

Responsive Research and Community Involvement among the Brazilian Yanomami

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The purpose of this presentation is to chronicle the positive outcomes that have grown from initial efforts to document Yanomae, an indigenous language of the Brazilian Amazon. It illustrates how a small pilot literacy project that was guided by a responsive and flexible research agenda expanded into unanticipated but far-reaching and productive directions. It also shows how linguistic research that is motivated by the specific needs of the host community can foster a cultural dialogue that informs both indigenous and Western perspectives. In this case, close collaboration among researchers, members of the indigenous community, and personnel of a supportive non-governmental organization (the Pro-Yanomami Commission-CCPY) provided the foundation of an ongoing process, through intercultural education, of increased empowerment of the Brazilian Yanomami as a people vis-à-vis the national society.

In October, 2006, an assembly of 70 Yanomami representatives from 34 regions within the Brazilian Yanomami Indigenous Reserve complained to federal authorities of illegal incursions into their lands by colonists/ fishermen, gold prospectors, and ranchers, and they protested the ongoing crisis in medical care that has resulted in a malaria epidemic. Their problems and priorities have not changed since a potentially genocidal gold rush on their lands in 1987-1990 resulted in the deaths of an estimated 15-20% of the Brazilian Yanomami population. What has changed in the past two decades is the involvement of Yanomami communities and the roles of new leaders in voicing their needs and asserting their rights in the Brazilian national context. Education has been an important catalyst in facilitating this transformation.

The promotion of a written form of their language provided a vehicle for greater cooperation among Yanomami communities, and it stimulated interest in a wide-range of topics as indigenous literacy brought demands for greater indigenous participation in dealing with health and land rights issues. My experience over two decades as a linguist with the Yanomami Intercultural Education Program, an initiative of the Pro-Yanomami Commission-CCPY, provides the basis for this presentation. Linguistic and anthropological research have made significant contributions to a process that has brought remote rainforest dwellers into the 21st century, technologically and politically, while supporting the maintenance of their traditional language, culture, and lifestyle.