

RECENSÕES

RUDDLE, KENNETH. *The Yukpa Cultivation System. A Study of Shifting Cultivation in Colombia and Venezuela*. Ibero-Americano, Volume 52. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974. Pp. 197. \$2.50, paper.

Shifting cultivation remains the most widespread form of agriculture in the tropics and in the last few years there have been a number of excellent studies of such systems. This is the first in-depth analysis for a South American society. It is a specialized and detailed study that should be read by all scholars interested in shifting cultivation, cultural ecology, and cultural change.

The Yukpa are a Carib-speaking Amerindian population inhabiting the Sierra de Perijá, the Serranía de Valledupar, and the Serranía de los Motilones in the northeastern Colombian and northwestern Venezuelan border region. In this variegated highland habitat, sixteen Yukpa subtribes, exhibiting diverse degrees of acculturation, are dependent upon a wide range of partial systems of shifting cultivation. The book is based upon data derived from three subtribal grouping: the more traditional and conservative Maracá (Colombia) and Irapa (Venezuela), and the acculturated Río Negrinos (Venezuela).

The first three chapters deal with the conceptual framework of shifting cultivation and provide the basic sociocultural and biophysical background for the analysis which follows. An introductory discussion of typologies of partial and integral systems of shifting cultivation is confusing and is neither needed nor useful in understanding or explaining the descriptive material. Although the major part of the work is devoted to a thorough examination of the agricultural systems, most anthropologists will find Ruddle's interpretation of the historical development of the current situation to be of particular theoretical interest.

The subsistence patterns practiced by the contemporary Yukpa are not uniform. The majority depend primarily upon horticulture, but a few of the more isolated subtribes, and even individual families of less isolated groups, place greater emphasis upon the ancillary activities of hunting, fishing, and gathering. Among others shifting cultivation has been relegated to secondary importance by the introduction of wage labor, cash cropping, and assorted market-oriented activities. It is suggested that these variations represent the interaction of two processes: (1) migration into a new, diverse and less favorable environment; and (2) increasing contact and competition with Colombian and Venezuelan settlers. However, the author perceives current subsistence difficulties and problems less in terms of inter-ethnic contact than as indicative of an originally maladapted Yukpa autosubsistence system. He deduces that "Historically the Yukpa appear to have manifested many of the characteristics of incipient tropical forest horticulturalists, and to have operated an autosubsistence system in which a partial system of shifting cultivation was of no greater importance than hunting, fishing, and gathering activities. Despite technological adjustments to the cultivation system, it became maladaptive on the steeply sloping terrain of the new habitat and the physical

environment has suffered and continues to undergo widespread damage and anthropogenically induced change" (p. 14).

The reviewer finds this thesis convincing, but the author underplays the importance of acculturative influences. He sees the subsistence variations *per se*, in which some groups place greater emphasis upon hunting and gathering as opposed to cultivation, as reflecting a less important early role for shifting cultivation. The general explanation is based primarily upon several apparently incongruent features of the subsistence organization. There has been no balance achieved between technology and habitat conditions despite a long-term occupation of the highlands. This is most evident in the careless and indiscriminate use of fire. Crop loss, the destruction of fallow timber, and poor burns are either directly or indirectly the result of misjudgement of optimal periods for drying, burning, and planting. There has been impoverishment of already poor soils due to leaching and erosion in the absence of sufficient vegetation cover, a reduction in the necessary length of fallow to permit climax regrowth, and the conversion of large tracts of land to savanna. No primary forest remains in the area. Animal and insect predations also account for significant crop loss, yet no effective countermeasures for protection or for improvement of storage facilities have been undertaken. Rather, the Yukpa conceptualize such "losses" as exploitative opportunities to obtain protein through hunting and gathering. In much the same manner, they also reserve the best land, give considerable care in seed selection, and focus ceremonial activities upon only the traditional varieties of maize to the almost complete exclusion of other crops of greater productive and dietary importance.

In short, the movement into the highland environment involved the increased importance and apparent intensification of cultivation, but it was not accompanied by concomitant changes in socioeconomic organization nor by efficient technological adjustments. The introduction of new crops and a seemingly more efficient technology (in the form of metal tools) have failed to increase productivity or to stop environmental deterioration. Health is poor, food is often scarce, and salable surpluses are rare.

Since conquest times, relationships between the Yukpa and Europeans, and among Yukpa subtribes, have been characterized by mutual hostility. This has been exacerbated by the increased colonization of the Maracaibo lowlands from which the Yukpa have been pushed into their present territory. Recently hostilities have diminished, and in Venezuela the establishment of an Indian reserve has served to partially protect indigenous lands and permit some return to lower altitudes. The absence of such governmental protection in Colombia has been accompanied by a continued loss of land and upward retreat. Warfare, disease, and depopulation have surely been important factors in the failure of the Yukpa to adjust to their highland environment as well as contributing to their migration into the area. While competition for land and population pressure, especially in restricted localities of Colombia, have unquestionably exaggerated the ecological damage which has taken place, the data presented also clearly illustrate that acculturative influences are at least equally important in explaining the subsistence variations. For example, Ruddle points out that the occurrence of individual freehold in the land tenure system is atypical of shifting cultivators and that it may reflect either past conditions or "a continually diminishing land area". Indeed, the origins of the practice may never be discerned, but present realities more adequately explain it.

The contemporary situation is exceedingly complex. Whatever the historical antecedents of the present Yukpa shifting cultivation system, an adaptive equilibrium has not been, nor is it likely to be attained. The ecological impact of past and present subsistence practices has enormous implications for future development of the region and its people. The author is to be commended in providing a valuable source for economic development specialists concerned with improving agricultural systems, social scientists interested in the effects of acculturation on indigenous subsistence systems, and culture historians looking for information on processes of culture change.

The text contains several excellent charts and maps and is followed by a Maracá orthography, glossary, bibliography, index, and eighteen black and white plates.

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