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Child development in post-colonial contexts: educational change and ethnic transfiguration in a French Guiana Wayana-Apalaï indigenous community

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Abstract

This paper presents a first attempt to describe an emergent dynamic: the transformation of family educational practices between Wayana-Apalaï indigenous people of French Guiana. Ethnographic data collected between 2010 and 2013 show a large set of variations concerning care-giving time, house-keeping charges or the frequency of traditional activities. Taking into account the role of schooling and based on a critical analysis of the socio-economic and historical context, the authors interpreted the data as demonstrating the hypothesis that Wayana-Apalaï have been involved in a process of Ethnic Transfiguration which in return has had a deep impact on traditional lifestyle, on community schemes for youth training and education and, last but not least, on child social development.

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Keywords: Apalaï; Ethnic Transfiguration; French Guiana; Parenting; Post-Colonialism; Schooling; Wayana.

1. Research Context

One of the most interesting contributions of anthropology-related studies to education is a set of observations about local forms of parenting, children training and socialization-learning processes. Researches in this field have

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been contributing to demonstrate not only the existence but also, and above all, the pedagogical validity of these ancestral schemes of family and community practices (LeVine & New, 2008).

Between 2010 and 2014, we developed an ethnographic research based on a continuous fieldwork in an indigenous village in the Amazon region. During four years, we lived with a Wayana-Apalaï community in Antecume pata, a remote village located in southwestern French Guyana, depending administratively on the town of Maripasoula. Our work aimed to observe local lifestyle and parenting standards and to describe a set of variables related with the dynamic of teaching and learning in family context. When we arrived in Antecume pata, the village was provided with an elementary school, functioning since 1986. Adolescents followed high-school lessons by a distance-learning program elaborated by French National Council of Distance-Learning (CNED – *Conseil National de l'Education à Distance*) and managed as an antenna of the Maripasoula high-school, in partnership with a local no-profit organization, the Yepé Association. In 2011, the local Educational Academy, acting in the framework of the directives of French Minister of National Education, opened a pre-elementary class in the village. Contemporarily, it closed the Antecume pata high-school antenna and built a dormitory in Maripasoula to host indigenous students at the town's high school. The Students' families perceived such a change as a "revolution". And, like in every revolution, it generated a crisis.

1.1. Traditional ecosophy vs. colonial logics

As we observed in other previous works, Wayana-Apalaï traditional (in the sense of pre-colonial) forms of knowledge transmission and socialization training have been acting as powerful forces aimed to preserve the homeostatic balance between the community social requirements and the limits of natural environment (Alì & Ailincai, 2013). Traditional ecosophy –interpreted as a form of Amazonian Weltanschauung- has been permitting Wayana-Apalaï to adapt the Amazonian biotopes to their needs and to adapt themselves to the different ecological and cultural landscapes occupied during their displacement across the northwestern area of the Amazon region (Ailincai, Jund & Alì, 2012. For a deeper reflection on the notion of ecosophy, see Alì, 2010 and 2012). During the last century,when some communities migrated to the territories corresponding to actual French Guiana to establish themselves in High Maroni area, they took contact with the French colonial structures (Chapuis & Rivière, 2003). With the de-colonization process, they became French citizens and some of them accessed to public offices thanks to their knowledge of the French language and to other skills needed by Public Administration (Cognat, 1967).

During the 1960s and 1980s, André Cognat, founder of Antecume pata, created an informal school opened to all the villagers and aimed to train indigenous people to understand western world (and French culture) and to manage the stressing contact with the post-colonial reality (Cognat, 1977). Between the 1970s and 1990s, the French Government created a scheme to grant the existence of a primary school in several isolated indigenous villages of French Guiana. At the present days, the High Maroni region, where the Wayana-Apalaï communities inhabit, dispose of a network of elementary schools in Elahé, Cayodé, Taluwen, Antecume pata and Pidima villages. Most students' parents went at school and they attribute a considerable importance to the schooling process. In other words, they consider compulsory schooling as a "normal" phenomenon, integrated to their daily-life and not interfering with their traditional educative style. Although, most of them consider that traditional education has to be preserved, because it offers a unique set of skills related with biologic survival in the peculiar environment (i.e. the tropical forest) they live.

1.2. State strategies vs. community needs

In 2011, families responded positively to the change imposed by the State. At Antecume pata, all children between 3 and 5 years of age are integrated into the new pre-elementary class and all adolescents after completing the elementary courses successfully moved out from the village. Most of them enrolled in the Maripasoula high-school, others had to move to schools or training centers in Cayenne, Kourou or Saint-Laurent du Maroni. At the end of the scholar year, a large majority of students' parents started complaining about the new system. They considered that school was distancing their sons and daughters from them and diminishing their parenting influence

on their children's development. During these four years we have seen how the dynamics of schooling perceived by the parents as a double distancing between them and their children (on the one hand, the education of young children in kindergarten and on the other, the departure of the adolescents to middle school), has transformed the lives of people in Atecume Pata village .

1.3. Research strategy

Having the opportunity to analyze a set of data gathered before and after the critical moment, we decided to interpret our ethnographic records in the framework of an ecosystemic approach. Based on Berry's works on influences of eco-cultural factors on cognitive style (Berry, 1971, 1976, 1995), on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model –interpreting family as a human development ecotype- (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1995, 2005), and on Ogbu's critical studies on eco-cultural influences acting on ethnic minorities schooling (Ogbu, 1978, 1985, 1987, 1992), we considered that a coherent description of Wayana-Apalaï educative model needed to integrate the family system, the community structure, the National power and the global context.

2. Hypothesis, goals and methodology

When we started our fieldwork, we considered the hypothesis that Wayana-Apalaï communities of French Guyana were adapting their lifestyle as an effect of an ethnic hybridization process. Mexican sociologist Néstor Garcia Canclini interpreted the notion of hybrid identity as a typical colonial heritage in the Americas (Garcia Canclini, 1989). Based on his approach, we assumed that autochthonous communities, like Wayana-Apalaï people, challenged by western colonial power, have been adapting their bio-social mechanisms to survive and to preserve their "ethnicity" (a perspective used, by Gourg, 2011). Although, we observed that such a model was far from Antecume pata reality.

Wayana-Apalaï families perceive that, as an effect of the growing pressure of "modernity", they are losing their resilience and their adaptability. During ethnographic interviews, old people identified no less than three factors contributing to this alteration. The first one is the paternalism of the State and the social aid system acting as a disincentive for preserving the traditional economic scheme, based on a subsistence model (hunting, fishing, gathering and clash-and-burn agriculture). Actually, the absolute majority of Antecume pata families receives the State assistance using financial aids to buy packed and frozen foods and beverages in Maripasoula. The second factor is that the school is considered as a bifacial institution. If on a side it allows children to be educated and to learn useful notions, on the other side it distances younger family members from traditional learning, knowledge and skills. The general perception is that new generations are preferring the "modern" way of life and the obvious preoccupation is that they will refuse the traditional life-style or, in the worst case scenario, that they will limit their ethnic identity to a folkloric functionalist surface. In addition, the feared risk is to lose the abilities requested to survive in their habitat: driving a boat, marching in the forest, obtaining food from natural environment and making handcrafts related with their daily tasks. Several prestigious voices have been appealing to French Government to avoid such a threat, asking for a reconsideration of administrative logics in Haut Maroni area (Grenand, 2000; Hurault, Grenand P.and F. & Lévi-Strauss, 1998).

The observation of patterns of variation in care-giving time, domestic charges and frequency of traditional activities gave us the opportunity to understand how subtle and irreversible was the impact of this change. In reality, what we were observing was an emergent dynamic of systemic de-configuration. Until 2011, The traditional resilience of Wayana-Apalaï families has been permitting a certain balance between the different "ecosystems" constituting their social universe: the micro-systems of primary training (families and school), the community meso-system, the National exo-system and the globalized macro-system. However, the crisis generated by the abrupt change in school dynamics has been fueling a process of structural change.

2.1. From cultural hybridization to ethnic transfiguration

The sudden alteration of domestic rhythms and responsibilities, added with the gradual disintegration of the subsistence economy, the paternalistic policies of the State and the chronically unsolved political marginalization of indigenous communities in French Guyana, risks to drive Wayana-Apalaï people to an ethnic transfiguration process. Such a dynamic, whose mechanism was accurately described by Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, explains the perverse dynamic that is leading ethnic communities to live at the margins of globalized economy, to negate their ethnic identity (or, more precisely, the set of moral values shared by the ethnic community), and to adopt habits and customs that would be considered as deviant in the framework of traditional ethic and survival logic (Ribeiro, 1971). In our previous works, we described the way Wayana-Apalaï have been surviving as cultural entity thanks to a set of skills and knowledge transmitted through generations, based on an ecosophical world-vision recognizing the role of the natural environment as an active partner of their daily life (Alì & Ailincai, 2013).

Those pages are dedicated to demonstrate the impact of "top-down" changes in the educational system (imposed by Public Administration without a serious mechanism of community participation) not only on traditional way of life of native communities but also, and above all, on preservation of traditional knowledge and local skills indispensable to live in Amazonian habitat.

3. Patterns of Variation in Wayana-Apalaï Care-giving Style

During the scholar year 2010-2011, we observed five Wayana-Apalaï families to identify the caregivers, their interactions with children and the time they spent "educating" the younger family members. Every family was observed during 24 hours in five opportunities and in different days (working-days and week-ends). Totally, we cumulated 2.400 hours of family life from direct observation. For every caregiver it was calculated the total amount of time invested in training and teaching activities involving children. We resumed our results showing the medium value of time spent by identified caregivers in educational activities during a typical day, as in Table 1.

Table 1. Time spent by Wayana-Apalaï caregivers in educational activities (2010-2011)

Caregiver	Care-giving time
Mother	12h 33'
Father	1h 28'
Mother's Brothers	42'
Mother's Sisters	51'
Father's Brothers	10'
Father' Sisters	23'
Mather's Parents	4h 24'
Father' Parents	32'
Other Family Members	2h 11'
Other Community Members	43'

We repeated the same experience in 2013, with the same families, observing a sensible change, above all in working days (during week-ends, we observed a less evident variation with 2010-2011 figures), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Time spent by Wayana-Apalaï caregivers in educational activities (2013)

Caregiver	Care-giving Time
Mother	10h 23’
Father	32’
Mother’s Brothers	27’
Mother’s Sisters	15’
Father’s Brothers	03’
Father’ Sisters	05’
Mather’s Parents	2h 49’
Father’ Parents	08’
Other Family Members	3h 12’
Other Community Members	1h 03’

Analyzing data, we observed that, apparently, the most committed caregivers are, in order, the mothers, the mothers’ parents (the maternal grand-parents), the siblings and the cousins. Such a pattern seems not changing between 2010 and 2013. The most evident change is related with the total amount of time spent by parents with their children. For mothers’ case, we observed that in 2013 they spent for care-giving activities two hours less than in 2010. Concerning fathers, in 2013 they spent only one third of time employed three years before for educating their sons and daughters. Other family members, as siblings and cousins –but also other community members, as shamans or administrative leaders- are supplying to this vacuum. Finally, we have to note that we observed similar patterns in care-giving relationships both with biological and acquired family members (for instance, adopted children).

4. Family Tasks between Tradition and Modernity

In 2010 we identified a set of family activities executed with the active participation of children and deeply related with the natural environment and the satisfaction of primary needs: agriculture-related tasks, little hunting (with traps, bows and arrows), big hunting (with rifles), fishing (with lines and nets or using poisonous plants), breeding of cachiri (a homemade traditional manioc beer), cooking and house-keeping, handcraft making and sewing, and participation to cachiri parties (gathering family and community members). We observed children (between 3 and 8 years of age or 3-8 year-olds) implied in those tasks, their sex and the number of days dedicated to those activities during the year. In 2013, we realized a similar study, with the same research protocol.

The evidence demonstrated how children were less involved in traditional activities and how daughters were gradually charged with more kitchen and house-keeping related tasks, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Participation of Wayana-Apalaï children in domestic activities: number of days assigned to every activity in 2010 and 2013.

	2010		2013	
Activity	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Agriculture-related tasks	334	353	61	112
Little hunt	355	271	198	101
Big hunt	18	0	4	0
Fishing (with lines and nets)	228	308	51	283
Fishing (with poisoning plants)	6	6	4	4
Cachiri breeding	0	161	0	213

Kitchen and house-keeping tasks	319	324	4	355
Handcraft making and sewing	327	349	103	352
Cachiri parties	9	8	42	40

In addition, we observed an evident augmentation of days dedicated to participate in cachiri parties, a pale remainder of ancestral rituals related with marake ceremonies (where initiates -and the entire community-, symbolically sanctioned the natural cycle of death and rebirth. See Hurault, 1968, 1972). Traditionally cachiri was offered to foreigners or family members coming from other villages. In present days, a cachiri party is one opportunity more to share large amounts of manioc beer with friends and neighbors, listening dancehall music at very high volume and sometimes, to substitute the traditional beverage with Caribbean rums and cheap whiskeys coming from Chinese shops behind the Surinamese borders.

5. Traditional Activities vs. Compulsory Schooling: the Ethnic Dilemma in Ultramarine Contexts

A vivacious debate is actually animating the academic circles and the public entities charged with educative tasks in French ultramarine territories. Actually, three critical factors represent the core of the problem.

The first one is represented by the general unsuccessful results obtained by ultramarine students in official evaluations realized at the end of the elementary school cycle. Most scholars consider that the multicultural context typical of former colonies, added to their peripheral situation in terms of socio-economic integration with Homeland, has never developed into the intercultural scenario imagined by political decision-makers (Dupuy, 2007; Léna, 2000). The lack of real integration has marginalized the autochthonous and ethnic communities occupying most of ultramarine lands and the school has failed its declared goal to work as a social elevator and to contribute to republican ideal of equal opportunities for all (Couchili, 2010).

The second factor corresponds to the voluntary exclusion of the notion of ethnicity in French juridical system. The administrative system logic is structured to offer equal services to every French citizen, in all territories under the State sovereignty. The "republican approach" had been applied for years in all public services, including school. The same National curricula was applied in every French school: in Normandy as in French Guyana or in French Polynesia. However, for the last two decades a new educative approach has been uprising, with the adaptation of some educative processes (above all on learning to read and write) and the creation of pedagogic tools and mechanisms focused on strengthening the knowledge of local languages and skills (Alby & Launey, 2007; Garnier, 2011; Maurel, 2010, 2012).

The third factor, the loss of traditional knowledge, depends largely on the second one. During the Colonial period one of the Homeland policies was the eradication of traditional cultures and the –often-forced- acculturation of indigenous communities. The decolonization process generates a certain degree of "conscience crisis" and the acceptance of the necessity to integrate, in a way or another, French citizens with autochthonous identity. Despite the efforts, the same mechanism of exclusion of the notion of ethnicity from French law is now under accusation, charged with not recognizing cultural differences, facilitating social distortions, and paradoxically with fueling ethnic discrimination (Grenand & Renault-Lescure, 1990). In fact, most of National policies are difficultly adaptable to territories and ethnic realities so far –and so different- from Homeland, and sometimes they generate the reticence of local communities (Grenand, 2000). In 2013, for indeed, the decision taken by the Minister of National Education to modify the working hours for all French school was strongly disapproved by most of Wayana-Apalaï villages. The extension of the daytime school was contrasted by the students' parents because it was blamed to deepen the gap separating the new generations from familiarizing with traditional knowledge. Finally, the Major of Maripasoula was obliged to ask the National Government a long-term agreement to guarantee an exception from National norm for schools located under its responsibility due to the fact that indigenous habitants were not disposed to change their domestic planning and their family habits.

6. Conclusions on Family, Schooling and Colonial Heritage

The case of Wayana-Apalaï people of French Guyana is significant and representative enough to understand some of the problems related with educative system in ultramarine French departments and territories. The peculiar condition of their cultural and ecological landscapes; the existence of autochthonous identities struggling for the respect for their lifestyle; the existence of socio-economical disparities and the survival of Colonial structures; amplified by the isolation and remoteness experienced by a large part of the population; and finally the inability of the State to adapt local realities to National standards are probably the causes of the declared failure of the traditional pedagogical mechanism of the Wayana-Apalaï people.

The results of our work seem to confirm such a hypothesis. Our next step would be to apply the same analytical model to other French ultramarine settings to evaluate how and how much post-colonial logics have been impacting on ethnic community, their daily life and their general world-vision.

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