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Background History of the Yanomamo People

The Yanomamo people are indigenous Americans of Indian origin residing in South America in the Amazon rain forest between Brazil and Venezuela.

The remote characteristic of this region resulted into lack of interaction between the Yanomamo people with other communities until the beginning of the 20th Century (Tahan 4). They are believed to be descendants of a group of Asians who came from Northern Asia to North America through the Bering Strait and Alaska about 2000 years ago. They then moved to South America through Central America and further south to the Amazon region (Tahan 12). Amazon region experiences rainy days during the April which continues until November. There is minimal rainfall during the dry seasons which occurs during the period ranging from December to March. Due to the extended rainy seasons, the forest is usually wet and humid (Tahan 9). The region has diverse types of plants which are the main source of fruits, nuts and oils for the natives.

In addition, the region is known for its valuable trees such as mahogany and rosewood among others which are known for their medicinal value. The rainy forest is inhabited by thousands of animals such as parrots, turtles, monkeys, alligators and jaguars. Yanomamo population consists of approximately 24, 000 people who are distributed between Venezuela and Brazil. Venezuela has the largest population of Yanomamo people which averages 15, 000 compared to that of Brazil which is approximately 9, 000 (Early& Peters 225). These people live in approximately 350 villages which are dispersed within the forest. They usually move from their settlement

areas to look for fertile grounds after 3-4 years. Approximately 1, 000 years ago, the Yanomamo people existed as a single group inhabiting the area around Orinoco and Parima rivers.

Later, this group was divided into subgroups according to their different languages. These groups moved to other areas surrounding the two rivers (Early & Peters 226). Until the 20th Century, the Yanomamo people had not been in contact with any other society except their neighboring tribes. Their first contact with the outside world occurred between from 1910 to 1940. By 1950s, Christian missionaries from North America started to arrive in many villages. Their main aim was to convert the natives into Christianity which was in vain. However, these missionaries managed to get closer to the natives thus the two groups established a strong relationship (Tahan 15).

The arrival of gold-miners signaled the emergence of diseases and deaths among the natives particularly due to mercury poisoning. The Yanomamo people have been referred to as ' the fierce people' by their neighbors and other outsiders due to their war-like behaviors. This paper analyzes the impact of Yanomamo people war-like behavior on their culture.

How does the war-like behavior affect the culture of Yanomamo people?

Most Yanomamo males are well known for their hunting activities. The community is involved in various activities such as hunting, fishing and foraging, gathering, trade, horticultural and shift agricultural practices within the Amazon region. The hunters, who are mostly men, use bows, arrows and blow guns in their hunting activities. Sometimes these tools are smeared

with poison which makes it possible for them to capture even the biggest game (Gordon 23). Despite some of the subgroups being peaceful, most of the other subdivisions are always at war for various reasons.

Warfare is a common phenomenon among the Yanomamo people due to lack of formal laws that control conflicting parties. Most of these wars are fought stealthily by scattering enemies, killing men and stealing their women. Studies indicate that many fierce warriors of the Yanomamo tribe are engaged in warring activities in order to enrich their villages with reproductive women who are captured from other villages. This practice is perceived to be necessary since it allows the victorious village to capitalize on their reproductive achievements.

In most cases, the conflicting villages are distantly located which usually take the warriors several days to reach their target. On the other hand, the more friendly villages are usually closely located which only takes a few days' walk. Therefore, it is evident that the distance between two villages is dependent on the intensity of conflicts between the two. The warfare activities have also affected organization of Yanomamo people into villages.

Many people come together to make a large and much stronger village when there are approximately 100-150 individuals in each village. This is meant to make the resultant village strong enough to withstand wars which may be instigated by an opposing tribe (Gordon 25). In case of an internal conflict between individuals within the same village, tradition dictates that these people must not split before a populace of more than 300 people has been reached. Conflicts may arise in the village when someone commits adultery,

theft or when someone fails to let go of a woman who is engaged. These conflicts are usually solved by respected men in the village. Due to various reasons, the villages may engage in warring activities at any time. These behaviors have made warfare to be part and parcel of Yanomamo people's culture. This arises from the fact that they feel that this is the only way of solving conflicts amongst them.

Studies have revealed that more than 40% of male adults interviewed at any time in any one village admitted to have killed more than one person at some point in their life (Gordon 30). In addition, approximately 25% of all adult deaths among the Yanomamo people are attributed to violent activities. There are various forms of violence among the Yanomamo people. They range from chest thumping, club fights to raids and abductions with other war-like activities. The ever prevalent conflict between two or more villages influences the political and social organization of the Yanomamo people to various extents. The Yanomamo people live in villages which are headed by headmen who are political leaders chosen from the largest clan. A village may have a number of headmen if there are two or more clans of equal size.

An individual qualifies to be a head-man if he settles disputes and represents the interests of his clansmen adequately in addition to handling enemies and friends democratically (Gordon 34). Headmen display various leadership tactics such as employing verbal skills to solve conflicts or through use of force. On the other hand, most Yanomamo women are married at an early age through pre-planned marriages. These plans are made with the aim of strengthening alliances between families and decreasing the possibility of

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conflicts between the two families (Early & Peters 15). Mutual cross-cousin engagements were also arranged in order to strengthen family and village ties.

The importance of the question relative to the ethnographic studies

Ethnographic studies of Napoleon Chagnon have been held as being the most famous studies ever done within the Amazonian region.

In addition, the studies are also considered to be the most controversial since they generally regard the whole group of the Yanomamo people as being fierce and violent. Little has been done to confirm Napoleon's claims. Therefore, a research question such as the one being analyzed by the researcher in this paper can aid in conforming or refuting Napoleon's claims. This can be achieved through additional ethnographic studies which will involve various anthropologists being engaged in observational studies in order to gather first hand data that can give a clear picture of the Contemporary Yanomamo society. Interviews and use of questionnaires are also feasible methods of pinning down the reality in such studies.

Conclusion

This essay has given an in-depth analysis of the history of the Yanomamo people who originated from Northern Asia and migrated to South America through Alaska and Central America. They settled in the Amazon rainy forest which lies between the boundaries of Venezuela and Brazil. The essay further highlights the impact of warfare on the culture of the Yanomamo

people in addition to the importance of addressing this issue in the context of contemporary history.

The Yanomamo people represent a group of indigenous and primitive people who lived in isolation until the 20th Century when visitors started to arrive in the Amazon region. Until this period, the Yanomamo people were engaged in war-like activities which resulted into outsiders perceiving them as being fierce people. This misconception has been in the minds of many anthropologists for many decades. However, numerous changes have occurred communities have been affected by modernization. Therefore, further ethnographic studies should be conducted in order to confirm or refute the claims made by ancient anthropologists such as Napoleon Chagnon.

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