# ETHNOCIDE OR INDIGENOUS IDENTITY IN THE PERUVIAN JUNGLE?

Native societies in the Amazonian rain forest have always had to contend with other native groups, in relationships that are at times hostile, disruptive, or threatening. Those living in rainforest areas close to the Andes have also for some millennia coexisted with larger, more organized social systems, culminating in the civilization and state run by the Incas up till the Spanish Conquest, and since then with an hispanicized Andean world. Indeed, societies are always changing, adapting to new conditions and to pressures from other societies. What is it then, that allows us to use the term ”ethnocide” in relation to the effects sometimes produced upon native societies by contact with variously termed “occidental”, ”capitalist”, “dominant”, global”, “national”, or — in the context of Peru – “mestizo” society?

Clearly, the distinctive characteristic that justifies the term ethnocide is the rapidity of the change that is imposed by, or whose contours at least are structured by, an overwhelmingly more powerful civilization and cultural system. Native adaptation to domination by this system often means disintegration and the hegemony of capitalist society's cultural values — that is. ethnocide (if not physical death). Sometimes however the adaptation, though it is caused by occidental social influence, is simultaneously a defiant self-assertion. a recreation or reinvention of cultural identity. The more or less forced change and the assertion of an old identity in new forms. are inextricably interlinked. The process is analogous, though not comparable in any detailed sense, with the creation of Third World nationalism by or within colonialism (1). Here there is the forging of an identity that is new, yet non-western. drawn from precolonial history.

Colonialism brought into being new nation-states. realities that did not exist before, which in some ways represented the imposition of a western idea. At the same time however. Third World nations were brought into being paradoxically through resistance to colonialism. Very often the identity is new, in that communities which before were indifferent or hostile to one another. developed a sense of being part of one entity. Once this idea is alive, it invents itself in ways that draw from traditional languages and cultures with roots in the precolonial past. Something rather similar seems to happen in an area such as the one being considered in the Peruvian rainforest.

The province of La Convención in northern Cusco Department is both particularly interesting and an example of a characteristic region of the Peruvian rainforest that borders the Andean foothills. For reasons of navigational difficulty through the rapids at Pongo de Mainique. the lower Río Urubamba remains relatively remote, though colonization, extraction of timber, and oil exploration nevertheless impinge upon and threaten the cultural identity of indigenous native groups, and in some cases their very existence. It is particularly easy to observe and analyze processes of cultural assimilation here, in all their diverse and contradictory forms: the region is something like a microcosm of the Peruvian rainforest in its relations with the Andean region, with the frontier town, the encroaching market and national society.

In this article I try to consider the multi-dimensional, contradictory and simultaneous processes of acculturation or assimilation into the dominant culture on the one hand, and the assertion of distinct identity on the other, among native groups in Sepagua on the lower Urubamba (2). I will mainly confine my attention to the *Panoan* communities of *Yaminahua* and *Nahua* who live in Sepagua.

For as long as there have been civilisations in the neighbouring Andes, this has been a region of contact and exchange between rainforest natives and Andean societies. One of the native groups living in Sepagua, the *Piro*, historically dominated trade with the Incas and probably earlier Andean rulers. Petroglyphs at Pongo de Mainique indicate this (3). Though the Incas gave up trying to conquer the jungle directly, the latter was important to them in providing certain vital things — especially coca and parrot feathers. The Incas imposed a system of usufruct in this region, as in other rainforest areas bordering the Andean foothills, to ensure the supply of such products. Though leaving the native peoples basically intact, they must have greatly influenced them as a much more sophisticated and large-scale society.

After the Spanish Conquest this relationship between Andes and neighbouring rainforest changed; with the collapse of the Inca civilization the elaborate trading system broke down. Things became more localized and autarchic. presumably as they had been long before. In the three centuries following the Conquest there was some missionary activity in the area, but not very sustained. Native communities must have been scarcely aware, for considerable periods, that the Spanish were there — unlike in the Gran Pajonal where Dominican missionaries set up missions which were expelled by an extraordinary uprising led by Juan Santos Atahualpa in the early eighteenth century, resulting in a period of a hundred years during which little effort was made to reenter that area.

As elsewhere in the Amazon, it was the onset of the rubber boom (1860-1910) that caused native societies here to know fully about the dominant society. Vast concessions were given by the government to ruthless rubber barons, who used one group of natives to subjugate other groups; enslavement, exploitation, liquidation, death through disease and forced movement of natives caused dislocation, and depopulation it is estimated, down to 10% of its pre-rubber boom level. In the disruption and disarticulation caused by the rubber boom, scattered fragments of different native groups were sometimes thrown chaotically together. To survive, individuals of wholly different ethnicity would often congregate as groups.

Thus they survived the rubber boom, to experience isolation again between I910 and the post World-War II period. Then began a new cycle of resource extraction: of timber, skins and in due course oil. Plantations and cattle ranches have not been attempted much in this area, fortunately: though some poor colonists from the Highlands and the coast have moved in, trying to establish a new life by cutting down a portion of the jungle. The post-War period has also seen a growth in missionary activity, chiefly by Dominican Catholics who have set up missions like the one in the legally established Native Community of Sepagua. where they provide a school and some medical care. Whether or to what extent they influence the natives in Sepagua is a matter of interest to be

considered later. Though the Dominicans have the predominant right to be active in the area. the American Protestant Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) also has a presence.

The village or town of Sepagua came into being in 1947 when the Dominican Mission was set up. The first native residents were a small group of *Piro* who had been living there before: more *Piro* came in the ensuing years and through the l950s. In the 1960s came the Panoan Amahuaca, then in the 1970s *Yaminahua*, both from the Río Purus. In each of the latter cases. the Dominicans negotiated with a group of natives to come to Sepagua, who were in difficulties. It seems that natives have not generally come originally to missions or “settlements” fully voluntarily, that is without some pressure to do so. It always means living in much bigger communities that they are accustomed to — their traditional mode of life being in very small groups, itinerant and nomadic, with continuous fusions and fissions. Though very conscious of their identity as parts of larger groups, they did not traditionally live physically together. In each case, as with the Nahua to be discussed shortly, they came for shelter due to problems, and had to accept certain terms along with that. The *Amahuaca* and *Yaminahua* in the Purus area had been decimated during the rubber era: communities could not survive in their traditional endogamous way. The need for women exacerbated old patterns of hostility between groups: raids between groups for women were accompanied, according to Graham Townsley, by an increase in accusations of witchcraft (4). Thus in spite of massive reductions in population, groups were constantly at war. The group of *Amahuaca* who came to Sepagua in the 1960s had been nearly wiped out, before accepting the invitation from the Dominicans. A similar pattern preceded the *Yaminahua* joining the community in the I970s. As with the *Nahua* in the l98Os, each native group that came to Sepagua had to sacrifice some elements of their traditional way of life. Thus for the *Yaminahua* the system whereby each community lived in two large malocas, as two moieties, disappeared — though this change began before they came to Sepagua; with this the entire cosmology of society and nature being a “dual order”, as Townsley calls it, receded in importance. In Sepagua now they build small houses, one for each nuclear family. The small size of each community of natives has necessitated a loosening of the norms of endogamy, as the need for some marriages with other natives, and some with non-natives (the latter being seen as a valuable way of “binding in” with the mestizo community) has been recognized. A negotiation with the new conditions means a loss, therefore, to endogamous ideals (though the majority still many endogamously) and to the dualistic cosmology (according to which for example, all animals and plants are of one or another moiety, with which all Yaminahua individuals are associated). Each group has simultaneously reacted to some loss like this, whilst making certain gains: material, educational. health-wise, and in security — each of which they value, even if for example they make certain criticisms of the way the school is run by the priests. These gains, set against their collective memories of difficulty and hostility in the past, lay the basis for a new affirmation of cultural identity — in an imaginative leap cultural tradition is reinvented, albeit in new terms. At the same time these new possibilities serve to “hook” native groups to life in Sepagua: they could not easily do without them again as they are very aware of, and they have forgotten concretely much of their former strategy for existence in the jungle.

However, the extent to which natives enter into a “fetishistic” seduction to or dependence upon commodities and money-dependent kinds of power and status imagreflects inversely, to a considerable degree, the extent of community strength and confidence — the extent to which the different groups experience control over their existences.

Thus, we witness a complex process of voluntary and involuntary acculturation, elements of which are difficult to disentangle. Though it is difficult for natives to return to their former way of life in the jungle even if that were possible, the recent return of a group of Nahua to the Río Mishagua, to be discussed later, indicates that this remains a possibility in what remains of habitable, but unoccupied virgin forest, if a native group is so inclined.

Hence, the history of the Panoan groups in Sepagua is a complex mixture of ethnocide and cultural reaffirmation. A history of population depletion, forced migration, settlement, missionary activity, and adaptation to the “dominant culture” in Sepagua — where natives have had to negotiate with or react to mestizo traders and lumbermen, oil company employers, commodities, wage-labour and the market – has resulted in some loss of traditional economic activity. Though they still hunt and gather, these activities are less central than formerly. On the other hand their methods of slash-and-burn agriculture have not altered significantly, but for the introduction of some new crops. There has been some loss of traditional ritual and cultural activities, but also a strengthening in some areas.

Shamanism in particular has been strengthened among the *Yaminahua*. Though some no longer participate in the sessions at which the hallucinogenic potion ayahuasca (shori in Yaminahua) is drunk, due partly to advice from missionaries, partly to a self-generated wish to relinquish that aspect of native tradition, in general the importance of shamans’ visions has grown. Through the visions that shori allows, shamans confront spirits, ancestors, and mythical figures: they negotiate with them, try to use or direct their forces and powers, shape them to the benefit of the community. The need to negotiate with other native groups and the non-native community around them, means there is plenty of opportunity to want this. The visionary encounters are a sort of psychic-intuitive mustering of strengths and forces to cope with people and situations — it could be viewed as an active metaphor for dealing with the outside world. The importance of shamans is also no doubt enhanced by the respect shown by some nonnatives for the shamans‘ curing powers, and their fascination for the visionary experiences opened by shori. Certainly,the stature of the main Yaminahua shaman in Sepagua, his reputation as a competent man, capable of dealing with the world — both within the Yaminahua community and outside — testifies to the crucial importance of the shaman as a visionary wanderer at night and a quick, sharp-witted wheeler-dealer, negotiator, sorter out, by day. He must also be physically strong, practical, a good hunter and worker in the chacra and at other tasks.

The circumstances in which the Nahua were “contacted” by people from Sepagua have been recorded in a number of places,(5) so I will give only the most brief resumé here. Though the Nahua´s existence in the headwaters of the Ríos Manu and Mishagua (and their hostility to intruding seismologists and lumber men) had been known of for more than ten years previously,

the first sustained contact was made in 1984, when some lumbermen captured a group of Nahua and took them back to Sepagua. On this visit they met SIL missionaries and the Yaminahua headman/shaman. Shortly after their return home a group of some l30 Nahua fell ill of pneumonia as a result of contact, of which about 50 died. The remainder, weak and debilitated, now accepted missionaries among them to administer medical care. Partly due to this dependence, and partly because it transpired that the Nahua and the Yaminahua speak the same language, so that the Yaminahua shaman came to have some influence over the sick Nahua, the latter accepted an offer by Shell employers to bring them to Sepagua, where Shell at that time had its regional base. This was in 1985. Though Shell was not officially involved in the move, a clear convergence of interests on the part of resource extractors, missionaries, and the slowly expanding mestizo society had succeeded in removing these Nahua from their habitat.

For the Nahua their arrival in Sepagua was a traumatic and distressing experience. The largest batch of about sixty had to live in a single house with no sides, though they were accustomed to houses with roofs that come low, almost to the ground. No regular supply of food was available for them. They were accustomed to eating yucca, plantains and monkeys. Because they did not live near large rivers they did not fish, hence were unprepared to obtain fish on arrival in Sepagua. It was impossible to hunt sufficient monkeys in an area with a considerable human population and of course it would take many months before food could be obtained from agriculture. The Yaminahua headman brought them irregular, insufficient supplies of food, whilst Shell refused them food claiming it would imply their involvement in the move and create dependent expectations on them.

To observe the reactions of the Nahua to their first contact with “civilization” was both fascinating and tragic. This must have been like a leap into the future for them — frightening, exhilarating and utterly perplexing all at the same time, with very little to soften the shock at the end of their odyssey. They were absolutely fascinated with clothes and materials quite new to them and very quickly found they liked some new kinds of food such as sugar. The way they stared at the Shell trucks (the only vehicles in Sepagua) and Hercules aeroplane as it landed at the Shell airstrip displayed an amazement befitting a science fiction scene.

The miserable aspect of the experience was that they were forced to beg for food: they did not understand money or the idea of wage-labour, so they took slowly to the notion of working for food or for money to buy food. Many mestizo people failed to understand their predicament and thus had prejudices reinforced about savages being lazy and thieving. Natives of other groups living in Sepagua were often generous, but even some of them shared these prejudices and few people seemed to doubt that to become “civilized” was the best thing for the Nahua. Some of the orphaned children were taken in by kind families; on the other hand the Yaminahua headman talked about selling children to mestizo families who would bring them up as servants (though this did not happen). Some of the men got very drunk on licor — being quite unused to alcohol of such strength it changed them from their serene, self-controlled normal state into wild men.

The old and ill obviously felt things worst; the young men adjusted best. Some of the latter quickly got to know how things worked and were soon doing jobs to obtain things other than food. Clothes and hats seemed to seduce them; they cut their hair and replaced their feathered head-dresses with construction men‘s hats given by Shell (even though the latter would not give food!) and the women gradually replaced their beautiful dresses made of seeds strung on cotton threads with western dresses. Or. Western clothes were worn over traditional clothes, ornaments and painted bodies, sometimes in several layers! Such reactions might have been simply an initial excitement; the concern was that some of the Nahua would lose the desire to live in the jungle again whilst others would become disillusioned with “civilization”. If this occurred. the community might become divided. Or, after a long period they might lose the ability to live in their former way.

I returned to Sepagua exactly a year after the events described above, in August 1986. The Nahua had become divided as feared, though it seemed that the two groups were reasonably well-balanced with respect to age and sex, a situation that often does not prevail when native communities are disrupted. Approximately fifty had gone to live on the Río Mishagua and thirty were still in Sepagua, though there was some movement back and forth between the groups.

The Sepagua group were still ineffectively settled in inadequate houses and some were still in bad health, though generally their situation was less lamentable than one year previously. They had cut and burnt some fields for crops. They were reliant on the Dominican mission for health provision and in time their children would attend the mission school. As usual. the process of “set-tling” involved loss of territory, autonomy, and some aspects of traditional life-style.

SIL missionaries were with the group on the Río Mishagua and were attending to their health. Some ill natives returned to Sepagua in August. Some of the Mishagua group were working for lumber men. Generally they were reasonably healthy though rather short of food. These Nahua who retumed to the Río Mishagua were under the influence of, or agreed with, an older head-man who was unhappy with the treatment they had received from the inhabitants of Sepagua.

Intermingled with the ethnocidal tendencies among Panoan natives in Sepagua, there is cultural affirmation. The very threats to their survival have resulted in adaptations that reassert their identity, if in new forms. Change. and the need to resist oppressive or complicated external influences can bring about reaffirmation of cultural identity. Successive groups settling in Sepagua have acted as patrons for the next: Piro for Amahuaca, Amahuaca for Yaminahua, Yaminahua for Nahua. Acculturation seems often to move through phases of seduction to the dominant society, then to a backlash of reidentification. Previously identity has been less a conscious issue; it has been more automatic, spontaneous, unreflective. Again, the extent of acculturation of a native group is often dependent on the speed of assimilation. Thus the Campa and Machiguenga have had contact over centuries, whilst the Purus Panoans have known it only since the rubber boom or more recently still. In some cases a longer time allows a more self-conscious, considered accommodation, though in others, depending on their experience, it has meant becoming acculturated. Generally, the large population and homogeneity of a people — for example 30.000

Campa cover a homogenous territory — is favourable to maintenance of identity. The Purus Panoans are fewer and live in fragmented communities, yet as we see, they nevertheless find means to resist assimilation.

The most recently arrived group, the Nahua, have to negotiate the more powerful world of mestizo Sepagua and that of the Yaminahua (and to a lesser extent those of the other native groups). The chief problem I observed among the Nahua in 1990, after they had lived five years in Sepagua, was the loss of the men's incentive to hunt (more so than among Yaminahua men, who paradoxically have been there longer). A lack of protein causes lethargy at times, and sustains a seduction to buying food with money, and thus a continuing inclination to beg. This goes hand in hand with a continuing lack of understanding of money and monetary exchange, especially on the part of the women who have traditionally not engaged even in non-monetary exchange. But presently the Nahua live in good houses, the community is vibrant, and they keep chacras with a variety of crops. Women normally wear traditional ornaments, though sometimes with western clothes. Men also sometimes wear traditional ornaments, more often with western clothes.

The Amahuaca and Yaminahua were traditionally bitter enemies, hostility being underpinned by rivalry over territory and women. This was exacerbated by the consequences of the rubber boom, as already explained. In the native Community of Sepagua they have had to live together, and to survive have needed to intermarry (even though the first group of Yaminahua that came to Sepagua in the l970s were killed by the already-resident Amahuaca). Alvarez Lobo, the long-time Dominican head of the Sepagua mission, points out that this has caused to some extent a pooling of cultural traits between the two culturally similar groups (6). He considers this to be a cultural enrichment, made possible by the Community.

The Nahua, before coming to Sepagua did not take ayahuasca and were unfamiliar with Yaminahua shamanism. Now Nahua men have become apprentices or initiates, and participate in this rich store of Yaminahua cultural experience, surely to the enhancement of both groups. The children of the Yaminahua shaman can sing Andean songs in Quechua or Spanish, or Brazilian songs in Portuguese. The shaman flies in an aeroplane more often than on an eagle, as formerly, in his visions. He compares his shamanic visions with a cinema film, since he saw one on a visit to Pucallpa. This incorporation of technologies from the dominant society for their magical powers is surely culturally creative, rather than ethnocidal. There is no indication that traditional myths have lost their meaning for him meanwhile.

For a “progressive” Dominican missionary like Alvarez Lobo these positive features of the Sepagua Native Community serve to legitimize the mission and the values behind “settling” natives. For him Catholicism allows natives to affirm their identity. There are of course differences among Catholic missionaries concerning their “metatheory” or “master-narrative” of history. We might compare them for a moment with a deterministic or “vulgar” version of Marxism (though there are of course other versions), whose schema sees “primitive” society developing into a number of class societies, culminating in capitalism which brings into being the world proletariat. The latter is the heir to all previous forms of society, and unites to overthrow all oppressive social forms and create

a new, global socialist civilization. Native societies get knocked aside in this grand sweep of history, becoming proletarian - “world” people no longer holding to a distinct native identity. Socialism is the only and necessary solution to all human problems, including those of natives, whose form is disclosed to Marxist theorists. A dogmatic, ethnocentric blindness to all human distinctions besides those relating to class places “indigenous” peoples merely as sections of the peasantry or working class.

For a ”progressive” Catholic “metahistory” like that of Alvarez, Catholicism is destined to redeem the natives from their suffering, injustice and exploitation, restoring their identity in a “true” form. Traditional native culture is respected to a degree but the solution to the problems of history is Catholicism; though in fact this form of missionary activity frequently serves to acculturate natives to the norms and values of the dominant, capitalist society, it is seen by the missionaries as providing an alternative to, and shield against, capitalism, which is recognized as exploitative and dehumanizing.

The outlook of SIL missionaries on the other hand is that they save natives from themselves and their fallen world (7). In reports written by the first missionaries to meet the captured Nahua in Sepagua in 1984, the event is referred to as a ”discovery” of “lost people”. One author writes: “I marvelled at the providence of God...bringing these frightened ones out”(8), and another says they “expressed their desire to stop killing and live in peace. They also said they wanted help”(9).

For SIL missionaries Christianizing natives means granting them the true religion, but also quite consciously, offering them the benefits of modern consumer-technological society. They explicitly state that their role should include adapting natives to capitalistic assumptions about wage-labour, production for the market, individual possessions, and material prosperity. Though some Catholic missionaries share this view, others do not — even if, as suggested above, the effect of their work is to instill such values anyway.

There are other “master-narratives” for native history that come from outside (10). The Indigenist outlook is essentially separatist and purist: traditional identity and life-style comprise the only meaningful categories. For the liberal secular view, indigenous people are simply people, but as individuals, not parts of a class as for the kind of reductionist Marxism referred to earlier. However inadequate, the Laws of Native Communities do at least challenge the anti-ethnic assumptions of this last, recognizing in principle a kind of property ownership different from capitalism's, and allowing that cultural distinctiveness is inseparable from economic productive efficacy and political rights.

Can there be a genuinely disinterested, authentic view of native self-determination? A commitment to diversity, difference, and equality with justice in the face of pressures from an intruding global society‘? If there can, it must obviously be based on what the natives themselves want. But the difficulty cannot be evaded that, as soon as “contact” occurs and from then on, external influences cause differences to set in within native communities over how to define and realise their wants. The very process of contact with the dominant civilization tends often to

fragment them. A whole new area of need then emerges: for a public sphere of native dialogue, discussion, and debate. Native self-determination has to be seen as native democracy.

**NOTES**

1. See Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* Verso, London, 1983.

2. See also Tim Cloudsley*: Ecological Destruction. Ethnocide and Poverty in the Peruvian Jungle in New Ground*. London, Winter 1986/7, and *La Busqueda de Petroleo de la Shell y sus Efectos sobre los Nativos en la Selva Peruana in Amazonia Peruana*, Lima. 1989.

3. See Luis Roman: *Aproximución a una Realidard aparte: la conivivencia Piro-Campa* in *RelacionesIntertribales en el Bajo Urubamba y Alto Ucayali*. Documento 5, Centro de Investigación y Promoción Amazonica, Lima, 1983.

4. See Graham Townsley*: Ideas of Order and Patterns of Change in Yaminahua Soc*iety, unpublished thesis for PhD, Cambridge University, 1988.

5. The following are just some: Survival International *Urgent Action Bulletin*. London. October 1984; Alonso Zarzar: *Report and Research Plan on Social Organization and Cosmology among the Nuhua*, unpublished, Lima, November I984; *Amazone-Indianen Tegen Shell in Peru*, in Tribaal, March 1985; *Nahua people suffer the perils of contact* in the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Newsletter No. 45, Copenhagen, April 1986 (Sources: Luis Roman: *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, Pueblo Indio, No. 7 Lima 1985): Tim Cloudsley: *Shell´s Search for Oil and its effects on Natives in the Lower Urubamba Region of the Peruvian Jungle*. Research Report for Survival International, February 1987: Alonzo Zazar: Radiografia de un contacto: *Los Nahua y la Sociedad National* in *Amazonía Peruana*, No. 14 Vol Vlll Lima, May 1987.

6. See Ricardo Alvarez Lobo: *TSLA Estudio etnohistórico del Urubamba y Alto Ucayali*. Editorial San Esteben, Salamanca, 1984.

7. See Soren Hvalkof and Peter Aaby (eds): *ls God an American? An Anthropological Perspective in the Missionary Work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics*, a joint publication by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs and Survival International. Copenhagen, 1981

8. *Impressions of the Week of June II-I5, I984: Parqui-nahua Contact*, SIL document, 1984.

9*. Some Questions Focussed on the First Six Months after Contact with an lsolated Ethnic Group*, SIL document, April 1985.

10. For a discussion of this general issue see: Andrew Gray: *Perspectives on Amarakaeri History.* Etnologiska Studier 38. *Natives and Neighbours in South America*. Anthropological Essays (eds). Harald O. Skar and Frank Salomon. Goteborgs Etnografiska Museum. 1987.