



Yanomami

THE FIERCE CONTROVERSY AND
WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM IT

Robert Borofsky

PHOTOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE

CLAUDIA ADUJAR

(Brazilian photographer and activist on behalf of the Yanomami)

*"The Yanomami have a deep sense of spirituality,
and I wanted to convey that. I fear for the Yanomami because of their
relative isolation. Few Yanomami understand the world outside their own.
My apprehension drew me to capture their images with respect,
empathy, and a certain sorrow."*

facing page, top: A Yanomami woman, between twenty-two and twenty-five, from Wakathu village. The stick decoration is worn only by women.

facing page, bottom: The shaman is in a trance with both eyes shut. He is about sixty years old and is the headman of the Hwayau village. During the construction of the Northern Perimeter Highway in 1976, the whole Wakathu River valley was infected with measles. A messenger had walked five days from Hwayau to the health outpost where Claudia Adujar was to request help. She and a health practitioner had to walk back to the village to assist as best they could. Half the people of the village died from the measles epidemic. The shaman, who was himself facing death, told her, "When I die everything will become dark, the night [death] will come like the wind or like the morning sun. I will be without defenses or power." He noted that with the introduction of outside diseases, shamans were losing their power to cure people.







above: The women are bathing in a small river during a hunting trip. In preparation for a feast, the Yanomami go off hunting for a week or two to collect the necessary meat they are required to provide their guests. Everyone goes along—women, children, grandparents, and dogs—and they live in a temporary camp. Usually the men go hunting during the day, leaving the women to take care of the children, collect firewood, and carry out other domestic chores. The hunting trips tend to be rather pleasant times with lots of playfulness and laughter.

facing page: Yanomami women often carry their children when they walk through the forest. The women wear baskets on their backs for transporting items, and a child may sit on top of the basket. The child keeps in close bodily contact with the mother until breast-feeding is over, at around three years of age. This picture was taken at Wakathu village.

KEN GOOD

(American anthropologist)

“When you live among the Yanomami for a long time, you forget they are naked. As a result, many photographs I took are not suitable for American audiences, because they show genitalia. I sought pictures that were aesthetically pleasing as well as anthropologically illuminating. My goal was to ethnographically document the events I witnessed during my years of fieldwork but to do so in a way that others could appreciate the aesthetics of Yanomami life.”

facing page, top: Normally it is the visitors rather than the hosts who extensively decorate themselves with feathers. But this is a special case. The two men are getting ready for a ceremony to initiate a new shaman. The new shaman has been taking drugs and reciting chants for a week. The man on the right is the village headman. The two men are relaxing, talking, and enjoying themselves.

facing page, bottom: This village had been raided by another village, someone had died in that raid, and now the men are getting ready to go on a revenge raid. At a sign from the headman, all the men going on the raid walk to the center plaza of the *shabono* (or communal village house) and bang their arrows against their bows. The men then get into a line, as they are here, raise their arrows in the air, give a shout, and proceed out of the village. The goal is to leave at a time so that they can reach the other village around dawn the next day. The raiding group hopes to kill some unsuspecting person who has wandered outside of the *shabono* (perhaps to urinate). This is a much safer way of gaining revenge than attacking the *shabono* directly, which might result in injuries to the raiding party.







above: When visitors enter a village for a formal feast, the male visitors move to the center of the *shabono*. The headman then scurries around allocating various guests particular hammocks. The visitor reclines in the selected hammock and looks straight ahead—as in this picture—until the host, whose hammock it is, initiates conversation. The guests do not leave the hammocks to get food; rather it is brought to them by their hosts.

facing page: This is a young girl adorned in typical fashion for a special feast. The bead decoration was gotten in an exchange; the yarn and coin (below it) are relatively new, nontraditional adornments. The down feathers are from a buzzard. She is the younger daughter of the village headman. The girl later died at a fairly young age from a respiratory infection.

VICTOR ENGLEBERT

(A Belgian-born award-winning photographer, who has worked extensively among indigenous peoples and now lives in the United States)

"My visit to the Yanomami was commissioned by a Time-Life project, and I had a list of pictures that needed to be taken for it, so I used that as my guide. The thing that struck me most about the Yanomami, who supposedly had been isolated for centuries, was how similar they are to us. They have an incredible sense of humor and a wonderful love for children. You find among them the same types of people you find in our own society: leaders, clowns, politicians, storytellers, and paper pushers. As a child, I wanted to become an explorer to learn about people different from me. Yet it struck me only small things separated the Yanomami from me: their lack of clothes, for example, and how they decorated their bodies. What I sought to preserve in my photographs was our shared humanity with them."

facing page, top: A Yanomami *shabono*, in the Toototobi region of Brazil. Families live in the protected areas, with public events occurring in the open plaza at the village's center.

facing page, bottom: A woman, accompanied by her young child, is bringing firewood she has collected near her garden back to the *shabono* for cooking.







In these two pictures, members of Toototobi village are decorating themselves in anticipation of the arrival later in the day of a neighboring village for a feast. Feasts are occasions to reaffirm alliances as well as to bury the ashes of the dead and, in some villages, to eat ashes of the dead. These two pictures, taken in 1981, reflect a period of calm and relaxation before the excitement of the feast.

above: A wife is decorating her husband with a red dye (*urucu*) made from the fruit of the annatto tree.

facing page: A father, already decorated for the feast, is decorating his son with the white down of a hawk.





above: Yanomami conversing and relaxing in the *shabono*. The feast's guests have arrived, and one is sitting in his host's hammock. The village headman is conversing with the guest. The photograph conveys a sense of life in the *shabono* as well as some of the implements Yanomami possess.

facing page: A guest at the feast. He has the traditional pensive, straight-ahead look common for the occasion.



A Yanomami male uses a fire to dry some hunting arrowheads he has smeared with a poison extracted from the bark of the virola tree.



A Yanomami shaman (the man in the middle) is preparing *yokoana*, a potent hallucinogenic that will help him get in touch with the spirit world. The man at left grinds dry scrapings from the inside bark of the viola tree in a nut shell. The man at right burns the bark of an ama tree to ashes. *Yokoana* is made by mixing the pulverized ashes of ama bark with the virola powder.

JOHN PETERS

(Roundtable participant, anthropologist, and missionary)

“These are pictures I took when I was working at the Mucajaí mission station in the Yanomami region of Brazil. I sought to make a visual record of the changes that were occurring as the Yanomami came into increasing contact with Brazilian (and Western) influences. Kurt Kirsch, a Brazilian missionary, helped with some of the photographs.”

facing page, top: An older man, with his daughter and son-in-law, paddling back from a field where they are growing sugar cane. The field is about half an hour away by canoe on the other side of the river. The canoe fairly closely resembles canoes used in earlier times. Note they are all wearing clothes.

facing page, bottom: Yanomami traditionally used to fish with a bow and arrow. They would build some scaffolding at the edge of the river, watch for hours, and then shoot when a fish appeared close by. These fish here were caught with hooks. Hooks were highly valued during my early years at the mission station. Using hooks allowed Yanomami to catch not only more but bigger fish.







above: A family is posing for a picture. The man has the down of buzzards on his head for decoration, and the boy has decoration on his face. Traditionally, families never posed together, which helps explain why the woman looks somewhat ill at ease. Recently, more Yanomami appear to want family portraits.

facing page: Two girls are having their picture taken next to a building. Not only is the wearing of clothes noticeable but, in contrast to a decade earlier, these girls seem positively pleased to have their picture taken. They have seen lots of people pose for pictures in Brazilian magazines. The women are wearing decoration on their faces. Their hair is also longer than was previously customary.