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RAHARARI  
the anaconda-monster  
of the Yanomama Indians

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## INTRODUCTION

The multiple symbolism of Raharari <sup>1</sup> is made evident by the various accounts dealing with its life. This paper presents four moments in the life of this extraordinary anaconda-monster. After each story I have attempted to stress the complex symbolism involved. My interpretations are not necessarily evident to the Yanomama. Nonetheless, on a subconscious level, they might go along with some of my conclusions.

In the process of describing, analyzing and interpreting the myths about Raharari, I have constantly kept in front of my mind not only the content of the stories, but also the way they were dramatically recounted by the Shamans; how the Yanomama audience participate and react while listening to those representations and how they have explained the same stories to me, the curious foreigner.

Further readings of similar myths recounted by the anthropologists Jacques Lizot (1974) and Luigi Cocco (1975) have helped me to be

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Lizot called the anaconda-monster "Rahara". I prefer the spelling "Raharari" because of its use by the Yanomama of Catrimani River in Northern Brazil.

more objective and critical in looking at details and interpreting events. I have translated two myths collected by myself (# 2 and 3) from the accounts of the Yanomama of Catrimani River (Brazil) and two (#1 and 4) from the narratives of the Yanomami of the Orinoco River (Venezuela) as collected by Jacques Lizot (1974).

### The symbolism of Raharari.

Raymond Firth (1973: 15) defines Symbolism as "The recognition of one thing as standing for (re-presenting) another; the relation between them normally being that of concret to abstract, particular to general. The relation is such that the symbol by itself appears capable of generating and receiving effects otherwise reserved for the object to which it refers - and such effects are often of high emotional charge". Following the guidelines of this definition I will explore the symbolism of Raharari in four Yanomama myths.

For the Yanomama the anaconda-monster Raharari suggests and symbolizes qualities that go beyond anything possible to a concret and ordinary water-snake, even though they look at the anaconda as its external manifestation and point of reference in all their accounts. The exploits of the primordial, mythical monster Raharari combine a variety of contradictory characteristics:

1. it is intimately related to the Yanomama, (Myth #1)
2. it saves the Yanomama from the flood, (#2)
3. it allows his daughter to be taken in marriage by the leading Yanomama hero, (#3)

4. it swallows<sup>w</sup> the careless Yanomama and those who mention its name while crossing the river (#4).

1. Origin of Raharari.

"One day the twins (Oman and Yoasi),<sup>2</sup> while working on a log of palm tree, turned it into a round ball. Immediately after, they started to play throwing it to each other. 'To you Oman, catch this one'. 'Yoasi, see if you can grab this one'. They played with it for quite a while, but then, one of them missed the pass and the wooden ball rolled into the river. As soon as it touched the water, the ball turned into Raharari, a dreadful watery monster." (Lizot 1974: 101).

Raharari, the mythical monster of the Yanomama, is here presented as having an earthly origin: it derived from a palm tree; it was fashioned into an egg-shaped wooden ball, and it was easily controlled by man during the light-hearted ball game<sup>3</sup>.

The present myth seems to convey the idea that in a primordial era the waters were under an easy human control. This state of affairs

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this Paper, for sake of consistency, I will use the spelling "Oman and Yoasi" as I found it among the Yanomama of Catri-mani River, even where the stories are taken from Lizot (1975), who has adopted a slightly different spelling.

<sup>3</sup> The Yanomama children practice since time immemorial a ball game like that played by the mythological twins. It is a game in which the tool in use has no secondary function besides entertainment. The ball derives from blowing a bladder of peccary, deer or tapir with air and twisting the outlets to prevent the ball from going flat.

did not last long. Possibly because of a human mistake, one day the Yanomama lost forever that original dominion - the ball escaped from their control. From that moment the power of the waters became forever linked to the river - the ball touched the water and metamorphized into Raharari.

## 2. The flood.

"The young son of Oman was really thirsty. It was the dry season and the forest had no water. Yet you could hear from the underground the deep, dull sound of mighty roaring waters. 'Daddy, I'm thirsty' complained the child. Bending over, Oman dug through the soil with his stick, and lo, suddenly clean water started to trickle out. Sucking vigorously, his lips glued to the whole, Oman's child drunk greedily. But now that the child's thirst was finally quenched, they saw how the spring kept growing in size and pressure. It was now a powerful jet that cutting its way through the thick branches of the forest was reaching all the way to the sky where Yaru, the thunder, lived. At the same time a mighty river was forming as the water returned falling through the forest. Caught unprepared, father and son started to be carried adrift through the lowlands. It was then that the mighty Raharari appeared along the embankment. It was handsome. Its long shiny body was dotted with bright red spots. Raharari dived into the spring and the waters began to subside. Gradually the forest re-emerged. The Yanomama were safe." (Makutasihipiutheri, 1974)

In this myth, the central figure is again Raharari. It mysteriously enters into the action toward the end of the account, but its

sudden apparition on the flood scene is prepared by a combination of data which directly hint at it: the stick, the jet, the river.

At the end of the dry season, when the forest is coursed by drought, Oman used his stick - traditionally used in: farming, in ritual performances, in bloody mutual clubbing challenges and as tool of self support in old age - in order to produce water. The action of the stick - a snake-like tool - brought about the blessing of water to quench the thirst of the child. Another snake-like figure was the jet which emerged with malevolent effect from the same act of digging through the ground. It produced a flood were man lost both his own and the control of the waters. As the waters spread rushing through the forest, two new serpentine figures emerged both shiny and powerful: the river and the anaconda.

Combining all these concret and particular realities of daily experience, the Yanomama imagination has developed the emotionally charged figure of Raharari: shiny, powerful, dangerous and beneficial. It symbolizes the watery characteristics of the river - its beneficial qualities of light, life and purification - with those of the stick and jet - strength, challenge and fecundity.

3. The girl-fish.

"Oman and Yoasi had been quite successful that morning while fishing along the bank of a creek. Yoasi was busy at opening and cleaning what they had cought when suddenly he saw a girl-fish coming

afloat in the center a nearby pool. She was pretty, graceful and lovely, with full, hard breasts partly hidden under water, and her strong arms swimming rythmically to stay afloat. Yoasi whispered to his brother, 'look, there is a woman in the river'. Catching sight of her, Oman answered 'Hurry, let's catch her'. They rushed wading through the creek. Yoasi grabbed her and tried to hold on her, but she was too slimy, and, sliding out of his arms, she disappeared at the bottom of the pool.

Returning to the bank, Oman and Yoasi hurried through the forest searching for nests of white ants. Finding them, they rushed back to the creek and spread them on the water. Suddenly, attracted by this choice bait, all the fish came bobbing on the surface. The girl-fish too hurried towards the spot near the bank to share the banquet. Oman dived at once and cought with her. He threw his arms around her upper body and wrapped his legs around her thighs while Yoasi grabbed her feet and dragged her on the embankment. There, working with their fingernails, they scretched out all the slime from her hair and skin. It was then that they discovered how they had cought Raharari's daughter because her hair was trimmed in the Yanomama style and, like the Yanomama, her body was painted red.

Meanwhile Yarima, who hidden in the forest had observed the entire scene, rushed forward and insisted that he wanted <sup>to</sup> make love with her. Oman, who had the first claim on her for having succeeded in catching her, gave in without resistence. The over-aroused Yarima dashed his penis in her vagina, but immediately he jumped out with

a groan of pain. Hidden inside the vagina, a sharp toothed piraña had swallowed part of his penis. Red faced for shame and pain, Yarima disappeared inside the deep forest and turned into a monkey.

Oman baited his fish-hook. Carefully he let it drop inside the girl's vagina and soon pulled out a red piraña. After Yoasi had his chance to make love with Raharari's daughter, Oman brought her to his house and married her. She gave him numerous children and introduced among the Yanomama many useful seeds, roots and shrubs that she had stolen from her father's house: bananas, manioc, agave, cotton, tobacco,..." (Hwayautheri, 1976).

In this myth the central figure is Raharari's daughter. She is the linkage connecting human beings and the power of waters (Raharari). Once more the Yanomama mythological process is rooted upon carefully selected characteristics found in the physical world. The watery elements are the river, the fishing activities, the hook and baits, the swimming, the wading, the diving, the sliminess of the fish, the piraña. The chthonian elements are the fishermen, the monkey, the girl, the breasts, the hair, the red painted body, the penis, the vagina, the ants, the shore, the forest, the children, the house, the seeds, roots and shrubs.

Raharari's daughter emerges from the narrative combining the most significant characteristics of both Raharari and human beings: their qualities are both pleasant and unpleasant, constructive and destructive. Like her father Raharari, her natural habitat is the river:



she is not out of place in the deep water, but she prefers to swim on the surface; she is slimy and cannot be easily caught; she is covered by slime to hide her identity; like any fish, she is attracted by a bait; and like them, she can only be caught by means of force and cleverness. Her human characteristics are her powerful and enticing femininity, her prettiness and gracefulness, the shap<sup>e</sup>liness of her breasts, her red painted body and her haido in the style of the Yanomama.

The linkage between river and earth is represented by the act of fishing, wading in and out the water, grabbing and holding the girl-fish, having sexual relationship with her, fishing out the piraña from her vagina and fruitfully marrying her.

The pleasant and/or constructive elements visible in this account are: the success of the human beings in overcoming the watery forces, the metamorphosis of the girl-fish into a complete Yanomama woman, the motherhood expressed in terms of natural (seeds, etc.) and human (children) fertility.

The unpleasant and/or destructive elements of Raharari's daughter are her female aloofness, her struggle against sexual relationship and intimacy, the "vagina dentata" (Eliade 1975: 409) with its clear function of frustrating and destroying sex, fertility and masculinity.

The symbolism of the girl-fish, in conclusion, seems to illustrate

to the Yanomama their struggle for reaching out, understand and control some special aspects of the all pervasive water: <sup>the</sup> enticing and scaring, lascivious and frustrating, fruitful and emasculating qualities.

4. Raharari, the cannibal.

"The anaconda had stretched its long body over a wide rock and, rolled in accurate circles, was resting its head over the tail. It was muttering about all its familiar places in the forest: rocks, mountains, rivers.

'Up there rises mountain Watubawë;  
next to it ascends mountain Orawë;  
on that side emerges the rock Suwëroobë;  
on this side you can see mountain Namowei;  
down there the Konoribiwei river winds its way through the forest;  
up beyond it Kashorawë slopes down into the valley.'

He was still going on in its listing when Mirewakariwë saw him and, with a sharp arrow, shot him through the head. The anaconda rolled into the river; it was dead. Mirewakariwë <sup>tried</sup> to grab the falling corpse, but found in his hand only a tiny shapeless, living creature. He donated it to a Yanomama who kept it as a pet. But, during the night the pet turned into the terrible Raharari and swallowed every Yanomama child." (Lizot 1974: 101).

In this story Raharari seems to stand for the peaceful dominion and universal presence of the power of the waters. Man should never take

too lightly or - much worst - challenge the watery powers which are just too superior to his forces and too deadly. The peaceful aspect of Raharari is represented by its sleepy quality: resting over the tail while muttering to itself. Its small size after been shot and its acceptance as a pet by a Yanomama may stand for the forest creeks and rivers during the dry season when the larger creeks can be easily waded even by children.

The universal presence and dominion of the waters are represented by the wide rock over which the long body of Raharari is resting. The listing of a variety of far away mountains, rocks and rivers stresses how the waters have a personal direct knowledge<sup>of</sup> and presence throughout the known Yanomama world.

The power and deadly danger of the waters are conveyed by the unexpected aggressivity of Raharari. Its nightly advance on the Yanomama children symbolizes the sudden destructive power of the waters during the change from dry to rainy season. It is then that careless Yanomama may be swallowed in its currents and drown. Moreover the Yanomama are not comfortable with unfamiliar rivers and creeks.

Usually they cross only the familiar rivers and creeks and always at the same location. Even when doing so they are careful not to mention Raharari by name.

#### CONCLUSION

Raharari symbolizes the power of the waters which is intimately linked with the Yanomama life and culture. In these stories about

Raharari, the Yanomama reveal the results of their long meditations upon the significance and power of waters and their relationship and experience with it. In general the Yanomama seem to view the waters as fruitful and protective. The destructive power of the waters was triggered by human beings when they did not respect and acknowledge its power and rashly ignored the need for prudence in approaching and handling it.

The origin of Raharari shows a belief that man at the beginning had some influence over the waters, but he took it too lightly and lost forever that control.

Raharari's exploits during the flood seem to emphasize the beneficial effects of the waters. Even their destructive powers are not presented as utterly annihilating man and nature. The Yanomama seem sure that there is a limit beyond which the destructive power of the waters will not go.

The story of the girl-fish shows the human eagerness and tact in using the power of the waters for personal advantage and growth. At the same time it reminds of the need for prudence in handling such a blind force of nature.

The final account of Raharari represents a warning against humans who, because of past success in controlling the power of the waters, have become too easy going and eventually were victimized by it.

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