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State Healthcare and Yanomami Transformations: a Symmetrical Ethnography

José Antonio Kelly

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The publication of this book by José Antonio Kelly is to be celebrated not only amongst Yanomami and Amazonian ethnographers, but equally amongst scholars working on ethnopolitics and relations between state welfare and indigenous societies. Its appearance extends the reach of Kelly's excellent doctoral thesis (2003) to a more diverse audience than the Amazonianists who have already embraced it.

Kelly's work over the last years has contributed to broadening perspectives for Yanomami scholarship, engaging it with a wider Amazonianist discussion, and thus revitalising a field somehow exhausted by an endless cycle of feuding. His choice of working with riverine, mission- and state-provisioned Yanomami villages – in the lower Ocamo river, where national schools, Catholic missions and health posts have provided the growing *milieu* for a generation of 'interface Yanomami', as he calls them – underlines the insight of an ethnographer with deep respect for indigenous categories and cultures. Following Peter Gow's invitation to encounter the cipher of indigenous thought in its interaction with the *criollo* world, Kelly's gesture suggests that under all the socio-economic changes of the last decades, indigenous worldviews remain a vital and differential force. Kelly attunes himself to the transformational and perspectival *ethos* of the peoples themselves, arguing that it is precisely on the *surface* (i.e. in the body, in performance) of this transformational context where the workings of Yanomami living cultural categories find expression. By localizing a Yanomami category, *napepron* ("to become white") which any attentive researcher may find in everyday Yanomami life, not only has Kelly provided a tool for understanding a context of increasing interaction with the nation state, he has also engaged the field with the on-going debates of perspectivism and predatory ontologies in Amazonia and beyond.

It is, of course, not solely Kelly's work which has achieved a reinstallation of Yanomami ethnography within its own productive field of reference. We might trace it to the impact of Bruce Albert's doctoral thesis (1985) in the wider Amazonianist *milieu*, maybe the triggering event of the break of this 'endogamous stage' of Yanomamologists discussing *war*, *lineages*, *proteins* or *foraging* as if in chest-pounding duels. But in looking at the Venezuelan side of things, Kelly's work has made a contribution to this engagement with a wider theoretical landscape, and this 'border crossing' has broadened Yanomami studies. This has also engaged the latter with a field of researchers who have placed indigenous issues in Venezuela in the contemporary discussions in social, political and ecological anthropology (Arvelo, Heinen, Mansutti, Vidal, Wilbert and Zent, to name a few).

Kelly's book is an examination of the interaction between the Venezuelan Yanomami and the national health system in a period of transformation and productive crises: the years following the opening of the region to statehood – previously a federal territory banned to politics- and electoral campaigning and the increasing substitution of missionary welfare by the state assistance machinery of the revolution. Neither a 'political economy of health' nor a 'dialogue between health systems' approach, the research is an examination of health assistance as a major context for the negotiation of the relationship of the Venezuelan Yanomami with national society. Its focal point is the daily attention in the health posts and doctors' visits in the Ocamo village and river, and

the ways in which the actors involved – Yanomami nurses, leaders, patients and villagers on one side, and young *criollo* doctors serving their one-year rural internship on the other – display and defend their mutual categorizations in an agonistic way. Offensive as it may sound to many devoted doctors in the field, Kelly shows us that the locals' expectations of the doctors dramatically differ from what the doctors expect from the locals. Instead of 'only' providing medicines and curing people, doctors are expected to engage in Yanomami sociality through proper redistributionist behaviour, establishing kin relations, and permanence. This set of demands is as extraneous to the doctors' understanding as the Yanomami's failure to be disciplined within the medical structure. Not behaving as obedient *patients*, they are deemed to be "disorderly", "spoilt", "ever-changing" and "unpredictable". Kelly's ethnography allows us to envision a constitutional misunderstanding in the making. In this tense relationship, the role of certain powerful mediators between both cultures (i.e. bilingual Yanomami nurses, school-educated leaders and representatives) serves as an illuminating device to ascertain the logics of the interactions. These mediators, which have 'become white' by means of their acquisition of *criollo* knowledge and *habitus*, both channel and regulate the communities' demands to the doctors, control their behaviour, and seek to administrate *criollo* power within the community. This mediating capacity in the current context of transformation is equivalent, Kelly argues, to the shamanic mediation with the spirit world in the traditional context. With a clean theoretical armature that adds scholarly heft to the honesty of a clear-cut ethnography, Kelly productively draws on a few authors: Roy Wagner and his conventional-inventional dialectics as a key mechanism of culture (1975) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism (1998, 2004). Within Yanomami literature, Kelly provides an elegant development of (and 'inventional' complement to) Bruce Albert's influential model of 'Yanomami socio-political space': the concept of the "*napë* (white, foreigner) transformational axis". Both synchronic and diachronic, this axis of increasing/decreasing alterity provides a layout of differences between groups of people and also gives a picture of the Yanomami's historical process of becoming 'civilized'. It goes from the distant, traditional Yanomami groups to the 'real' *criollos* – powerful outsiders living faraway. In the middle ground Ocamo village which is the vantage point of this context, Yanomami villagers and co-resident *criollos* – doctors and missionaries – are caught up in the dynamics of Yanomami/*napë* negotiation with cycles of conflict and appeasement. Doctors must be 'domesticated' and their alterity 'obviated' (108); Kelly claims that *criollos* occupy a place of potential affines in Amazonian thought. As such, they need to be integrated into sociality by means of demands of giving objects and generalizing their resources –food, fuel, motor boats– but at the same time, they are not expected to marry with Yanomami or participate in rituals, an exclusion that underlines their inherent ambiguity. It may be unusual to find in a single piece of work such an example of both a respectful relation with its theoretical ancestors and autonomy as the one provided by this book. The centrality of previous interpretations and authors is evident, but Kelly's analyses are not simply an 'example' of these theories: they constitute an enriching development that widens the field of understanding to which they have contributed.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 function as the analytical core of the book and must be followed carefully for the reader to fully engage with Kelly's contributions. These chapters analyse the entire dynamics of health assistance interaction. They show it to be embedded in the context of the logics of relations between village factions, Yanomami nurses and leaders, current and historical missionaries, patients and doctors, as well as with distant villages. It is here that the specific character of this research becomes evident, in its going beyond the medical to understand the confrontation between two 'domesticating' projects:

"Doctors want to be only doctors rather than providers of objects and potential affines. They want upriver trips to be medical –rather than political, economic or kinship – trips. They want to control their patients and the community rather than being the object of control. They want to act institutionally rather than be caught in the dynamics of Yanomami internal politics. In short, doctors resist their *napë* meanings and their contributions to the becoming *napë* of the Yanomami" (138).

Many issues and themes can be picked apart for further discussion in such a rich text, but I will comment instead on the potential of Kelly's work to reach beyond scholarship, as it could provide many helpful tools for doctors and state officials engaged in dealing

with Yanomami welfare. I have had the fortune of witnessing different moments in the history of medical attention in the Upper Orinoco since the early 90's to the present, and the repetition of situations of conflict between many young doctors as well-intentioned as un-prepared for the seemingly hellish intercultural mess in which they are suddenly immersed. Kelly's research provided me with a concrete tool for understanding the logics of these many events and the context that continues to reproduce them today. But the application of the insights of this book in the field of healthcare is clearly more a potentiality to be developed than a promise easy to fulfil. As the author clearly states, the problems that hinder the effectiveness of the medical device are structural and do not depend on the good-willed agency of the actors involved. Another major issue is translation between professional discourses, both technically and politically: is it possible to make an insightful interpretation as this available to doctors? The question remains about whether the conditions exist for any anthropological interpretation to be considered necessary within a professional field with such auto-sufficiency as the medical one – in a state and frontier context.

The final section of the book provides evidence of the complexities involved in the attempts to incorporate indigenous voices and views in the provision of their welfare and, in general, in an attempt at a dialogue between the state and Indians. Chapter 8 develops the issue of the dialectic between the state's civilizatory project and the Indians' project of indigenization of the state in the context of two meetings: one between anthropologists, Yanomami and state officials regarding the investigation of the *Darkness in El Dorado* controversy, and the other a state-sponsored attempt to institutionalize shamanic authority. In the same way in which the previous comparison between the (socio-centric and horizontal) Yanomami conventional space and the 'napë transformational' context evidences a difference that lies in hierarchy and power relations (between the Yanomami and *criollos*) the relation between these two projects is not set on egalitarian grounds:

“Indians and state indigenize each other, so to speak, but the latter determines the limits of the former's manoeuvres. Indigenous peoples' growing political participation notwithstanding, they still have little control over the projects that state policy makers have in store for them” (p. 199).

The complexity of the issue is further explored in Chapter 9 from the vantage point of Kelly's own engagement, after finishing his doctoral thesis and taking office as the director of the Yanomami Health Plan. The keywords of this coda to the book might well be *symbolic Indians*, *fetishized multiculturalism* and *bureaucratic jumble*. Admittedly less analytical than the rest, this chapter portrays the initial years of a new process of institutionalization of state healthcare, through one of its flagship projects, the Yanomami Health Plan. The creation of a specific state agency to deal with indigenous health is put into the context of the novel recognition of indigenous rights in the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution. The materialization of these rights in the health context, with the creation of a high-budgeted and politically empowered unit for indigenous health, began with a momentum unmatched in any of the other essential fields of rights provision – education and territoriality – as Kelly rightly shows. But indigenous empowerment is not easily channelled within the state culture, least of all in the health context in which delegating a first level of primary healthcare to indigenous health agents appears as a promising achievement and opportunity. To put it simply, the Bolivarian revolution taps into Indians as symbols of 'ancestral' nationality – and not as interlocutors – and these images are an essential component of its ideological armature. Kelly joins here the analyses of other scholars that have shown that indigenous leaders in these years of constitutional recognition became state officials pushing government agendas and not those of indigenous peoples. Between a fetishized image of indigenous peoples and an ancestral bureaucracy now geometrically increased by the perpetual shuffling and re-shuffling of authorities and state agencies of the revolution, the opportunity of an advancement of indigenous welfare is seriously threatened. Kelly's hopeful ending, nevertheless, underlines the undeniable gain in visibility that the indigenous peoples have experienced.

Some politically-informed anthropologists might disagree with this hopefulness in a reading of a political interaction between two actors with such a dramatic power differential (the Yanomami and the Venezuelan state). The choice of an 'ethnopolitics'

rather than a 'political anthropology' perspective could risk 'culturizing' a dialectics which must be approached from the point of view of social inequalities and power differences in the context of an expansive developmentalist state. Extending the spirit of the last quote above, one could argue that by avoiding a more radical critique of the workings of the state (the more powerful factor in the equation) the analysis would then contribute to fortifying the 'exceptionality' which has constructed indigenous realities since 17th century missionary administration. Instead of an effort to extend citizenship towards ethnic minorities, this reification of Indians could well be part of the same difficulties that the Venezuelan state shows for accepting dissidence: a mechanism for dissecting national society in discrete and controllable groupings, excluded from power and crystalized in external characterisation. Even if this is a feasible line of critique, it falls beyond the intentions of this book and provides just the possibility of an extension of some of its suggestions. This book has the quality which Bob Dylan demanded for something to be called a poem (and for that matter, any work of art or *good* piece of scholarship): it walks by itself. And it will be a fertile walking, as the one depicted in the Yanomami myth of the origin of tobacco: after finding the tobacco bud he was craving, the ancestor Naroriwe un-does the steps of his search across the forested mountains, spitting the juices of his tobacco-chewing on the way. In all the places where the spit fell, tobacco plants bloomed.