

THE BROAD AND THE NARROW: Two Views of Native South American Culture

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THE YANOAMA INDIANS: A CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY. By WILLIAM J. SMOLE.
(Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1976. Pp. 272. \$10.95.)

MEHINAKU: THE DRAMA OF DAILY LIFE IN A BRAZILIAN INDIAN VILLAGE.
By THOMAS GREGOR. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago
Press, 1977. Pp. 382. \$24.00.)

These two books provide significant contributions to our knowledge of the native inhabitants of South America, although in most other ways they differ markedly in both approach and the nature of the peoples studied. Each suffers also from significant faults. Since some of these faults might not be evident to someone not widely acquainted with the literature on the non-Andean peoples of South America, I shall devote somewhat more space to them than I might in a review directed solely to specialists. I will, however, attempt to evaluate each work in terms of the author's intent, not in terms of what I would have written had I been the author.

Smole's intent, on the broadest level, is indicated by the title of his work. One would expect a study with this title to provide a reasonably detailed discussion of "man-land" relationships with an analysis of the interaction of cultural and other environmental factors. As one would anticipate, a geographer like Smole avoids falling into the simplistic adaptation model frequently used by those who do not differentiate between ecology and environmental determinism. The table of contents suggests his approach. Following a brief introduction there are eight chapters: the Yanoama and their milieu; distribution patterns and settlement morphology; Yanoama livelihood; horticulture; collecting; hunting; the apportionment and consumption of food; and landscape modification. There is also a glossary; an extensive bibliography; a somewhat deficient index; an appendix on the process and problems of studying the Yanoama; and numerous footnotes, which are vital to the understanding of the work. The production is lavish in quantity: 31 plates, 11 figures, and 13 maps, as well as 16 tables. However, although the detail is good, the photographic reproduction lacks contrast, and an apparent production

problem resulted in the lettering on some of the maps being virtually unreadable.

The Yanoama-speaking peoples are one of the largest remaining groups of Native South Americans outside the Andean region and occupy more than thirty thousand square miles around the headwaters of the Orinoco River on both sides of the Venezuela/Brazil border. Yanoama territory is broadly divided into two "major habitat subtypes," riverine lowlands and tropical highlands. While most earlier studies have dealt with lowland groups, Smole studied the Barafiri who live in the Parima highlands. Thus, the title would appear to be somewhat erroneous; surely no one would attempt to represent the reality of some fifteen thousand people occupying such a large and variable region in a single cultural geography. I assumed that Smole must have used the term "Yanoama" loosely to refer only to the Barafiri, but I was finally forced to the realization that Smole had really attempted to write a cultural geography of all the Yanoama. As such, to paraphrase Crosby (1972, p. 175), Smole has described a mythical entity: average Yanoama culture in average Yanoama territory. Although he states that his approach is inductive (p. 4), in fact he appears to have been attempting to reconstruct, on the basis of the "comparative method," a sort of Ur-Yanoama culture. My interpretation arises from the way he combined data from all Yanoama groups, sometimes attempting to explain away clearcut cultural differences, as well as from his insistence that the Yanoama "originally" lived in the Parima highlands. By establishing the region where he did his research as the Ur-home of the Ur-Yanoama culture, he could then use his empirical data to describe Yanoama cultural geography and need not preoccupy himself with the varying environments occupied today (and ever since first reported contact with the Yanoama).

Some of Smole's problems arise from his failure to deal adequately with the diversity of anthropological theories that have been applied to the Yanoama. Speculation regarding the Yanoama has resulted in their classification as hunters and gatherers (Métraux, 1948) and "cultural marginals" (Steward, 1949), as well as incipient agriculturalists (see Zerries' discussion of some of these opinions in Zerries and Schuster, 1974, pp. 301–4). Most of these classifications had little or no basis in fact, and they are quite properly rejected by Smole who, however, does no better with the statement: "Gardening, collecting, and hunting are bound up inextricably into a single ecosystem whose stability and probable antiquity are suggested by its uniformity over diverse and extensive habitat zones" (p. 97). However, he offers no data for many of the diverse zones, while he mentions some considerable variation in the practices referred to, such as the presence of canoes and fishing, and the extensive cultivation of "bitter" manioc. Such variation is, however, swept away by the phrase "recent borrowing," following

the example of Steward in dealing with unwanted culture elements among the "marginals." The stability and integration of an element into the culture as an index of its antiquity in that culture has proved untrustworthy as shown by Forman's study (1977) of *titora* reed at Colta Lake.

Smole apparently accepts the alleged "marginality" of the Yanoama since it permits him to posit that they were left in their original location while later peoples swept around them. In taking this position he mentions, but does not comment on, Lathrap's suggestion (1970) that those peoples currently living in interfluvial areas have been pushed out of more desirable riverine niches. Present Yanoama distribution might represent, however, recent aggressive expansion into the area, a possibility supported by reference to Shirianá domination and expulsion of other groups in the past (Métraux, 1948, pp. 861–63), as well as by Chagnon's evidence of current population increase. Even the evidence of landscape modification that Smole uses to demonstrate the antiquity of Yanoama occupancy of the Parima highlands might be used to suggest the opposite. His descriptions of the difficulty with which cleared fields are burned by the Barafiri militate against the invocation of uncontrolled burning to explain the genesis of the savannas, especially when he frequently refers to the reforestation of abandoned Barafiri fields. He cites only one example of savanna formation attributed to specific old Barafiri clearings and even in this case he does not explain why no plantains or palms were preserved in these old fields. If, on the other hand, practices differing from those of the Barafiri had been used (excessive reuse of fields, for example) perhaps savannas might have formed. The existence of extensive savannas, as well as unexplained clusters of useful trees of species not cultivated by the Yanoama (e.g., *Theobroma* sp.) in an area where trees do not naturally grow in stands, suggest that either some other culture was previously resident in the Parima highlands, or else the Yanoama have changed their horticultural practices quite radically. Archaeological research might help to resolve the problem even if all the Barafiri leave is broken pottery and stone (p. 214).

In addition to his own research, Smole has drawn on numerous published sources of varying quality as well as unpublished observations. It is often impossible to determine whether a specific statement originated with a Barafiri, a local missionary, another scholar, or his own observation. He seems to give all the published sources equal weight, whether a paranoid explorer like Rice or a trained observer like Zerries. He also uses the English translation of Helena Valero's account of her life among the Yanoama (Biocca 1971). Since the original Italian publication was a translation of Valero's account in Spanish, the English translation is two steps from the original, and the second step was made by someone unacquainted with the region, flora, and fauna. Much of the

material derived from this source could well have been taken from the scientific report of the Italian expedition in which there is detailed information on plants and animals used by the Yanoama (Biocca, 1966, vols. 2 and 3).

While Smole is broadly conversant with the ethnographic literature on the Yanoama and to a certain extent with that from other native groups in Venezuela, a broader acquaintance with the literature outside of that nation would have suggested useful parallels. For example, while the Gê-speaking groups share the Yanoama lack of alcoholic beverages (and do not even use drugs other than tobacco), I know of no group other than the Barafiri which does not replant manioc cuttings when the tubers are dug. The Timbira pattern of abandoning the house and currently maturing garden until the crops are ready to harvest might also shed some light on the Barafiri practice of abandoning their houses and going visiting at times (p. 81); had Smole been aware of this, he might have asked some useful questions or made observations on the point in the annual cycle when the abandonment occurs. If he had been aware of the frequent presence and importance of dooryard or kitchen gardens in addition to the main fields, Smole might have been more specific about the nature of the occasional(?) planting of cotton and papayas outside the palisade (pp. 121, 124).

Smole's failure to grasp the intricacies of South American flora and fauna is also unfortunate. His ignorance of the extensive literature on manioc is everywhere manifest and may help explain his neglect of Barafiri manioc cultivation. The Latin binomials that he provides for plants and animals were derived by looking up the local Spanish term for the specimen in a book that provided the proper Latin equivalent (but he does not explain how he got from Yanoama to Spanish terms). This technique, long used by anthropologists (including myself) and others untrained in botanical and zoological identifications, can lead to endless problems and is rapidly falling into well-deserved disrepute. The nature of these problems is demonstrated by Smole's discussions of the difficulties in the "botanical identification" of the peach palm (p. 120) and the classification of agoutis (p. 182 and p. 251 note 25). The major danger in following this technique lies in the variation in local vernacular and the possibility that such mechanical application of existing lists may mask new and unsuspected species or even genera.

Smole's own research, which is the most valuable part of the book, is hard to evaluate because he does not provide vital information such as how long and what time(s) of year he spent in the field. Hunting, collecting, and horticulture all vary more or less depending on the season, even in a region of little seasonal variation as Smole claims the Parima highlands to be. The fact that Smole was clearly more interested

in plantain (*Musa* spp.) cultivation than any other aspect of Yanoama livelihood, and plantains are not especially seasonal, may explain his oversight as well as providing yet another reason for his failure to discuss root cultivation in any detail.

The results of most of Smole's firsthand observations are concentrated in detailed description of *Musa* cultivation and consumption by the Barafiri, and some other details gleaned from his intensive research on eleven clearings (p. 312). While his description of the clearing and burning process is sketchy, there is an interesting discussion of the factors considered in choosing a garden site. Ownership, size, and arrangement of the gardens are well treated and accompanied by plans and tables. Information on harvesting and production, although referring mainly to *Musa*, is well presented and clearly demonstrates the ability of the Barafiri to provide a considerable surplus. Smole's treatment of the process of abandonment of fields, a topic not often covered in any detail, is especially welcome. We could wish that more authors would provide information on this process, since the Barafiri pattern would seem to be a function of the perennial nature of the main crop. Smole is not entirely consistent in his presentation of this topic since he treats food collected from "old" fields (*suwabada taca*) as though it was wild, so the abandonment of fields is treated in the chapter on collecting as well as the one on horticulture. The author mentions that large numbers of people, sometimes an entire settlement, set up camps especially to "collect" food from these *suwabada taca*. Thus it would appear that these gardens are not actually abandoned, but rather form part of a planned farming sequence. The data provided by Smole suggest that among the Barafiri a plot is termed *suwabada taca* when it is no longer planted or weeded, although it may continue to produce food for an unspecified number of years. This entire question clearly requires more research.

The discussion of collecting includes, in addition to foodstuffs, materials used for building, firewood, drugs, adornment, poison, tools, and weapons. A further item of interest, which the author relegated to a footnote, is the Barafiri practice of encouraging frog propagation (for food) by hollowing out small ponds in old gardens, a sort of frog farming. Smole does not, however, mention the Barafiri cutting down palms specifically to encourage their infestation with palm weevil larvae, a sort of grub farming that has been mentioned for other groups (Chagnon, 1968, p. 30; Beckerman, 1977, pp. 152–53). Besides information on food and collecting, Smole's observations on Barafiri household structure and settlement morphology, especially the diagrams and plans, are good and useful. His mapping of the area and settlements personally known to some of the Barafiri men, together with a discussion of the reasons for

traveling, are especially interesting since all traveling is done on foot. The distances involved stand in marked contrast to those reported for canoe-using peoples.

The Mehinaku, described by Gregor, are quite different from the Yanoama. They are one of a group of linguistically diverse peoples that form a culturally integrated whole in the region of the upper Xingú River in Brazil. Although these groups are not identical culturally, none of them could survive intact without the others since they are linked by complex trading and ceremonial interchanges. At the time of Gregor's last study all the Mehinaku were living in a single village with a population of seventy-six, of which thirty-seven were adults.

According to Gregor, the purpose of the book was "to describe the way of life of the Mehinaku, a little-known tribe of Indians living in the Mato Grosso of Brazil, by viewing them as performers of social roles" (p. 1). The book is divided into four major sections each of which is subdivided. The introduction provides a description of the research situation, the theoretical basis for his interpretation, and the upper Xingú region in general. Gregor spent eighteen months among the Mehinaku in the course of three visits. On the first and longest of these, which lasted ten months, he was accompanied by his wife who aided in the research although her role is not specified. Part 2 of the book is entitled "the setting for the drama," and refers basically to the physical environment and how it is used by the Mehinaku. Parts 3 and 4, which occupy the last two-thirds of the book, are entitled respectively "the staging of social relationships" and "the script for social life." The book is well illustrated with an intelligent combination of drawings made by the Mehinaku, photographs, and the author's own drawings and maps, although a larger map including all the places mentioned in the text would have been helpful. There are twenty-four tables sprinkled throughout, most of which are useful and some of which amplify considerably the information provided in the text. The index is, however, worse than useless.

Gregor views the Mehinaku village as a "theater in the round." The arrangement of houses facing into the circular plaza with the men's house toward the center, the "trash yards" behind each house to provide the backstage area, and the trails and gardens surrounding the entire complex makes the stage analogy an obvious one. Unfortunately, Gregor does not apply interactional theory to much advantage (compare Barroe 1975). There is some reason to believe that had Gregor not been a young man at the time of this study, his analysis of Mehinaku culture might have resulted somewhat differently.

Women and their activities are almost totally excluded from this work, except when they impinge most directly on the male realm. For instance, in a fairly lengthy account of how "the Mehinaku label and

give shape to the lands that surround them" (p. 40), all the data presented are from men; the entire discussion of theft, its importance, and how it is done, contains no mention of the possibility of thieving by women, in spite of the fact that they are in the best possible position to steal things (is this an oversight, or is it known that women do not steal?); and the chapter entitled "portraits of self" again refers only to men. Gregor mentions women only in appropriately stereotyped places: for example, he notes that Mehinaku men blame the spread of gossip on women (p. 86); and he discusses women in the section on dress where, I might add, we find the first and only mention of the existence of female chiefs (p. 164).

If women were a negligible factor in Mehinaku society we might excuse this lopsided view, but there is every indication that such is not the case. In an earlier work (1973, p. 242) Gregor stated that Mehinaku "men and women lead somewhat separate lives. They not only work apart, but conduct separate ceremonies, intertribal sporting events, and trading sessions." Even in the present work there are numerous indications of the importance of women. To begin with, gossip is a powerful social sanction. If women are to "blame" for spreading it, then they are also in a position not to spread it, thus exerting control over who is gossiped about and who is not. Furthermore, we find (p. 291) that it is the woman who defines relationships in situations of ambiguous kinship when a young man wishes to have sexual relations with her. While this arrangement could be considered simply a graceful way for a woman to refuse the advances of an undesired man, it appears that once she has decided how to resolve the ambiguity, her decision holds, thereby affecting the kin duties and obligations of numerous people. The author does not discuss this facet of the problem, however, but only the effect on kinship of a young man's decision to have an affair with a certain relative. Even Gregor's fascinating section devoted to children's games is marred by his one-sex slant. One wonders what games the girls play that are equivalent to the boys' Chief and Shaman—or do the girls play Chief, too?

Another, though much less serious, fault in this book is Gregor's attempt to describe certain aspects of Mehinaku culture in statistical terms despite the small sample. For example, in discussing which of five craft skills adult males possess, on the basis of a total sample of sixteen individuals half of whom are over forty, Gregor states: "On the average, men over forty know 90 percent of the listed skills. Men under forty are familiar with only half the listed skills" (p. 196). It seems more significant, however, that there is only one man under forty who possesses all the skills, while of the twelve men over thirty there is only one who does not know four of the five (see table 11). Table 11 suggests that the age of thirty forms a sort of watershed after which a man might be expected to

know most of the skills. Rather than derive percentages, the author might have told us why, of two thirty-one-year-old men, one knows all five skills and the other only one of them. He might also have told us which of these two men is the very short one listed in table 12. A consideration of whether a very short Mehinaku man might try to compensate for his shortness by acquiring other desirable characteristics (craft skills), or whether he would instead be so overcome by his shortness that he would simply fail at everything, might prove more enlightening than a simple correlation of height and attractiveness. Surely in the course of eighteen months in such a very small group, the ethnographer could have dealt with each adult individual separately, and could tell us why there are such differences between these two thirty-one-year-olds, rather than treating them statistically—but perhaps that would not be “scientific.”

In spite of its faults, Gregor’s study presents much of interest and value about Mehinaku culture; and a most welcome dividend is the fact that it also provides enjoyable reading.

Each of the two works considered represents the only monographic treatment of the particular group studied (the Barafiri and Mehinaku). As such each contributes to our knowledge, but in addition to a simple increment in the number of facts available to us, each author has contributed valuable insights into his material that will contribute to our growing understanding of the many complex cultures, now being so rapidly destroyed, that have grown and flourished in lowland South America.

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