5 million people lived in tribal societies in the area of South America known today as Brazil; only about 250,000 survive. Dozens of tribes have become extinct and others have been devastated. For example, the Nambiquara along the southern watershed of the Amazon numbered 20,000 people when first visited by Europeans in 1909. By 1970, only 600 Nambiquara were left alive in a reserve 0.5 per cent of the size of their traditional land.

I arrived in the Amazon for the first time in 1986 with all the usual preconceptions of a liberal education; I believed the deaths of tribal societies were tragic but inevitable. The stronger (subconsciously understanding this to mean superior) forces from one society had won over the weaker. It has happened throughout history by force of arms and by force of trade. Tribes, being primitive (of course meaning only less developed), fell apart when shaken up by the arrival of Europeans. Armed resistance only emphasized the superiority of our weapons over tomahawks or bows and arrows.

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Like millions of other fair-minded Europeans, I believed the social progress that came from contact with the Whiteman inevitably meant the destruction of the tribal Indians of South America. Indians in contact with Europeans are drawn irresistibly into the Whiteman's camp - begging for food or tools proves the superiority of our culture for it can supply items the Indians want; in time, they wear our clothes, pray in our churches, buy our radios and abandon their war paint and feathers. Disease can speed up this implosion, but the process of social evolution continues and, inevitably, the Indian disappears. This is what I believed and it is a lie.

Anthropology has reinforced the unconscious racism because it treats tribal societies as systems and because, frankly, anthropologists have wanted to investigate "authentic" Indians, not those who have "lost" their culture by wearing the Whiteman's trousers. For example, the American Museum of Natural History in New York devotes a large gallery to exhibiting the way of life of Amazon tribes without once showing a metal cooking pot or steel knife, despite their acquisition by some tribes over 400 years ago. Nowhere is any mention made of the realities of the challenges of life after contact with the Whiteman's world. The Indians are kept frozen, like mammoths caught in the Ice Age.

Change is the only inevitable consequence of the meeting between Europeans and Indians and this can benefit us all. The medicinal value of many plants from the rain forest, for example, is so great that we are bound to want to obtain them. The discrepancy between our technology and the elementary technology of the Yanomami people is too great for them not to want the utility of many of our tools. Just as we regard the fruits of their forests and mountains as bounty for the benefit of everyone - quinine to cure malaria, potatoes to make chips - so do Indians regard our tools. Our desire for forest products and the minerals under the ground does not have to mean mass murder and conquest of land unless that is how we want to make the world. Conquest cannot happen without conquerors with the desire to subjugate.

Most tribes want contact with their neighbours and want many of their tools; they want to "progress", but this is far from meaning the people want to give up being themselves or that they forfeit their traditional lands because they use a metal cooking pot or a video camera. Culture is more concerned with expressing the experience of being human than with the quantity of tools we use, though technology

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displays and may, to some extent, define a culture. Western culture thinks in opposites - the good guys, the bad guys; dominate or be dominated - and produces weapons of mass destruction, not mass education.

Change does not have to mean death and destruction for the Indians or for us unless that is what we want. We too can be profoundly changed, yet not destroyed, by listening to Indians' views of life and of the world. At the end of the 20th century, when Industrial Man and Woman falter for lack of good faith in themselves, the Yanomami and many other tribes can teach as - as they have shown me - that we are most fully ourselves when we are related to one another and to everything around us. The psycho-jargon of the city self-help seminars would call this "participating fully" in every moment.

Again and again, contact with the Whiteman has led tribes into a Catch-22 situation. If they remain isolated and ignorant of our world, they are cheated of their land; if they retain their "innocence", they are dismissed or cherished as "savages" who need to be saved for Christ and taught to be workers in the consumer society. But if they learn the languages of the newcomers, if they take some of the tools to use, if they learn to defend themselves according to the laws of the newcomers (which we proclaim for all people), they are declared no longer Indians and their land is forfeited.

I believe that people have a natural right to the land of their ancestors; they are the natural "owners", if we speak of ownership rather than trusteeship. Our own property laws and constitutions seek to confirm and protect this natural right - so why is it so hard to respect the traditional lands of indigenous peoples?

Land is, and always has been, the heart of the conflict between Indians and the Whiteman. The Whiteman wants all the land and all that it contains. This is as true for Canadian tribes still struggling to have their land claims settled after 200 years as for the Yanomami, most of whom only heard rumours of our existence one generation ago. More than anything else, it is relationship to land, and to the visible and invisible forces the land contains, which distinguishes Industrial Society from the societies of Indians.

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(Extract from *Savages, The Life & Killing of the Yanomami*)

But which Indians? I had to ask myself when I met people in the Amazon from half a dozen different tribes whose languages, costumes and philosophies were as distinct from each other as the Spanish are from the Danes in Europe. It is for our convenience that we lump them together. Even the word "Indian" is a misnomer; Columbus thought he was meeting the people of India when the Lucayans welcomed him ashore on the isle of Guanahani in the Caribbean; a place Columbus called San Salvador.

We cling to a double, and contradictory, picture of "the Indian" as being either Noble Savage or Naked Savage that perpetuates images of a bare-breasted young woman grilling fish and a warrior in war-paint and feathers. Is she any less a Yanomami or a Mohawk if today she carries a metal cooking pot?

If we forget our stereotypes and deal with Indians as individual people, then a different history emerges of their contacts with Europeans and of their struggle to survive our arrival. This is the challenge of this book. It is the story of how the Yanomami are being wrenched from centuries of isolation and their efforts to comprehend an alien people (the outsiders, the Whites, the people they call the *nabé*) who invade their land, who bring them miraculous metal tools and who kill with unknown diseases. It is told as much as possible in their own dramatic way of storytelling, based on many hours of conversation recorded with a tape recorder and later translated and transcribed. Edited excerpts are given here. Unfortunately I do not speak more than a few words of Yanomami, in any of its four dialects, and conversations were restricted to those bilingual Yanomami who speak Portuguese. This was a severe handicap but I persisted for two reasons; firstly, what the Yanomami men and women have to say speaks for itself in any language; secondly, Europeans have much to learn by listening. It is remarkable that, after more than 400 years of contact, only two or three books record what any Amazonian Indians think of the newcomers while there are shelves of books and monographs reciting the European views of the Indians.

Curiosity was the original impetus for me to travel to the Yanomami in early 1988 and it has been my renewable source of energy during all the subsequent months of travelling, interviewing, reading and sickness. My first visit to the Yanomami (described in the book *Amazon*) left me with the simple question, What do the Yanomami think of us? Looking for answers was to grow into a quest both exhausting and

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compulsive. I have been especially fortunate as a freelance writer to be able to devote the time and money necessary to travel in search of clues to possible answers.

Plain curiosity would be no justification to enter the Yanomami area - risking carrying disease to them and as illegal as the gold miners' invasion. My permission has always come from the Yanomami community of Ironasiteri on the Marauíá river. We first met below one of the waterfalls when I went up the river alone in early 1988 after more than one year's travels in various regions of the Amazon. "Who are you? Why have you come?" asked the group of tense people armed with three shotguns. I said that I wanted to learn about the forest and asked them to teach me. At first, they thought I was a gold miner but they found neither equipment for gold panning nor shotgun when they searched my sacks. The group took me up the river as their guest to the community shabono. I have returned three times since then, always at their invitation. Each visit has been preceded by a medical check-up. "Do you have permission to go there?" asked Davi Yanomami, the most prominent Yanomami leader, when we first met. "I have the permission of the communities, but not of the Whiteman in an office 2,000 miles away," I replied. Davi was satisfied. Yanomami ownership of their land must automatically include their right to control access; to say "yes" as well as "no".

Yanomami friends have given and taught me so much and I have wanted to acknowledge this generosity by doing whatever I could to help them defend themselves. It is my hope that this book might alert more people to the continuing expropriation of land and destruction of indigenous peoples all over the world still being done today in the name of "progress". This would be sufficient justification for my visits to Ironasiteri.

I knew from my first chance visit in 1988 about the illegal invasions by gold miners and the killer epidemics and, having promised at the end of that stay to return one day, I wanted to be of some practical service when I went back in fulfillment of my pledge. I am not a doctor nor a millionaire who could provide air transport but a chance meeting with Davi Yanomami one morning sparked a simple idea that I set about putting into action. My purpose was to spread Davi's warnings to communities in the west about the dangers of the gold miners and the need for scattered communities to link together.

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The Yanomami live in the forests and mountain valleys between the mighty Amazon and Orinoco rivers, an area divided by the mountainous frontier between Brazil and Venezuela. In 1986, an estimated 22,000 people were living in approximately 320 isolated communal houses. Built like huge doughnuts open in the middle to the sunshine and rain, each *shabono* (or village) stands in a clearing in the forest several days' journey from its neighbours. Communities are semi-nomadic, moving when game animals become scarce, or when manioc, bananas and other crops no longer flourish in the tired soils of their forest gardens. More than forty-four percent of the land where the Yanowami live was classified as "unsuitable for agriculture or ranching" by the Radam-Brasil survey in the early 1970s.

Their method of shifting cultivation is proof of how well the Yanomami understand their forest - communities in Brazil are spread over an area the size of Portugal. This is the ecological living space that they need.

Several communities within the same area of rivers, forest and mountains may regard each other as regional allies. Travel beyond these regions is discouraged by the shorter, denser rain forest that grows on the ancient and leached rock formations north of the Rio Negro. Rocky, fast-flowing streams in the mountains impede travel by canoe. Trade of baskets and tools, and inter-marriage is restricted to neighbours within a week's walk. Yanomami in the west have had no direct contact with their fellow tribesmen in the east. Such isolation has fostered suspicion of people from outside, including Yanomami from other areas, which still sits deep within the psyche of each community; distrust wrestles with hospitality and an eagerness for exchange of news, ornaments and tools. Strangers may be suspected of sending bad spirits to kill people. Such accusations sometimes lead to war-skirmishes between villages in which three or four may might be killed and their women taken to be wives. Semi-isolation has allowed the Yanomami language, religion and customs to diverge into four main groups during the past 5,000 years. The need today is for the Yanomami to draw together again as one people, but countering the pattern of thousands of years is not simple.

Before the arrival of the Whiteman, contact between the Yamomami and other tribes was restricted to immediate neighbours with whom the Yanomami traded or, in one case, worked. But even these contacts stopped in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries when their

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neighbours, vanished. Portuguese or Spanish raiders captured men and women as slaves for their plantations or to gather rubber, or made war on them if they resisted. For example, the Manau, who traded gold along the Rio Negro and the Amazon, resisted the Portuguese in the 18th century under their chief Ajuricuba. He was eventually captured but jumped into the river in chains rather than be enslaved. The city of Manaus is named after the extinct Manau tribe.

Priests also came up the rivers offering metal tools to people who had hardened wooden or stone axes to chop down trees and cut up meat. Whole tribes descended to the mission stations, there to die soon after baptism of the newcomers' diseases, such as viral infections or smallpox. At least their "converts" did not die heathens, the Christians told themselves.

The Yanomami were protected from this annihilation by their deeper isolation in the forest far up unnavigable rivers. Even the word "*nabé*", meaning a non-Yanomami person, fell out of use when their neighbours disappeared and the Yanomami were able to expand into empty areas of the forest.

This isolation ended for most Yanomami in the mid-1950s when Catholic missionaries ascended to the headwaters of the tributaries of the Orinoco River in Venezuela and the Rio Negro in Brazil to pacify and save the souls of the Yanomami. Contact with these outsiders brought killer diseases, including influenza, chickenpox and whooping cough. Contact also brought miraculous steel tools and new foods. Many, many people died but communities were able to re-establish their populations and to adjust to the small numbers of newcomers who were useful to provide tools, medicines (for the new diseases) and who spoke of places and spirits the Yanomami had not yet encountered.

In 1974, during the military dictatorship in Brazil, the Army began to construct the Perimetral Norte road cutting through the middle of the Yanomami area in order to integrate this remote region near Venezuela into Brazil. "Integration" was the cry of the decade; to open up, to dominate, to penetrate, to occupy all parts of the Amazon with Brazilians. Indians could not be trusted to safeguard the country's northern border - they were only recently elevated from the status of "legal minors", ineligible for citizenship and of equal legal status to the insane.

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The arrival of road construction crews driving bulldozers among people who had never even seen a Whiteman, much less a machine that moved and gave out smoke, was calamitous. No warning was given of what was coming, no prevention was made to control the spread of diseases. Death was commonplace. Whole communities vanished. As least thirteen villages, with about 1,300 people, were reduced within three years to eight small family groups camped by the road. Half the people in one *shabono* were killed by two epidemics of measles. Many Yanomami blamed their neighbours for sending evil spirits against them. No-one had any notion of the National Security Council's decision in Brasilia to "integrate" them into Brazil.

The road stopped after 225 kilometers because the earth was too soft and construction too expensive, but the events were a red light to post-Vatican II missionaries, anthropologists and others who now wanted to help the Yanomami against this aggression. The first studies to define their traditional area were undertaken by a coalition of Brazilian supporters in 1968. The government officially closed, or interdicted, the area in 1982 but did not create a Yanomami park with legal protection. The government continued to issue mining permits for mining companies to explore within the area.

In 1985, the year Brazil's military dictatorship ended, the military chiefs began the Calho Norte project; a secret scheme to colonize the country's northern border with Brazilians. To this end, the military built airstrips deep in the Yanomami area and conducted an aerial geological survey. An illegal invasion of the eastern half of the Yanomami area by 45,000 garimpeiros (gold or mineral prospectors) took place in 1987. The authorities did nothing to hinder this. At least 2,000 Yanomami, out of 9,500 in Brazil, died during the invasion. Even in late 1991, the Yanomami area was still without clear legal protection from the mining and logging companies eager to "develop" the region.

Contact with the Whiteman is bringing profound challenges to all communities, even in areas where gold or other minerals have not yet been found. Metal knives and cooking pots have reached all *shabonos* through trade, but the pace of further confrontation - with firearms, money and the social hierarchy of the Whiteman - varies grossly. For example, one community on the River Marauíá has gone in one generation from ignorance of metals to tape recording themselves singing. Another community, farther up the same river, met a Whiteman

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for the first time only in 1990. This book tells two stories that are intertwined yet distinct. One is of the arrival of the *nabé* and people's responses to the challenges of contact with him. The second story is the fight to defend the traditional land of the Yanomami against the illegal invasion of miners and those sections of the Brazilian government and military determined on a policy of genocide. Is there any other word to describe more than twenty years of continued failure to demarcate the Yanomami homeland while simultaneously making the region accessible to miners and selling exploratory rights to mining companies?

Contact between the Yanomami and the outside world is inevitable. Change through this contact is also inevitable. However, genocide by invasion is not inevitable but planned as the evidence and interviews in this book show clearly. The endurance of tribal cultures and their strength to adapt to change is proved by their survival despite conquest and genocide throughout the past 500 years. The Yanomami are well able to adapt so the changes brought by their contact with us. Their extinction is only inevitable if we and our agencies, such as our governments, banks and multinational corporations, choose to make it so.

The fundamental question, which all those working to "develop" the land of the Yanomami (and of all other tribal peoples) ignore, is whether people have the right to their land they have traditionally lived on. When this first right of "ownership" is respected, all the problems of conflict, cultural change due to contact and even mining interests can be accommodated. But respect between people - different and equal - is rare despite the political rhetoric.

Time spent with the Yanomami, and perhaps with people of any sharply contrasting culture, creates a sense of journey and exploration involving far more than miles covered by canoe or on foot. The greatest distances, and the greatest obstacles, lie in the traveller's mind. To learn anything about another way of being, it's necessary so unlearn the reality we already know, to allow ourselves to be led by our guides, to listen more than to talk. It's necessary to trust. This is especially true when listening to the shamans, or trained healers, who move between two realities with a facility that leaves the unaccustomed traveller out of breath. One of these realities is what we see around us every day. The second lies in what, perhaps rather ornately, I have called the shaman's labyrinth. This second reality is reached by the shamans with the aid of

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hallucinogenic drugs. The Yanomami inhabit this additional reality as much as they live in the ordinary reality; day-so-day living - and much of their reaction to the arrival of the Whiteman - comes from their experience of travel in the shaman's labyrinth.

The Yanomami, like other Indians, use collective nouns to describe us. Outsiders are called *nabé*, (pronounced na-bay) meaning non-Yanomami; or in Portuguese branco, meaning white i.e. non-Yanomami and non-Indian. "Homen branco" is the verbal shorthand throughout Latin America to describe European culture, descent or affiliation. It refers to a state of mind not to the colour of a person's skin. I have used the word Whiteman (capitalized like Indian) as the equivalent generic term to cover male and female.

None of the Yanomami are called by their real names in this story, because this would break their taboo against alerting bad spirits to a person's whereabouts. Traditionally, people avoided the danger by referring to their neighbours as, for example, "mother of so-and-so". Today, Yanomami who have contact with the Whiteman find it convenient to call each other by "Christian" names, because these are non-names which the spirits cannot recognize. The use of these "non-names" should not be construed as a conversion to Christianity, but rather as the adaptation of the *nabé*'s custom for their own convenience. The Yanomami in this story are called by their non-names.

Yanomami words are spelt in English as nearly as our letters can reproduce the sounds. The system of accented transliterations used by anthropologists has not been followed because it would require an additional book to understand.

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