

Language endangerment in Amazonia: the role of missionaries

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Viele Sprachen Amazoniens, wie auch anderswo in der Welt, sind heute ernsthaft bedroht. Zu einem großen Teil resultiert dies aus dem Druck, den der Kontakt zwischen den eingeborenen Sprechern dieser Sprachen und den nicht-indigenen (hauptsächlich europäischen) Neuankömmlingen hervorgerufen hat. Dabei hat der von Missionaren ausgeübte Druck bei der Entwicklung der Bedrohung eine Hauptrolle gespielt. Dies trifft nirgendwo mehr zu als im Rio-Negro-Gebiet des nordwestlichen brasilianischen Amazonas, wo sowohl katholische als auch protestantische Missionare über Generationen ihren Einfluss haben walten lassen. Dieser Aufsatz untersucht die Auswirkungen der Missionare auf die eingeborenen Völker und Sprachen des Rio Negro und des größeren Amazonasgebiets und vertritt die These, dass die Sprachgefährdung in diesen Gebieten von der Anwesenheit der Missionare bedeutend verstärkt worden ist.

1. Introduction

Amazonia is well known for its remarkable linguistic diversity, with an estimated 300 distinct languages comprising some 20 families and a dozen isolates. However, the linguistic diversity of Amazonia – as elsewhere in the world – is seriously threatened. In Brazil alone, at least 90 of the approximately 270 known native ethnic groups have disappeared since 1900, together with their languages, while two-thirds of the remaining languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers (NETTLE / ROMAINE 2000: 48).

The Upper Rio Negro region of northwest Brazil (see Map 1) represents a microcosm of both this linguistic diversity and this endangerment. The region is home to dozens of languages belonging to the Arawak,

Tukanoan, and Nadahup¹ families, as well as the creolized Tupi language known as *Língua Geral* [yrl]. The most striking feature of the Upper Rio Negro region is the multilingualism of its inhabitants, which is brought about by intense socio-economic interaction and by the widespread practice of linguistic exogamy (by which marriage takes place obligatorily between speakers of different ‘father-languages’²). Traditionally, it was quite normal for an individual to speak or understand half a dozen languages, and (with the exception of the languages of the Nadahup peoples, who are considered socially inferior by their neighbors) the languages were all understood to be socially equal.

Today, however, many people in the region are monolingual, and have relinquished their languages for Tukano [tuo] and/or Portuguese [por]. For example, AIKHENVALD (2002a: 27) provides the following language endangerment statistics for some of the Eastern Tukanoan and Arawak languages in the region:

Table 1: Languages and speakers in the Brazilian Vaupés

Family	Eastern Tukanoan					Arawak
Language	Tukano [tuo]	Piratapuya [pir]	Wanano [gvc]	Desano [des]	Cubeo [cub]	Tariana [tae]
People	4500	1232	1000	1800	3000	1500
Speakers	4500	200	200	150	300	100

From AIKHENVALD (ibid.)

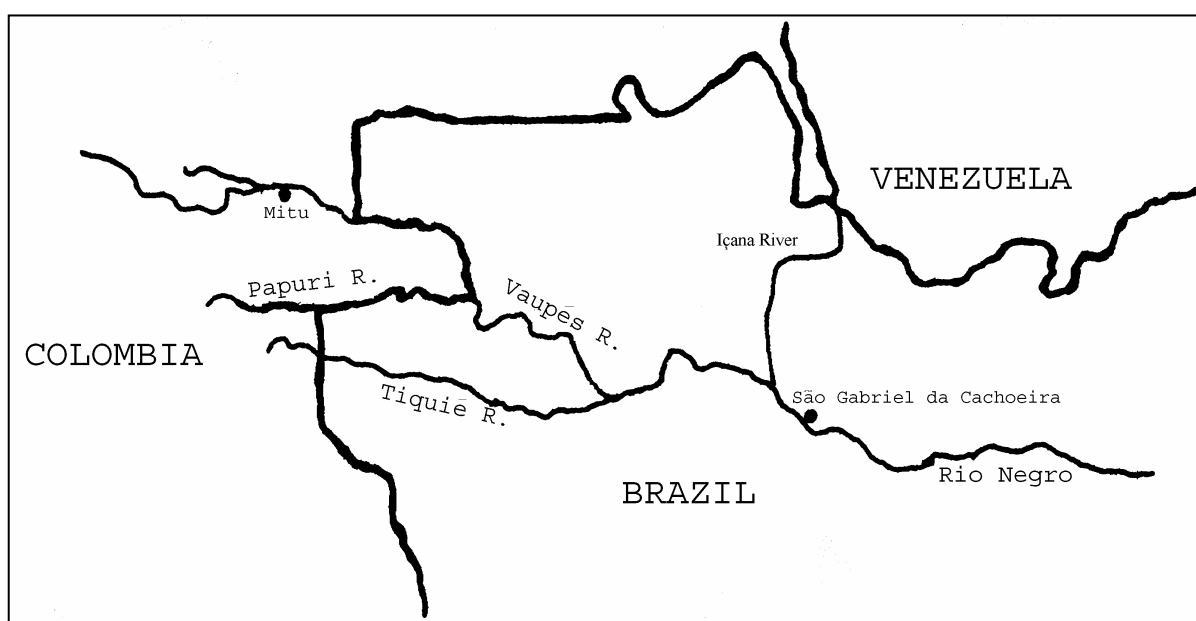
What has led to the endangerment of the Rio Negro languages, and those of Amazonia generally? The answer to this question includes pressures that are present in language endangerment situations all over the world. One of the most devastating has been the deaths of speakers and entire speech communities, through disease and massacre via contact with European invaders and their descendants. Another has been the indigenous peoples’ loss of their lands, typically accompa-

¹ I prefer the name *Nadahup* for two reasons: 1) There is some confusion surrounding the name *Maku*, which occurs in the literature in reference to several unrelated language groups in Amazonia. 2) The name *Maku* (probably from Arawak *ma-aku* [NEG-talk] ‘do not talk’) is widely recognized in the Vaupés region as an ethnic slur, directed against the members of this ethnic / linguistic group. *Nadahup* combines the names of the four established members of this family (Nadëb [mbj], Dâw [kwa], Yuhup [yab], and Hup [jup]). The name *Vaupés-Japura* has also been used for his group (cf. EPPS in press).

² Ethnic and linguistic identity is traced through the male line.

nied by the loss of traditional subsistence patterns and cultural norms, and commonly resulting in the essentially forced assimilation of the remnants of these groups into the dominant society. Finally, language endangerment and loss is also a frequent outcome of an unbalanced social situation, in which indigenous peoples may come to perceive themselves as socially and economically inferior to the members of the dominant society. In the search for economic opportunity and for freedom from social discrimination for themselves and their children, speakers sometimes abandon their languages and seek to blend in with the dominant culture.

In addition to traders, settlers, soldiers, and many others, the agents for social and cultural change among the indigenous peoples of the Amazon have included Christian missionaries. The influence of these missionaries on indigenous cultures has historically been direct and



Map 1: The Upper Rio Negro Region

profound, and their corresponding impact on indigenous languages both direct and indirect. This paper focuses on the role these missionaries have played in the lives of the indigenous peoples and in the fate of their languages in the Upper Rio Negro region, as well as elsewhere in the Amazon. As argued here, missionaries have done much to promote the process of language endangerment in these areas, and relatively little to combat it.

2. The Rio Negro peoples and the missionary onslaught

Despite the fact that the Rio Negro peoples have been able to maintain many aspects of their native cultures and languages compared to many of Amazonia's indigenous peoples, the story of their interaction with non-Indian people is a long and grim one. A European presence was first felt in the region early in the eighteenth century, when slaving expeditions decimated the indigenous populations along parts of the Rio Negro and the Vaupés River; as many as 20,000 people are estimated to have been killed or captured from the region, particularly during the period between 1739 and 1755 (MEIRA 1994: 9). This activity was followed by a colonial period, in which settlers and merchants ruthlessly exploited local Indian labor, and then by the rubber boom of 1870-1920, when Indians were virtually enslaved to the rubber gatherers through a debt-peonage system.

While the lives and livelihoods of countless indigenous people in the region were shattered by these onslaughts, it was the missionaries that had by far the greatest impact on the way of life of those Rio Negro Indians who survived. From the beginning, the European explorers and settlers were accompanied by Catholic priests, who quickly set about evangelizing the native peoples. The priests established mission villages and forced and enticed local Indians (who were often desperate to escape the brutalities of the slave trade or the rubber boom) to settle in them—although their successes were frequently followed by sweeping epidemics that left the villages empty again. BUCHILLET (1992) describes the missions on the Vaupés River in the late nineteenth century, where the priests submitted the local Indians to strict regimentation and did their best to eradicate the religious practices of the local people. They focused particularly on the *Jurupari* rituals, which centered around male initiation and involved the playing of sacred trumpets that were forbidden to women and children. One priest, Father Joseph Coppi, even managed to gain possession of some of the sacred *Jurupari* masks and trumpets and tricked women and children into viewing these, which led to enormous social upheaval and resulted in the temporary eviction of the priests by the furious Indians.

The Salesian Catholics gained control of the region in the early twentieth century, and by the 1940s and '50s had dramatically stepped up the campaign to change Indian ways of life all over the region. Now equipped with boats with gasoline-powered engines, the priests were able to extend their sphere of influence to Indian communities up and down the rivers, instead of focusing just on those Indians that lived within easy reach of the missions. Only the Hupd'äh and other Nadahup peoples – who lived far back in the forest and moved frequently – were temporarily spared because of their relative inaccessibility.

One of the Salesians' first steps was to break up the traditional longhouses, or malocas, and create villages of single-family houses, complete with a chapel. Whereas some visitors to the region, such as the ethnologist Curt Nimuendajú, wrote that the longhouses were spacious, cool, and clean, neatly divided into compartments for each family, the priests had a different impression. As Father Brüzzi da Silva wrote during this period,

these Indians may still live completely naked, dirty, fetid, promiscuously congregated in infected malocas, with their poor belongings confusedly scattered on the flea-ridden ground, including even their food... It is a standard of living that grieves our hearts, without any doubt unworthy of human beings.

Monsignor Pedro Massa summed up the general opinion of the Salesians when he noted that “the maloca is... ‘the house of the Devil’, for it is there that they hold their infernal orgies and plot the most atrocious vengeance against the whites and other Indians” (cf. HEMMING 2003: 244).

Nimuendajú was of a different opinion, however: “The principal reason for the missionaries' aversion to collective habitations is... that they see in them – with every reason – the symbol, the veritable bulwark of the former organization and tradition of the pagan culture that is so contrary to their plans for conversion, for spiritual and social domination” (cf. *ibid.*). Accordingly, the new single-family houses that the priests instructed the Indians to build effectively broke up the traditional living pattern and limited ritual life. They were also small and cramped,

in order to limit the number of occupants, and their solid wattle-and-daub walls (for greater privacy) made for hot and stuffy interiors.

Together with the breakup of the malocas, the Salesians carried on the work of eradicating traditional religious ceremonies and other practices, which were considered the work of the Devil. As BUCHILLET (1992: 22) describes, they “initiated campaigns of defamation and ridicule against the activities of the local shamans, prohibited the consumption of hallucinogens, and ransacked the indigenous malocas, robbing them of decorations and ceremonial musical instruments.”³

One Tukano man in his fifties told me the story of his father, who had possessed a wealth of knowledge of spells, rituals, and other traditional practices. The priests confronted his father time and again, the man recounted, threatening him with terrifying descriptions of the eternal fires of Hell, which he was sure to experience if he did not renounce these practices. Intimidated, he gave them up at last, and did not pass the knowledge on to his son or to anyone else of the next generation. Now, his son told me sadly, all that knowledge had died with him and it was gone forever. What’s more, he said, years after the old man’s death, anthropologists arrived in the region, asking “Where is your traditional knowledge? How can you have lost it?” — “First the Whites come and tell us we must give it all up; then they come and reproach us for having let it go!” he exclaimed bitterly.

In place of the Indians’ traditional ceremonies, the Catholics introduced new rituals and requirements; the fact that these were unfamiliar and essentially meaningless to the local people meant little to them. Marriage practices were a frequent source of friction. For most Vaupés Indians, marriage simply meant setting up house with an intended spouse; there was no formal contract, and if the marriage did not work out the woman merely returned to her parents’ home. With the arrival of missionaries in the region, however, these marriages would be formalized by Catholic ceremonies during the periodic visits of the priests to the Indian villages. One rather tragic case concerned a middle-aged Tuyuca [tue] (Eastern Tukanoan) man I met on the Upper Tiquié

³ My translation.

River. His mother, I was told, had originally married a man from a distant community, and at some point a visiting priest conducted a marriage ceremony. However, her new husband beat her and treated her badly, and she eventually left him and returned home. Later she met another man and they settled down together and had children. However, after some time the priest from the nearby mission discovered that she had already been “married” to another man. Over the course of several years, he browbeat her continuously, threatening her and her family with all the torments of Hell for their “life in sin”. Finally, the pressure was too great; the mother left her family behind and returned home to her native village. The result: the priest was satisfied, but the children grew up without their mother.

The missionaries’ efforts to break down native ways of life and traditional cultural practices clearly had an effect on the local languages, especially via the gradual eroding of the local people’s sense of confidence in themselves and in the ways of their parents and grandparents. Over time, many Indian people internalized the primitive-civilized dichotomy and strove to become more “civilized”, which essentially meant adopting a lifestyle more like that of non-Indians — including a knowledge of Portuguese.

In addition to these effects, the missionaries’ work had a quite direct impact on the region’s languages as well. From the beginning, the Catholic missionaries had belittled the multilingualism and linguistic diversity of the Rio Negro peoples, doubtless comparing the region to the Biblical Tower of Babel. Early priests brought in *Língua Geral*, a creolized version of Tupinamba [tpn] (a language of the Tupi-Guarani family and originally spoken on the east coast of Brazil). Promoted by priests and used by other non-Indians as a lingua franca, *Língua Geral* became widespread throughout much of the Rio Negro region and in Amazonia generally between the late 17th and mid-19th centuries.

Later, when the Salesian Catholic missions were established in the Vaupés area in the 1920s, the missionaries continued to insist on having just one language spoken. Recognizing that they would be more successful if they promoted a language that was already familiar to many of the inhabitants, they chose Tukano for this purpose. This fos-

tered the gradual rise of Tukano to dominant status in the region, whereas previously all the River Indian languages had been perceived as essentially socially equivalent (cf. AIKHENVALD 2002a: 26).

Perhaps the greatest impact on the region's languages was realized by means of the mission boarding schools, which River Indian children were for many years essentially forced to attend. At the schools, Portuguese was the language of instruction and interaction, and – as has been the case in so many parts of the world – this rule was maintained by force and intimidation. A middle-aged Tukano man on the Tiquié River described his experiences: if a child was caught speaking his native language, the man told me, the priests would often react by hitting him in the face, producing a bloody nose. “They would tell us over and over that we were just no-good Indians, that we were primitive and worthless,” he said. The effects of such treatment on the Indian children are easily imagined. As REID (1979: 317) expressed it,

‘Progress’ [in the eyes of the Catholic missionaries] necessarily entails the abandonment of traditional ways of life for quasi-enforced education and indoctrination of children in mission schools... Such procedures... entail acute alienation of young children not only from their culture but even from their families...

Such a separation and alienation of the younger generation from the older is directly implicated in situations of language shift all over the world (cf. NETTLE / ROMAINE 2000).

3. The experience of the Hupd’äh

Among the Nadahup peoples living in the Upper Rio Negro region are the Hupd’äh [jup].⁴ Unlike most of the River Indians in the region, the semi-nomadic, forest-dwelling Hupd’äh were spared much of the onslaught of European invaders – including the activities of the missionaries – for many years. However, their relative immunity eventually came to an end. The Salesian Catholics had developed an interest in approaching them before the 1960s, but had had little success – largely

⁴ I have worked with the Hupd’äh as a linguist since 2000.

because the Hupd'äh were simply difficult to reach where they lived in the depths of the forest. In the early 1970s, however, faced with the threat of tentative incursions by Protestant SIL missionaries across the Colombian border and into Hupd'äh territory, the Salesians stepped up their efforts. The Hupd'äh, the priests maintained, were “‘melancholic’, ‘backward’, ‘primitive’, ‘hungry’, and in need of ‘rehabilitation and civilization’.” The best way to improve their condition, they felt, was “to ‘oblige’ them to live in fixed residences and to expand their dependence on agriculture, as well as educating and evangelizing them” (REID 1979: 296).

The missionaries' first step was to entice or coerce many small local groups (of around 20-40 people) into new, settled villages of 150-300, located no more than an hour or two by foot from the river. A missionary – or later, a River Indian – was installed to act as schoolteacher and catechist, and to encourage the Hupd'äh to live according to the priests' wishes. Handouts of food, tools, clothes, and other goods were at first presented liberally to encourage them to come and stay. However, many Hupd'äh soon tired of the new arrangement, especially when the handouts began to taper off; but when they tried to leave, they were in many cases forbidden to do so, and even pursued and brought back (cf. op. cit. 306).

As one man told REID, an anthropologist working with the Hupd'äh in the 1970s:

[...] the priests come here and tell us to stop chewing coca and drinking beer. They tell us we shouldn't dance and play the pan-pipes and *Jurupari* trumpets. This is like one man coming to our village and taking all our food away. What should we do? Without food, without music, there is no movement in the world, and the people are sad, become sick and die. (op. cit. 284).

Today – thirty years later – the effects of the Salesians' efforts on the lives of the Hupd'äh are striking. Most Hupd'äh now live in the semi-settled mission villages, where in some cases populations range from 100 to 300 people. In contrast to the relative health and good nutrition of the small nomadic hunting groups described by REID in the 1970s, many inhabitants of the larger mission villages today are chronically

malnourished, due in large part to a depletion of game and fish in the environs of the village, as well as to the increased parasite load. Illness is common, and the mortality rate for children has been estimated at around 35% (Herma Klandermans, p.c.). Skin problems and scabies are rampant, exacerbated by the perceived need to wear clothes despite the hot, humid environment and the scarcity of soap for washing them. Fights are also more common, and sometimes more deadly, because the traditional way of resolving quarrels – via a group’s fissioning and going separate ways – is impractical with a more settled lifestyle. Most villages now have a resident River Indian schoolteacher and catechist (or in some cases even a resident nun), who assumes a position of dominance within the community, and insists on the children’s attendance at school despite the fact that most of them understand little of the Tukano and Portuguese instruction. Finally, not a few aspects of Hup traditional culture have become devalued and are not being passed on to the younger generation, including the *kapiwaya* song and dance tradition, the preparation of ritual hallucinogens, the fabrication and use of blowguns and dart-poison for hunting, and aspects of Hup cosmology. Only a few groups still regularly practice the *Jurupari* ceremonies, which are nearly absent now among the River Indian peoples in the same region.

Despite these problems, there is little likelihood that the Hupd’äh will at this point abandon the mission villages. They are kept there by a variety of factors, including their fear of reprisal sorcery on the part of both the priests and the River Indians (cf. op. cit. 314); their dependence on trade goods and occasional access to medical care; their unwillingness to leave their relatives behind and to lead a more isolated life; and finally – as in the case of the River Indians – their gradual identification of some aspects of their traditional life, such as a lack of western clothes and schooling of some kind, as “primitive” and therefore humiliating. At present, the Hupd’äh – who to a large extent escaped the enforced schooling in mission villages – have suffered no loss of their language, which is currently learned by all Hup children. However, given the cultural changes they are undergoing, it is not unlikely that a shift to Tukano – and thence even to Portuguese – may await them within a couple of generations.

4. Protestant missionaries

Evangelization among most of the Rio Negro region's native inhabitants has until recently been almost completely monopolized by the Catholics. Nevertheless, particularly since the 1940s, Protestant missionaries have also been a strong force in certain areas, particularly among the Baniwa Indians of the Içana River – as they have been in many other regions of Amazonia. The Protestant missionaries have tended to be even more active than the Catholics in wiping out native beliefs and practices. While the Catholics in general – particularly those present in the region today – tolerate the drinking of manioc beer, dancing, and even a certain amount of syncretism between Catholicism and local beliefs, many Protestant missionaries frown on these activities and do their best to put an end to them.

The most powerful Protestant organizations that have worked in Amazonia over the past few decades are the New Tribes Mission and SIL, both North American evangelical groups, which have fostered countless local offshoots. Endowed with vast sums of American and European money, missionaries from these groups and others have developed a tremendous infrastructure in Amazonia, as in virtually all other parts of the world, complete with their own planes, boats, and regional headquarters and support teams. This entire infrastructure is devoted to the primary objective of evangelizing indigenous peoples. **The New Tribes Mission**, for example, is quite explicit in its own literature about its reason for existing, as reported by HEMMING (2003: 259):

“The New Tribes Mission is a fundamental, non-denominational-faith missionary society, composed of born-again believers, and dedicated to the evangelization of unreached tribal peoples; in their own tongue the translation of Scripture; and the planting of indigenous New Testament churches.”

The **Summer Institute of Linguistics**, now known by its acronym SIL, is somewhat more sensitive in its approach than is the NTM – in particular, it presents its members to the public as ‘linguistic investigators’ rather than missionaries. Nevertheless, the primary goal of SIL activities, as of those of its more openly evangelical arm, the Wycliffe Bible

Translators, is incontestably the evangelization of native peoples. According to LEWIS (1988: 106), the linguistic front put forward by the SIL and the Wycliffe Bible Translators was perceived even by some of its own early members as duplicitous, leading the Wycliffe founder William Cameron Townsend to provide the following argument in its defense:

There is a Biblical precedent for [such subterfuge]. Namely, just as Jesus came out of Nazereth disguised very effectively as a carpenter, Wycliffe missionaries go into the field as linguists... Was it honest for the son of God to come down to earth and live among men without revealing who he was?

As one might expect under the circumstances, the quality of the academic linguistic contributions of SIL missionaries varies widely. While some missionaries do produce sound linguistic documentation, as well as useful orthographies and materials for native-language literacy programs, there are clearly many who do not.

The tactics used by Protestant missionaries in their efforts to save the souls of Amazonian Indians have been generally questionable — at best. The NTM in particular has been known to resort to force and intimidation. LEWIS (1988) describes a litany of events that took place in the 1970s and '80s and in some cases were no less than atrocities, including mission-sponsored hunts for 'wild' Indians in the forest (usually with converted Indians as the hunters). Brought to mission camps at gunpoint, sometimes injured or killed in the process, large numbers of intended converts would die of disease and despair — but as long as their souls had been saved, many missionaries considered this to be of little importance. LEWIS (1988: 231) quotes a NTM missionary in Venezuela as saying, "they say that all's fair in war, and for us this is a war for souls."

In many other cases, missionaries have focused on persuasion of the psychological variety. For example, CHAGNON (1967) reports a Protestant missionary terrifying the Yanomami [wca] with the prospect of Hell by showing them lifelike paintings of Yanomami-like people burning in agony in pits of fire — apparently quite aware that the Yanomami did not differentiate between a painting and a photograph. LEWIS (op. cit., 203) gives a Venezuelan Ye'cuana [mch] Indian's report

of the “psychological terror” by which the local missionaries brought about his people’s conversion:

In particular he cited the appearance of a comet, described by the chief missionary in the area as heralding the end of the world. The missionary had gathered the Ye’cuana together and given them three days, on pain of suffering a fiery extinction, to break with their wicked past.

The missionaries among the Panare [pbh] Indians, also in Venezuela, “went so far as to encourage the belief that they were in regular radio contact with God” (op. cit., 207).

Many other missionaries use gentler tactics — simply coming to live among the people and talk to them on a personal level about religion. In fact, however, coercion is virtually never really absent, because of the missionaries’ status as supremely powerful outsiders, equipped with planes, boats, and a seemingly endless supply of material wealth. Moreover, the indigenous peoples with whom the missionaries come to live — such as those in the Rio Negro region — have in many cases already suffered brutality, intimidation, or at least discrimination at the hands of non-Indians for generations. Many of these people have grown up with an ingrained sense of insecurity and awareness of their disempowered status — or their social structure is already compromised by disease, alcoholism, and loss of land and livelihood. Whether intimidated or desperate people are really in a position to make free and informed choices is questionable.

In many cases, the effects of the Protestant missionaries’ intervention on local culture are even more extreme than those of the Catholics. The Baniwa [bwi] of the Içana River in the Upper Rio Negro region, for example — unlike most of their Catholicized neighbors — have given up drinking manioc beer and have renounced many of their native rituals and dances. LEWIS (op. cit., 101) describes the outcome of many Protestant missionaries’ involvement as

[...] the banning by the missionaries of Indian ceremonies of all kinds, of Indian dances, of the playing of native instruments, of the self-treatment of Indians by their own medicinal remedies, of self-decoration in any form...

PLOTKIN (1993) describes the effect of missionaries on the rich shamanic tradition of the Tirio [tri] Indians of Surinam, who were shamed into giving up many effective natural remedies in favor of Western medicines, even though these are frequently unavailable.

The main goal of missionary work is to win converts — but it is rare that an entire village is persuaded all at once to give up their traditional customs and adopt the new ways that are thrust upon them. Much more often, some converts are made, others hold out, and the community becomes polarized. When Protestants are competing with Catholics for the souls of the local people, as in the case of the Baniwa of the Upper Rio Negro, or the Terena [ter] Indians of Mato Grosso, Brazil (cf. HEMMING 2003: 262), this problem is only exacerbated. As early as 1943, the director of the Brazilian government’s Indian Protection Service (SPI) wrote to Protestant missionaries, “the first drawback we observe after the entry of missionaries into an Indian tribe is the breakdown of tribal fraternity. Indians who become Catholic or Protestant form hostile groups and lose interest in their tribe...” (cf. *op. cit.*, 255).

This problem may soon reach even the peoples of the Vaupés region, who have until recently been solely under the influence of the Catholics. Brazilian missionaries with the organizations AMPT (Presbyterian Agency for Transcultural Missions) and AMEM (Mission for Worldwide Evangelization), affiliated with the Brazilian arm of the New Tribes Mission — and whose motto is “A soul is worth more than the entire world” — have since 2001 been establishing a presence in the region, with a special focus on the Hupd’äh. Their tactics are no less duplicitous than are those of many other missionary organizations: because the region is an official Indigenous Reserve and closed to non-Catholic missionaries, they present themselves to the authorities and — for the time being — to the Indians themselves as a non-governmental organization called PROPAS (Program for Self-Sustainable Fishing), the goal of which is ostensibly the promotion of self-sustainable fishing practices. Other than distribute presents of fishhooks and sinkers to all the local Hup families, however, their main activity has been to settle a missionary family in each of two Hup villages, with small houses

equipped with bathrooms, locking doors, and strict rules about who may and may not enter. In addition to talking to the Hupd'äh about God and giving out presents, the AMPT/AMEM missionaries actively voice their disfavor of manioc beer and tobacco, both important elements of Hup culture. They have apparently not yet had an opportunity to express their opinion about the practice of the *Jurupari* rituals, because the Hupd'äh have felt too uncomfortable to attempt these at all during the months of the missionaries' presence among them.

Despite the questionable tactics employed by many missionaries, some are clearly well-meaning people who sincerely want to help the Indians and devote their lives to this goal. Some also attempt to be more respectful of native ways of life than those described above. The medical care they frequently provide is often desperately needed to combat the diseases brought in by outsiders (although these sometimes include the missionaries themselves). One example in which missionaries can be said to have had an overall positive effect is that of the Dâw [kwa], who live across from the city of São Gabriel da Cachoeira on the Rio Negro. Due largely to their proximity to the non-Indian world, Dâw society had become shattered by alcoholism, prostitution, and violence; the population was plummeting, and it seemed that the Dâw were destined to disappear entirely, as so many other Amazonian peoples have done. Instead, Protestant missionaries began to work with them, providing medical care, small-scale economic projects, and schooling, including native-language literacy. While they almost certainly share in the responsibility for the current absence of shamans and native religious practices among the Dâw, the missionaries have perhaps kept them – and their language – from complete extinction.

However, the case of the Dâw is clearly distinct from that of the many other Amazonian peoples – both those in contact with non-Indians and those still uncontacted – who have relatively healthy societies and are in no particular need of outside intervention. Moreover, even in the case of a struggling people like the Dâw, there is in principle no reason why help must be packaged together with a soul-saving agenda; medical care, schooling, etc. can be provided with no strings attached by local governments or NGOs.

5. Missionaries and language endangerment

With respect to the preservation and documentation of endangered languages, there is little doubt that in some cases the work of language-oriented missionaries such as those of SIL can represent a positive contribution. In addition to producing some linguistic descriptions for the benefit of the academic community, SIL missionaries often devise working orthographies for the use of the indigenous communities themselves, and pedagogical materials and support for native-language literacy programs within the communities. These materials can promote language preservation and help to validate a language in the eyes of its speakers.

However, whether these activities actually do so effectively is frequently questionable, since orthographies designed by people with inadequate training in linguistics are often found to be virtually unusable by speakers, and only create confusion when competing or improved orthographies are subsequently offered. Also, the literacy efforts of most SIL missionaries are directed toward the reading and translation of the Bible, and it is doubtful whether literacy materials based on culturally unfamiliar Biblical texts are as effective as those grounded in culturally familiar narratives and the immediate needs of the people. Moreover, language preservation is only an incidental goal – at most – of the missionary endeavor; even the World Council of Churches, at their 1971 meeting in Barbados, agreed that the translation and study of indigenous languages carried out by SIL was not being done to give the Indians a tool to communicate to protect their way of life, but rather “to destroy the culture’s core belief system... and replace it with an American version of Fundamentalist Protestantism” (cf. HEMMING 2003: 267).

Even where the work of missionaries does help to promote language preservation through literacy programs and by fostering speakers’ sense of pride in their language, this contribution is necessarily undermined by the nature of the missionary agenda itself. Virtually by definition, efforts at evangelization challenge native beliefs and cultural practices. Even in the case of the most enlightened and culturally

sensitive missionary approach, there is no avoiding the fact that the goal to convert is inherently ethnocentric, since it rests solidly on the assumption that ‘we’ (i.e. the representatives of ‘Western’ culture) have something which ‘they’ (i.e. indigenous people) lack, and which they cannot be complete without. Successful conversion requires the converts themselves to accept this model – but the model itself is based on precisely the same assumptions (i.e. relating to a dichotomy between a ‘better’ or fully-formed Western society and an underdeveloped or inherently ‘lacking’ indigenous one) which foster the social, cultural, and economic insecurities that lead to the abandonment of native languages and cultural practices in the first place (cf. NETTLE / ROMAINE 2000). The practical realities of the typical conversion process – such as the frequent gifts of trade goods and the identification of traditional practices as ‘sinful’ – likewise reinforce this model.

Ultimately, there is no reason whatsoever why language documentation and native-language literacy programs – like the providing of health care and other aid – must come packaged together with an agenda for religious conversion. In fact, such programs can undoubtedly be carried out just as or even more effectively when religious goals are absent than when they are present.

In the Rio Negro region, where an individual’s sense of ethnic identity is closely bound to the ancestral language of his or her group, those Tariana and other Indians who have lost their ‘father-language’ to Tukanó or Portuguese are “referred to as ‘those who speak a borrowed language’ and therefore have nothing to identify with” (AIKHENVALD 2002a: 27). It is partly through the work of missionaries that this sense of identity has been compromised. In its place, the missionaries have offered a system of belief that was born in the Middle East and incubated within the cultures of Europe and the United States, but has little relevance to the lives and cultures of the Amazonian Indians.

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