

Bringing back the balance

Alternative economics for the Colombian Amazon

Fifty years ago 38 million hectares of Colombian Amazon were covered in closed rainforest, but colonisation has left as much as 6 million hectares converted into poor quality pastures for cattle ranching. Concern over the deteriorating state of the rainforests in Colombia has undoubtedly contributed to the government initiative in granting indigenous community rights to the land. Indeed, through resurrecting old colonial laws, and through the new Constitution, indigenous communities in Colombia have full rights to live according to their traditions and customs on their own land. The basis of land rights resides in territories known as *resguardos* in which indigenous peoples own communal, inalienable rights. Thus, the State cannot capriciously bring about the dissolution of the *resguardo* nor parcel it out without coming into direct conflict with the laws of the Constitution. Equally, since the land is held communally, individual members of the community cannot acquire or sell off any part of the *resguardo*. More than 18 million hectares of the Colombian Amazon have now been transferred into indigenous hands, comprising some 50,000 people from 59 different ethnic groups.

Land use

The forest throughout vast areas of Amazonia has been transformed through human activities. Indigenous knowledge of medicinal properties of animal and plant products, their use of a wide range of different tree species and vines for construction of traditional communal dwellings or *malocas*, bows, arrows, blowpipes and canoes indicate a long history of interaction with their environment. There is evidence too of specific areas made fertile - *terras pretas* - through the composting of wastes and forest litter. Walschburger and von Hildebrand (1988) found that a small community of Yucuna, living beside the lower reaches of the Caquetá River, use at least 16 types of ecosystem to furnish them with their basic necessities. In the orchard, covering some 2-3 hectares around the communal *maloca*, they cultivate fruit trees such as avocado, papaya, lemon and mango. Meanwhile the nearby forest provides materials from some 168 different plant for a great number of purposes. This same area also provides game, especially small animals and birds. Further from home, the Yucuna families go to hunt and to collect materials not avail-

Market economy systems, often in the name of "development", have caused serious damage to the rainforest, not only destroying the resource basis for a sustainable livelihood for forest people, but undermining traditional economies of reciprocity and exchange. However, recent governments in Colombia have set about encouraging traditional use of the land by indigenous peoples, not least in its share of the Amazon Basin.

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able in the nearby forest. The nearby lake provides fish during the summer months when the waters are low, while the *cananguchales*, areas that are permanently or seasonally flooded, are important for the *canangucho* tree (*Mauritia flexuosa*), which bears nutritious fruit and attracts game.

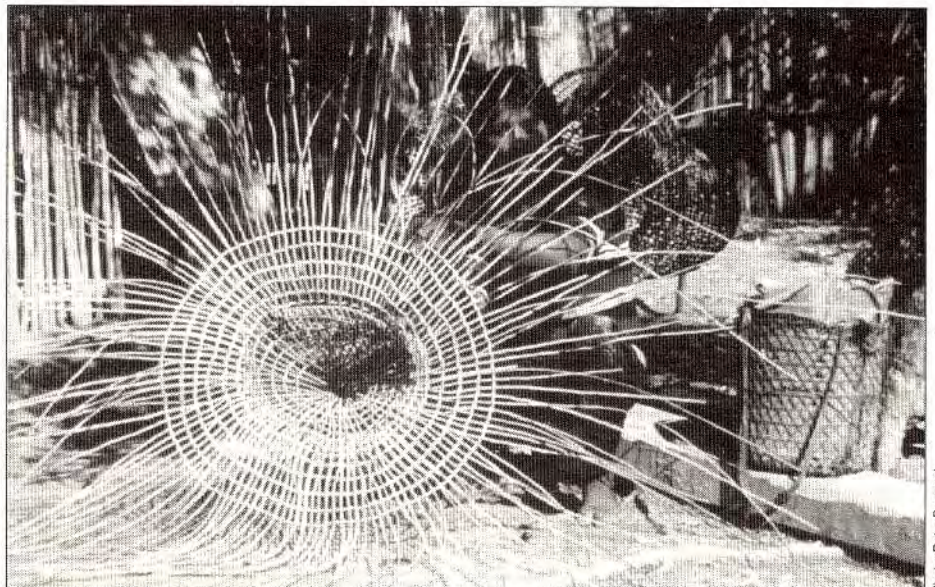
Mimicking nature

The *chagras* or garden areas where the Indians grow a variety of crops, form a relatively small part of the territory the Indians need to subsist. Since they can be used for 2-3 seasons at most before being abandoned, the area around the *maloca* is dotted with *chagras* at different stages of regeneration. The Yucuna make their clearings in primary forest which must have little understorey and relatively few surface roots, since well-developed root mats hinder clearing and indicate a nutrient-deficient soil. Natural clearings appear when a few trees fall, leaving open spaces

of up to 500 square metres. Many trees in the lower storey survive the fall of the larger trees and protect the soil from direct sunshine while letting enough light through to stimulate the rapid germination of pioneer species that lie dormant in the soil. A natural clearing also harbours many animals which bring in the seeds of woody species in their excrement. In contrast, when the Indians create their *chagras* they fell all the trees and the sudden insurgence of direct sunlight kills young plants and stunts the growth of others. About three months after cutting down the trees, the Indians fire the fallen wood, killing the shoots of many pioneer species. However, to encourage regeneration, they purposefully do not burn or cultivate the boundaries of their clearings. Regeneration is also enhanced through the planting of fruit trees attracting birds and bats which bring in seeds of a variety of woody plants. Recent studies of the movements of birds and bats validate the Indian's practice of keeping the size of *chagras* to approximately half a hectare, since if the clearings are too big, the animals will not venture into them. Rather than create one large *chagra* to provide more food, the Indians create one or more new ones.

Reciprocity and exchange

Embedded in the indigenous view of the world is the notion that each living part of the rainforest must be given the opportunity to exist in order to sustain the integrity of the whole. Without that wholeness will come disease, disaster and death. Martin von Hildebrand, who as Head of Indigenous Affairs under President Virgilio Barco in the late 1980s was responsible for the creation of *resguardos*, spent several



Witoto chief uses forest resources to make a fish trap for the Igaraparana river.



Photo: Peter Bunyard

Witoto women making crafts for sale. Options for alternative economics?

years in the 1970s as an anthropologist with the Tanimuca Indians of the Upper Piráparaná. He reported on the Tanimuca view of nature as participating in an intricate network of exchanges and reciprocity. The Tanimuca interpret living forms as the external manifestation of an entity, *fufaka*, which they translate as *thought*.

Thought emanates chiefly from the Sun. Each group of animals, plants and people needs a certain amount of thought to survive. Guardians see to it that each group has enough thought and that nobody takes more than their share. For example, the ant-eater is guardian for all hunted animals and the tapir for wild fruit. The guardian of human is the jaguar-man or shaman. When people or other living creatures become sick and die, they release thought which then can recycle and be trapped by animals, plants or indeed people. When people hunt or collect plants they must do so under the direction of their guardian or shaman so as to obtain thought or energy for their group. However, if a person consumes too much of a certain plant or animal, his thought will become visible to the guardians, who will then hunt him down. On the basis of his negotiations with the guardians, the shaman tells his people where and what they can hunt as well as how much. Permission varies with the seasons, with the animals, their reproductive cycles and the use they make of different areas of the forest. All this leads to effective control over the communal demand for natural resources.

The dynamic of the forest and the interchange of matter between one species and another, including that of the life-force, provides the Indian with a ready model of his or her existence within the community. Hence the local economy, both within the community and with neighbouring communities, relies heavily on the principle of exchange and reciprocity both among themselves and with the rest of nature. Contrary to the system engendered by the

market economy, in which a person's status increases with his wealth and possessions, personal accumulation is considered anti-social and to be deplored. On the contrary, surpluses serve to establish relations informally within the community and more formally with neighbouring communities invited during rituals and festive occasions, or when there is heavy work to be done, such as to make new chagras in the forest or to construct a new maloca.

Commercialisation

The problem, which is not unique to the Amazon, is to equate products that can be obtained from the forest for manufactured industrialised goods. The consequence of disparities between the "value" of imported goods versus those that can be locally produced - namely artifacts from the forest - may lead to excessive exploitation of the forest as well as to exploitation of the indigenous peoples themselves. At worst the demand for commodities from the rainforest - products such as rubber or fish from whitewater rivers such as the Caquetá - have led to systems of debt-bondage whereby locals find themselves bound for life to a trader.

Through missionaries and priests, indigenous communities entered into trade for goods that cannot be produced within the rainforest and have now become necessities. In return the communities are expected to abandon their traditions and ultimately their beliefs and take on christianity. But the priests and missionaries have not been content with simple conversion and, with rare exception, require that the entire traditional lifestyle be abandoned. The large community houses - the malocas - are usually the first cultural symbols to be destroyed, since these represent the traditional cosmology of the community and the authority of the traditional leaders, including the witch doctor. Also the practice of shifting cultivation and supplementing the basic diet with hunting,

fishing and gathering is likely to be transformed into a more sedentary existence. A loss of respect for the traditional leaders and hence a breakdown of community itself goes with a loss of tradition.

The communities have begun to address the problem of resolving the best way to satisfy their needs. Within the context of the market economy the answer would be simply that the communities must find a market for goods that they can produce from the land, whether timber, minerals, medicines, nuts, rubber or fish. But the forest's very heterogeneity and extraordinary diversity makes any gathering an extremely labour-intensive process. Transportation too, especially in the Colombian Amazon where many rivers are not easily navigable, can be a problem and transport by air is hardly a viable option, given its high cost. On the other side of the coin, imported goods, which are brought in by air, have a very high cost relative to their cost closer to the lines of international and national trade up in the Andes. The communities would therefore have to operate in the market with a heavy handicap. This imbalance is a fundamental reason for the debt-bondage relationship that became the norm throughout many parts of the Amazon.

Alternative economics?

Martin von Hildebrand has suggested a very different approach whereby essential goods are acquired through a relationship that mirrors the surplus/exchange mechanisms that were traditional. What would the indigenous communities gain? First, assistance, both legally and politically in protecting the areas under their authority. Second, the space granted to them and held by them would enable them to continue to live, if they so wished, within the traditional norms rather than those imposed upon them by a commercial world. Third, in order that their remaining "outside" the market economy did not penalise them in terms of goods forgone, a means would have to be found of meeting their essential needs. As their part of this reciprocal bargain, the indigenous communities would conserve and protect large areas of rainforest. This conservation should be seen as an essential service, given the dire necessity in today's world to protect the rapidly dwindling natural resources of the planet.

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